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**Participant Audition:
Audio-recording as ethnographic method**



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Abstract: Linguistically oriented anthropologists have over decades developed a unique approach to social reality that consists in the recording of verbal interaction in situations that are not directed by the researcher. Although this approach is of general interest for any attempt at understanding social life - just as observation and interview - it has not yet been released from the subject field within which it has been developed. But just as observation is methodologically functional for matters beyond ethology, and interviewing is expedient in studies beyond psychology, audio-recordings and analyses of verbal exchange is useful for research in thematic fields far beyond linguistic performance. In this article, we firstly propose to give that third method of ethnographic inquiry the contrasting name of “participant audition,” secondly try to demonstrate that this method has a number of epistemological and methodological implications that set it apart from participant observation and interviewing; and thirdly suggest to place it as a general method alongside observation and interview in order to make it a more visible option for ethnographers.

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Participant Audition: Audio-recording as ethnographic method

By Christian Meyer and Nikolaus Schareika

Introduction

By the expression “participant audition”, we refer to an ethnographic way of data collection that consists in the recording of verbal interaction in situations that are not directed by the researcher. We consider this a particularly fruitful approach to the study of social life that deserves a prominent place in the compendium of anthropological research methods. Participant audition names and conceptualizes a research procedure that has already been applied in various fields of anthropology but that has, so far, not been articulated as a distinctive *method of data collection*. Yet, as we view it, there are important epistemological, methodological, and also technical reasons for the introduction of such a concept that we propose to call “participant audition”.

One epistemological reason for the introduction of the concept of participant audition, as we will argue, is that it stresses the need to separate clearly and retraceably between data collection and presentation on the one hand and data interpretation and analysis on the other. A second reason is that it places greatest emphasis on the notorious question of how indigenous worlds of meaning can be acceded through self-critical and unobtrusive ethnographic research. Indeed, the methodological interest of the concept of participant audition is that it incites anthropologists to contrast their basic paths to social reality (observing, interviewing, and listening) along the two criteria of *accessibility of meaning* and *distortion of the data through the method applied*. The particular strength of participant audition, in our view, is that it opens up hitherto hardly recognized worlds of meaning while at the same time controlling and reducing the effects of distortion through the method used. Technical innovation during the last two decades, thirdly, has provided for the tools that make participant audition a feasible option for all anthropologists and not only for those specializing

in the study of linguistic performance. By identifying the recording and analysis of verbal interaction as a generally useful method of anthropological research and not only of a particular subfield within anthropology (i.e., linguistic anthropology) we wish to make it a more easily accessible option for ethnographers working in whatever fields of interest.

While sharing central aspects of participant observation, participant audition draws on two epistemological orientations. From life world philosophy it borrows the idea that the subjective world of meaning of the people studied is essential for an understanding of social reality. From ordinary language philosophy it uses the idea that this subjective world of meaning is linguistically shaped, and that we can make our way into that world by investigating language in action.

The “art of listening” (McGregor and White 1986) conceptualized by participant audition is far from new within anthropology although it has remained unnoticed in several of its subfields or academic communities. The new name specifies the *method of data collection*, whereas so far, the referent of “participant audition” has only been defined as part of a *field of research* (e.g. “linguistic anthropology”), an *interpretive perspective* (e.g. “ethnomethodology”), or a *method of analysis* (e.g. “conversation analysis”). The concept of participant audition shall help researchers to take into account a distinctive method *recognized by name* to be a promising option in many research situations and open it to a wider spectrum of anthropologists including those who have not been academically socialized within the field of linguistic anthropology.

The Concept

Participant audition, of course, is inspired by the Malinowskian research perspective to which Audrey Richards (1943: 2) drawing on a sociological conception has assigned the label “participant observation”. With “audition” (lat. *auditio* – the act of carefully listening yet maintaining the distance between utterer and hearer) we point to the fact that much of an

ethnographer's work in the field consists of listening to what the local people speak among each other. We do not want to withhold that in vernacular English, the word *audition* entails connotations of "checking" just as the word observation evokes associations of "controlling." Nevertheless, we think that the concept drawing on its Latin origins still present in concepts such as "audio," "audible" or "auditive" denotes well the research approach of attentively listening that we suggest here. The stance taken, thereby, is to avoid any guidance of the speakers' performance (as is done by asking questions) and to merely witnessing what people socially do by talk. It means listening carefully to what the locals speak among themselves and to how they perform speech acts, how they attribute meaning, how they shape, comment on and explain events and phenomena in the world. The stage metaphor contained in the concept of "audition" is also deliberate: audition designates an attentive registration of the *dramas* of daily life (Turner 1957), of the every day *theatre* that might be *off stage* or *on stage* (Goffman 1956) and *on record* or *off record* (Brown and Levinson 1987). The term "audition" highlights an omnipresent facet of the ethnographer's experience: that she is *hearing* the local people's voices in all sorts of conversations. That she carefully *listens* to these voices and *reflects* upon them in the light of her context knowledge is, in our view, a key approach to the understanding of culture.

Though passive while recording, participant audition is a participatory activity in the sense that Malinowski set out three quarters of a century ago. He vindicated ethnography as a process in which the researcher establishes a many-sided and long-term relationship with individuals and groups in their natural setting for the purpose of gaining an insider's perspective and thus an empathic yet scientific understanding of their culture. Formerly, deductive forms of inquiry into social life approached empirical reality by predefined concepts (sometimes disguised as questions) that either assume to know or completely leave aside what the things found mean to the locals. In contrast, participant observation encouraged researchers to *immerse* themselves into the day-to-day activities of the people they study and,

in doing so, to acquire an understanding of what is meaningful to them. This is not selecting observational data that fit into deductively developed hypotheses, but rather inductively following threads of observation that by becoming more and more entangled with each other disclose regularities in social life. Participant audition shares this endeavor of researchers not to impose their own reality upon the social world of the people under study.

The Emergence of Participant Audition

Listening to the conversations and speeches among the people with whom anthropologists are engaged is a method as old as ethnography. Indeed, rather than by observing people ethnographic information in many cases is provided by listening to what they talk. Moerman (1988: 8) says:

Ethnography's central and sacred data are what one native says or does to another, or to the ethnographer. The objects we record, examine, consider, and write about occur in the course of social interaction. Whether observing a meeting, conducting an interview, or just sitting and chatting around the campfire, our primary data are things said as part of socially organized scenes. We collect the droppings of talk.

Already Malinowski, in "Argonauts of the Western Pacific" (1922) as well as in "Coral Gardens" (1935), more often recurs to what people say than to what they do without words. Nevertheless, with regard to his method he again and again speaks of "observation", but not of "listening" (or of "audition"). For instance, he suggests to *observe* "the tone of conversational and social life around the village fires," and he advises that "characteristic forms (...) of conversing (...) should be noted down at once" (1922: 18-20). Malinowski also sets off the moments when the ethnographer should make a pause from observation and enter into the social life he studies: "it is good for the Ethnographer sometimes to put aside camera, note book and pencil, and to (...) sit down and listen and share in their conversations" (1922:

21). After doing so, “their behaviour, their manner of being, in all sorts of tribal transactions, became more transparent and easily understandable than it had been before” (1922: 22).

Malinowski is not the only ethnographer who held the art of listening in high esteem. Franz Boas regarded linguistics and ethnology as inseparable and cultural particularity as especially well expressed in all kinds of verbal performances (e.g. Boas 1911). That is why he collected so many speeches, chants, tales, songs, and texts. After Boas, Sapir stated: “It is an illusion to think that we can understand the significant outlines of a culture through sheer observation and without the guide of the linguistic symbolism which makes these outlines significant and intelligible to society” (1929: 209). And Nadel claimed that “the linguistic usage of a people, and equally the verbal reports on its culture (...) are thus themselves instances of the working of the culture” (Nadel 1951: 45). But when linguistic anthropology was institutionalized as a subfield of American anthropology its sister discipline cultural anthropology became separated from the refined methods and tools developed in later years.

It was Dell Hymes’ “Ethnography of Speaking” (1962) that pleaded to make verbal discourse as social activity an object of anthropological investigation in its own right. A series of substantial ethnographies documenting speech performances in all parts of the world grew out of this powerful impulse and addressed questions such as: What are the speech patterns available in specific social situations? What are the local categories of speech? What are the cultural conventions of speaking and of being silent? Later, this research field has also been called “ethnography of communication.” All the studies developed within this context made intense use of the method we call participant audition. But the term “ethnography of speaking” (or “of communication”) rather denotes a topic or field of research (“speaking”, “communication”) than a specific methodological approach to do ethnography in general. The same holds true for “sociolinguistics” as designed by Fishman (1971) and Labov (1972). It denotes a whole field of research connecting language forms and aspects of society, where participant audition could become only one of its specific methods.

The field that has most exhaustively employed what we call participant audition is, of course, linguistic anthropology. Linguistic anthropologists aim at studying the relationship between language and culture. Their goal is to “understand linguistic forms as constitutive elements of cultural practices” (Duranti 1994: 17). The data collection methods linguistic anthropologists name range from participant observation to interviewing and audio- and video-recording of all kinds of conversations and speeches. These methods are sometimes summed up as “doing linguistic anthropology,” though this expression does not refer to a method, but to a whole academic occupation. Thus, while as a sub-field linguistic anthropology is highly sophisticated in its theoretical and methodological orientation, its method of collecting empirical data of linguistic kind has not been branded as a distinctive method transferable to anthropology in general. With the term participant audition we suggest to fill this gap and to thus customize the refined methods of linguistic anthropology to the wider field of socio-cultural anthropology and the social sciences.

Linguistic anthropology has been defined as “the study of speech and language within the context of anthropology” (Hymes 1963: 277) or as “the study of language as a cultural resource and speaking as a cultural practice” (Duranti 1997: 2). Though accurate for itself as a sub-field, this definition is, in our view, overly restrictive in regard to its methods and, moreover, in conflict with some of the actual research practice within linguistic anthropology. Studying speech is not only studying language usage as cultural practice (i.e., as an object), it is, in fact, studying social processes that pertain to culture in general. This means that the study of speech can deepen the anthropological understanding in all spheres of social life such as social interaction (e.g. Moerman 1988), politics (e.g. Brenneis and Myers 1984), law (e.g. Conley and O'Barr 1998), religion (e.g. Fox 1988), economics (e.g. Bird-David 1990), emotion (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1986), identity (Myers 1991) or kinship and gender (e.g. Keating 1998). Linguistic anthropology has developed a huge set of refined research tools that should be made available to cultural anthropology in general.

Another term calling for the study of social situations as being constituted through speech performance is “speech event” (Hymes 1972: 56). Duranti (1994: 171) rightly argues that the speech event approach seizes particularly well the “mutually constitutive relationship between language and context.” It alerts to explore in a detailed way how context constitutes speech and how speech constitutes context. It is thus a promising approach by which non-reifying social theories such as Giddens’ theory of structuration (1979) can be methodologically operationalized in ethnographic research. Yet, speech events are a field of research and the method applied to study them has no other name than the unspecific “doing ethnography”. This is where “participant audition” comes in to designate the specific method of recording linguistic data.

A whole set of other denominations highlights interpretive perspectives in the study of social interaction. For instance, the term “ethnomethodology” has been launched “to refer to the investigation of the rational properties of indexical expressions and other practical actions as contingent ongoing accomplishments of organized artful properties of everyday life” (Garfinkel 1967: 11). Garfinkel suggests to follow the old Durkheimian call for studying “social facts as things” (Durkheim 1938: 45), though not as “structure” but as ready-made products that are created intersubjectively within interaction. A central assumption of this approach is that social reality is situationally created through all kinds of interaction modes (speaking, listening, body movements) that can be recorded by a researcher. Participant audition draws heavily on ethnomethodology, but designates a minor dimension in research: the sheer method of data collection and not the interpretative perspective.

“Dialogical anthropology” was one of the many approaches that emerged shortly after substantial technological improvements in recording instruments had been made. It emphasized the dialogical nature of fieldwork as an endless conversation between the anthropologist and the local people and tried to reduce the monadic character of the anthropologist’s authority (e.g. Dwyer 1982; Lydall and Strecker 1979; see also Clifford

1983). Participant audition also draws on a dialogical concept of human thought and social life as well as of scientific understanding (Bakhtin 1981; Clark 1996). But the term “dialogical anthropology” again rather designates an interpretative perspective or even a concept of ethnographic representation than one of data collection.

“Ethnopragmatics,” as introduced by Duranti, designates “a study of language use which relies on ethnography to illuminate the ways in which speech is both constituted by and constitutive of social interaction” (1994: 11) or “a double-sided, inherently eclectic and interdisciplinary analytical enterprise that relies on detailed grammatical descriptions on the one hand and ethnographic accounts on the other” (1994: 167). Concerning its method, Duranti (ibid.) proposes “audiotapes, ethnographic fieldnotes, and video recordings of spontaneously occurring events.” In focusing on the pragmatic character of social interaction Duranti’s concept is exemplary for participant audition, but the term again denotes an interpretative perspective rather than a way of data collection in fieldwork.

Thirdly, there are some terms that highlight the method of analysis. One of them is “culturally informed linguistic analysis” implying “the observation and recording of actual interaction among native speakers involved in everyday tasks, whether private and mundane or public and institutionally oriented” (Duranti 1994: 103). Another term is “conversation analysis,” which has been defined as the study of talk or verbal interaction, or, more precisely, of talk-in-interaction. There are only few anthropologists who use this approach in non-Western settings, but it is a growing field of research (cf. Sidnell 2007). Among the first was Moerman (1988) who raises the interesting idea of a grounding of ethnography within conversation analysis:

Ethnographers comment on, translate, and embellish the native world. The transcripts will anchor us in that world. Rather than pretending to read a culturally standardized finished text over the shoulder of an imagined native, we will be living in the line-by-line production of ongoing actual native talk. (...) I do not know whether culturally

contexted conversation analysis provides a “discovery” or a “verification” procedure for ethnography. Rather, I think it alters the terms and diminishes the importance of that distinction, making discovery and verification more complements than alternatives. Both become less matters of abstract correctness than of situated salience (Moerman 1988: 5).

Conversation analysis has developed a broad and highly useful variety of techniques to analyze recorded talk. Yet, it refers to the analysis component of the method and not to the data collection part, as we intend to do by participant audition. Moreover, it is possible to do conversation analysis with a corpus that has not been collected by participant audition (such as telephone conversations, cf. Sacks 1995).

“Discourse analysis” is a term that is much more incoherent and variable than the rigid methods of conversation analysis. Depending on the concept of “discourse” that is employed, it encompasses the study of speech (e.g. Brown and Yule 1983), of cultural practices as institutionalized power (Foucault 1971) or of pragmatic ethics (Habermas 1987). The term “discourse analysis” addresses the analytical and interpretative procedures of these approaches, and not the data collection designated by participant audition.

When adherents to all the research approaches mentioned above speak about their methods of data collection, they advance broad denominations such as “participant observation” or, more generally, “ethnography.” In giving the particular research practice of recording auditive data a distinct name that describes more precisely what we do during fieldwork, we become able to clearly identify its epistemological and methodological implications that differ from “participant observation” and “interview” as the other main components of “doing ethnography.”

Epistemological Orientation

Participant audition borrows some general orientations from two philosophical schools that both try to overcome Plato's ontologization of structure. Their critique on Plato primarily addresses his overly tight epistemological orientation to the visual sense and his conception of a world of pure ideas where real truths (e.g. structure) are to be found whereas in the world of reality exist only copies of those (e.g. action) (cf. Whitehead 1929; Rorty 1979; Tyler 1984).

We use mainly three premises from analytic and ordinary language philosophy. First, speaking is mostly or even always doing social things, i.e. when we observe people exchanging words we know that they are socially *doing* something (establishing, modifying, or renewing their social relationship, exerting power, exchanging verbal gifts, doing self-promotion, etc.) (cf. Austin 1962). Second, such verbal social acts always refer to what Wittgenstein (1953) has called a language game. Every utterance is but a constrained move in a game and would have no meaning outside it. Thus, only the function of an utterance within the language game constitutes the meaning of it. Consequently, an utterance can only be understood on the basis of a profound knowledge of former utterances and actions. Third, one of the most important tasks of academics is to critically reflect upon the models, metaphors, and schemata they deploy in scientific texts (cf. Ayer 1946). They often treat intangible phenomena such as ideas, social structure, language structure, or meaning as objects and "facts" rather than as context dependent, ephemeral incidents. Besides reification, false or lacking assignments of agent-patient or cause-effect relationships are some of the nasty tricks that common sense plays with scientific minds.

From *Lebensweltphilosophie* (life world philosophy) we borrow two assumptions. First, that social science should try to understand the social world by looking at how people make sense of it (Schütz 1974). Individuals always pre-interpret their *Lebenswelt* in an everyday rationality that Cicourel (1970), concerning social interaction, characterizes by a series of basic rules. These rules say for instance, that participants in an interaction are confident that

during or after an interaction meaning becomes determinable and that the interlocutor will fill hints or vagueness with meaning. Meaning insofar is at every moment dynamic and ephemeral, and constantly negotiated with retrospect and prospect. To the ethnographer, according to *Lebensweltphilosophie* and derived approaches such as social constructionism, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Garfinkel 1967; Sacks 1995), social meaning is accessible precisely because the production and negotiation of meaning is intersubjective and becomes objectified in speech.

The second assumption is that people perceive and understand the world by typologizing, i.e. by forming types of things they experience in order to orient themselves in the multiplicity of the world. These typologizations are usually not conscious aggregations of knowledge but rather intuitive abstractions, idealizations or recognitions of form (cf. Tyler 1978). They are guided by the concerns that are relevant to the society where people have been enculturated. These concerns naturally differ between the ethnographer and the people studied. We therefore think that descriptive categories should follow the emic logic and, when represented in an ethnographic account, be comprehensible for the reader through the data resources they stem from.

A Way in Between Observation and Interview

The literature on methods of ethnographic fieldwork mainly suggests two general techniques of data collection: observing what people do (participant observation) and asking questions about what they do and think (interview). Either have their epistemological strengths and weaknesses. Most typical for ethnographic research, first of all, is participation. Participation ideally creates and maintains an atmosphere of closeness, familiarity, and trust in the research situation. As part of the group studied, the anthropologist acquires a privileged access to events that happen in cultural life and that he can witness from inner and outer perspectives (cf. McGregor 1986). He enjoys such a privileged status of familiarity with the people studied

that he can completely dive into the situation of a person or group studied and, based on full-sensed experience, ignite processes of *Einfühlen* (empathizing) and *Verstehen* (understanding). The inner perspective acquired through participation allows for a succinct interpretation of otherwise collected data, but it must not be mistaken as a method of data collection itself.

Let us now consider which kinds of data the techniques of observation and of interviewing produce. Observation allows us to collect all kinds of behavioral and descriptive data (cf. Spradley 1980). But observing – in the proper sense of the term – what people do, most often involves that the anthropologist puts his sensory perceptions into categories of his own scientific or cultural system of meaning. At best, he consciously decides how to organize the system of categories that gives sense to his perception. He may refer to scientifically established and supposedly universal categories like for example “ingestion”. He may next use apparently non-cultural ones like “man”, “woman”, “hour”, “week”, “eat”, “protein”, and “calorie” in order to describe culturally specific patterns of food intake and distribution. This kind of description could then be transferred to particular frameworks of scientific interpretation such as “adaptation” (as in ecological anthropology). Alternatively or additionally, the anthropologist may also decide to assign his sensory perceptions to the categories of the people observed. The general category “man” would then turn into concepts such as “husband”, “warrior”, “friend”, “priest” and so on. The former category “eat” would turn into “nibble”, “feast”, “breaking a taboo” or “communicating with an ancestor.” The first problem for the anthropologist working this way is to know whether he really uses the observational categories of the people studied and does not pass his own categories off as theirs. The second is how to know in which more general scientific category the ethnographer should put the emic concept for a final analysis. And the third question is how to elicit the emic categories.

Thus, the observing anthropologist's field is full of traps that feign his categories to be those of the people studied either by explicitly declaring his as universal where in fact they are not or by neglecting that there is a world of meaning beyond his etic description. Observation which does not limit itself to a description of non-cultural, universal physical acts in a world of purely physical relations but offers a description of meaningful acts in a world of physical as well as meaningful relations has to be based on the detection of emic cultural categories that give meaning to the acts observed (cf. Holy and Stuchlik 1983: 17). It thus has to be complemented by methods deploying language.

Language is the major instrument humans use to communicate and to share meaning. Consequently, anthropologists frequently consider asking questions their most powerful tool for the task of eliciting meaning. A simple question such as "What are you doing?" provides the anthropologist with a completely new understanding of what he has seen (or better of what he thought he had seen). But since asking questions is assumed to be such a powerful tool for the discovery of meaning, researchers often put too great emphasis on this technique. The power of questions and of informants' statements turns against anthropological research when it is used as a shortcut to the detection of long and complex sequences of action that are difficult or impossible to observe (e.g. all that happened in the past, cf. Vansina 1985). In this case asking questions produces at the same time too much and not enough meaning. Informants' descriptions of events are distorted in the sense that they reflect the interests of them (or of the researcher) as actors in the social world they are describing. Bourdieu has stressed this point in his critique of the ethnographic interview (Bourdieu 1977: 18-19). The informant's discourse represents another kind of reality than the action reported. It is a representation of that action that rather hides than reveals the elements relevant for its motivation. Informants tend to stress those elements of action that correspond to established social rules and norms or to their particular interests. These rules and norms, of course, vary within one group according to the statuses, roles and interests of its members. What the

ethnographer gets is very often the perspective that the dominant individuals of the group use to legitimate their dominance. The anthropologist who grounds his analysis on accounts of social action elicited through interviews therefore severely limits his potentialities to discover the principles by which social action is constituted. Instead, he risks to present social action as the manifestation of the rules that his informants worked into their accounts.

Yet, it is not only for the reasons Bourdieu gives, that native accounts of social action are of limited use for anthropologists. Since social action, to a large extent, consists of people interacting with others through communicative acts, accounts of social action are themselves an important part of social action. Telling stories about what happened in the past or what should happen in the future are important communicative acts. Native accounts of social action are therefore important data sources for anthropological research, but they are of restricted value when they are *addressed* to the anthropologist in an interview situation. Instead when they are addressed to interlocutors in a native setting of discourse they are part of the things people do to construct their social world.

We do not want to dismiss ethnographic interviews. For many research questions, they are indispensable. In network analysis, for instance, sedulous interviewing provides micro-data that are subsequently aggregated in order to reach a higher level of ethnographic description. But in the realm of meaning, interviews are an instrument that should be handled with care. For instance, Turner (1967: 20) has suggested a procedure of symbol interpretation based on 1. the symbols' external form and observable characteristics; 2. the interpretations of these symbols offered by specialists and by laymen; and 3. the significant contexts largely worked out by the anthropologist. The first point refers to participant observation, the second to interviewing. The third point depends on the outstanding interpretative originality of the ethnographer. But as Strecker (1988) has outlined in a critique of Turner, symbols have to be understood as parts of social action. Therefore, he suggests to complete Turner's three steps

by adding on “the multivocality of the statements” (1988: 24) of the natives who create the symbols in the context of social practices.

Thus in participant audition the term “participant” ironically gets a meaning that in a sense is reversed from the one that Malinowski had put forward since it means here that the anthropologist is not the addressee of the native communicative acts. He is listening and audio-recording what the people studied *do* by talking without becoming himself the addressee of that talk. The anthropologist’s participation in group interaction, his becoming part of the group, is in reality precisely his means to remove himself and his subjectivity – both celebrated in the interview – of the situation studied. He merely sits, stands or lies there, in the ideal case as a neutral nobody, and follows – observing and listening – events of social action as they unfold (though this does in no way imply an anthropologist working undercover). This is the basic advantage of participant audition: the ethnographer influences the data produced as little as possible. Whereas observation accentuates, consciously or unconsciously, the categories of the observer and the interview distorts cultural meanings through an unnatural communicative situation, participant audition leaves the data nearly uncorrupted in the research process as well as in its representation.

Being part of native social action the talk recorded by participant audition has thus a number of advantages over interview data. First, natural talk is addressed to relevant social actors in order to produce an impact. Its meaning derives from the fact that it is socially and situationally addressed, and the anthropologist who participates in the situation gets access to this meaning because it is already intersubjectively shaped through discourse. Second, in natural talk people use concepts, theories and stories within their innate context of social meaning and not as abstract entities isolated for the anthropologist. Thus, in participant audition they do not appear as free floating systems of ideas but as impact generating devices. It is precisely in the revelation of their social impact that their meaning to the people who use them is understood. Third, talking is not only a dominant mode of social interaction it also

constitutes the social exchange of intersubjectively molded items of meaning (utterances, words, sentences, etc.) that through the sequence of their exchange are ordered into a structure (e.g. challenge and riposte, question and answer, account of event and evaluation of it) that can become one frame of reference for their interpretation. Fourth, impact generating, persuasive talk is “thick talk” (the thickness being a property of the data and not of the ethnographic description). When people are fully implicated and interested in what they do because it is part of their very sharing in a social process of high relevance (interviews with anthropologists usually do not figure in the list) they will mobilize all rhetorical resources they have. Thus a great many ideas, motives and values are revealed in the course of natural events of talking but not in interviews.

Linguistic utterances recorded by participant audition have been categorized as at the same time *informative* and *socially expressive* (cf. Jakobson 1960; Halliday 1970). Data produced by participant audition therefore comprehend a variety of types such as utterances that are a) basically social action; b) commented social action; c) socially commented information; d) mere information; e) comment on prior utterances; f) information on prior utterances. Thus data from participant audition provides us on the one hand directly with social action and on the other with local interpretations of social action that by being uttered in a social context become themselves social action. Thorough linguistic competence, conversations with key informants and other ethnographic context information are needed to fully understand an utterance (e.g. unknown terms, allusions, implicatures, ambiguous expressions, roles and statuses of actors, places mentioned, rationalities cast in idiomatic expression) and to ascribe to it these various levels of meaning; thus is elucidated its communicative function. The anthropologist might even ask for the assistance of informants by requesting more complex interpretations, e.g. on what a person intended by giving a certain statement. To sum it up: The great interest of participant audition is that it simultaneously reports, first, (verbal) social

action as it unfolds and, second, the meaning given to that action in the form of a) the socially expressive styles in which it is cast, and b) of the comments to prior social acts.

Undoubtedly, participant audition has a number of limitations as well and therefore has to be seen as but one utensil of the ethnographer's toolbox. First, communicative social interaction is not all acoustical; observational notes or videotaping of the discursive event are therefore a necessary complement on the level of data registration. Second, there is "the problem of correct interpretation" (Labov and Fanshel 1977 :350) under conditions that "we can never hope to have all the knowledge that the participants shared themselves" (ibid.: 351). The setting of a verbal exchange – the location and the relative positions of the actors – is part of the framework that gives meaning to the whole event of verbal exchange. This framework, however, stretches out into areas that are even beyond the empirically accessible. It includes social roles and relations of speakers and hearers, established rules for their verbal exchange in a particular setting, the factual context within which their interaction takes place (e.g. an ecological crisis or times of ease), the system of linguistic symbols speakers resort to when verbally approaching their hearers. Some of these items can be induced from other recorded interactions, but since participant audition is a time consuming research strategy it would be simply unfeasible to always do so. Therefore, any concrete exercise in participant audition has to be contextualized by ethnographic information obtained by interviews, observations, and methods beyond the range of ethnographic fieldwork (historical archive data, economic statistics, etc.). This again distorts the data so that at least in the ethnographic account, data and context information should be kept separated in the ethnographic account. Furthermore, it is just as well possible that participant audition data are used to complement data gained with participant observation and interview.

The translation of recorded data for a publication entails, again, an implicit interpretation and should be made explicit for the reader (cf. Maranhão and Streck 2003). Analysis should be done within the language of the people studied until parts of it get published.

To sum it up: participant audition is a method of data collection which is adapted to the fact that the object of anthropological study – culturally molded social life – empirically appears to a great extent in the form of audible talk and that people engaging in natural discourse are always *socially interacting* and not only semiotically communicating with each other. In participant audition, participation is meant to reduce distorting effects of the anthropologist's presence *during particular situations of the fieldwork process*. Participant audition parallels participant observation in that it captures social action as it naturally happens and thus gives the anthropologist the least mediated access to social reality. It thus avoids the distorting effects of biased abstraction occurring in the interview. Participant audition parallels the interview in that it is a language based access to social action and thereby gives way into the emic world of meaning, thus avoiding the transference of observer's categories occurring in observation.

Practical Concerns

New Facilities for Fieldwork

In participant audition, the fieldwork tradition of the old Malinowskian days meets digital information technology. Participant audition still requires the anthropologist's long-term stay of the ethnographer in the field. During the first time of this stay, he has to acquire profound language skills, general cultural knowledge (i.e., an understanding of the subject matter people are dealing with in their talk), and communicative competences (i.e. knowledge of the conventions of talk) needed to understand what people say and do when talking and to assess whether a certain discursive event is relevant for his study. It is not practical to acquire this knowledge by participant audition. Rather, it will be convenient to observe, participate and use various techniques of asking questions (Spradley 1979; Briggs 1986). Once the researcher has made his cumbersome way into the field, participant audition will become a method of collecting empirical data.

As any recorded discursive event draws meaning from its case history and its aftermath, it is not only because of this first long preparatory period that participant audition requires the researcher's long-term stay in the field. Although it is impossible to follow through all of an event's case history, it is quite illuminating to do so for some successive events. The question whether a recording instrument has an impact upon the situation it records has been widely discussed. It is not only our experience from several West African countries and Brazil that people reacted to the microphone at best in the beginning of the research. After few days, even few hours, they did not even pay any attention to the fact that they were audio or video recorded. From an ethical point of view, we would like to add on that the visibly plugged recorder reminds people any time of what ethnographers generally do: they listen, observe and remember. The visible recorder is a rather honest sign of the ethnographer's doings whereas pencil and notebook are often used out of sight to fix what the ethnographer's mind has secretly recorded.

Firmly grounded in the tradition of ethnographic fieldwork, participant audition owes its feasibility to recent innovations in the technology of sound recording. Today, compact, unobtrusive, easy to operate and cheap digital recorders are available for any scholar and fit even the smallest pocket and budget. They record sound with almost no operation noise for eight hours and more and store recordings as digital files on hard drives or flash cards. Regardless of these advantages, they provide excellent recording quality when combined with a good microphone that shields ambient noise, or, by way of a stereo function, allows distinguishing and thus understanding what people say when talking in overlap as it is often the case, for instance, in Wolof village debates. Microphones with differing directional characteristics can be used to adjust to the specific situation of the recorded event. Of the various digital audio-data formats offered some even allow for detailed acoustic and prosodic analyses. After recording the sound files can simply be copied to a personal computer or laptop, which can be used as storage for enormous amounts of sound data and as a complete

data processing machine. There is a great variety of – often free – software that can be used to file, edit, acoustically analyze and transcribe the recordings.

Participant audition has been facilitated by yet another development. Ethnographers can nowadays more and more easily consult local people who have received school education or even university training. These people speak fluently the language of the people studied and can be included in the anthropological research project to help record, transcribe, clarify, translate, comment on, summarize and even code and analyze the recorded discursive events. Since the longhouse, mud hut or nomadic shelter that characterize the research setting, are not always ideal places for such a computer-based work, a great part of this collaborative work can be transferred from the field into the office building of a local institution or even to the anthropologist's home department when local research assistants are invited. During some stages of a research project the team members can also communicate via email to which all data units (sound and text) can be attached and transferred across the globe.

Occasions and Locations

Thus, participant audition does no longer depend on ponderous equipment that has to be set up carefully *before* the event can happen. Based on such devices, participant audition can follow the event, not vice versa. An anthropologist doing participant audition should, indeed, become the equivalent of “l’homme-caméra” – “the microphone woman” – that Jean Rouch had in mind when explaining his method for visually rendering the situational experience of protagonists in ethnographic films (Garlinski 1991: 275; Rouch 1974). Consequently, any event of verbal interaction that the anthropologist can participate in and where recording is morally and legally acceptable is a potential situation for participant audition. Of course, the anthropologist should never walk around a nomad's tent or straw hut and record or even listen to what a woman and her husband sitting inside are talking about. But when he has been

welcomed and invited to come in and sit with the family or to stand next to the market stall he may ask for the permission to record the discourse as it happens.

There is a broad range of such recordable situations: a greeting, small-talk in the streets, people commenting on others working, a person asking someone the way, a person giving instructions in a work situation, the cheering during a competition, the shouts by which a group's performance is directed, the conversation of men riding on horse-back or by bus to the market, negotiations between buyers and sellers in markets, people chatting around the camp fire or at the dining table, people discussing a decision to make, an elder explaining behavioural norms to children, a teacher teaching, the ranting and raving, cursing and swearing in a quarrel, the various parts of dispute negotiations in a moot, parish assembly or at court, professional hearings, interrogations and interviews as between policeman and traffic offender, waiter and customer, doctor and patient, or development worker and "target population", the public debates and discussions among members of clans, villages, associations or work teams, the speeches of lineage elders, chiefs, local politicians, priests or state officials, the auditable parts of cultural performances such as initiation rituals, collective prayers, or public pledges of loyalty.

The list is far from exhaustive, but it discerns some possible "diagnostic events" (Moore 1987) that the ethnographer could use in order to study his issue. "Diagnostic speech events", as we could also extend by integrating Hymes' "speech event", are events that, for instance through conflict, express more general cultural aspects or social dynamics and make them thus visible (audible) and analyzable for the researcher. The recognition of such events requires a long field experience and moreover, many diagnostic events become apparent only *ex post facto*.

It is crucial to take notice of the different communicative functions of talk in these situations and of the influence the social configuration exerts upon these situations. What is said varies with where and in which overall social context it is said: Is it public or private, formal or

informal speech (Irvine 1979)? Are certain social categories like elders or women present or not? Therefore it is important not to equate a research interest with a particular recordable situation, but to record discourse across various situations. When interested in, say, village politics or land right disputes, it is not only village councils or disputes that should form the corpus of recorded discursive events. Private talk within the family or among friends can be interesting as well since in these social contexts of talk other views and ideas on the subject may be expressed.

Moreover, once a theme appears within a discursive event, it is a worthwhile strategy to follow it up through subsequent discursive events. The treatment of an issue – e.g. a land dispute negotiated in a moot – will certainly become itself a topic of later discourse – e.g. a talk around the camp fire – where people comment on what they witnessed and thereby give further information and express their ideas, values and attitudes about how actors performed in the first situation.

When doing participant audition the researcher no longer faces, as we have indicated above, problems of recording capacity. The central problem, then, has rather become one of choice and information management. It costs a lot of time to listen to hours and hours of discourse in an exotic language, to transcribe it and then to archive, code and analyze it. And, finally the transcript (at least parts of it) has to be translated for publication. The researcher has to take these post-audition costs into consideration before recording discourse.

We tend to record rather more than less with two basic techniques that help reduce and organize the amount of information. First, one should try to study various discursive events in their own right in order to get a feeling for what is generally talked about in various situations and where one is likely to witness conversations that are relevant for one's topic. Second, one should keep written record of what is happening or what one thinks is happening when recording talk. Digital recording automatically writes meta-data such as time and date into the audio file. But it is also important to make notes of observations directly pertaining to the

discursive event: persons present, postures and spatial positions of persons, general setting, important attributes of persons and setting; and to summarize by pencil what is being recorded (topics, particular arguments, key words, names of persons mentioned, etc.). These notes help to later retrace salient parts for detailed analysis.

The publication in a scientific text poses the problem of accurate translation and of integrating the transcription text from the recorded voices with the descriptive and analytic text of the anthropologist (an appendix with indices in the text or extensive citation of the data corpus in the main text are only two possible solutions). In any case, publication space particularly in scientific journals but also in books is a serious problem for the presentation of data from participant audition sustaining the results of a study.

Conclusion

Linguistically oriented anthropologists have over decades developed a unique approach to social reality. Although this approach is of general interest for any attempt at understanding social life – just as observation and interview – it has not yet been released from the subject field within which it has been developed. We suggest to give that third possible method of ethnographic inquiry a contrasting name in order to encourage and propel its reflected and, of course, critical use in all fields of ethnographic research, be it kinship, politics, religion, material culture, economy, gender, or global studies. Our aim is to place participant audition as a method of research alongside observation and interview in order to make it a more visible and applicable option for ethnographers and to also encourage a new epistemological debate concerning subject matter, theory, and method of empirical inquiry.

Participant audition fills a double gap. First, it gives a name to a method of data collection that has already been practiced within anthropology but that thus far has been tacitly subsumed either under participant observation without differentiating its epistemological implications or under other umbrella terms that describe particular analytical procedures, interpretive

perspectives or fields of research. Second, it emphasizes the importance of a particular dimension of social action, verbal interaction, which should be included into the research practice of scholars in any of anthropology's subfields. Much of the social action ethnographers encounter in the field is indeed linguistic activity. People constantly talk when they do things and, far beyond that, they frequently do things by talking. Or to put it differently, what they socially *do* is mostly talking. We should make a virtue out of the fact that we have the opportunity to listen and go to where speech and discourse are socially operative and manifest. The empirical evidence of ethnographic research is to a large extent linguistically constituted – the negotiation of power in a village gathering, the negotiation of blame in a legal setting, or the relieved comments on a ritual passed by or the constitution of kinship relations by use of address terms and the narration of genealogies. Therefore, anthropologists should not base their analysis on second order accounts of discursive practices, but already on the discursive practices themselves. Language used in social interaction derives its meaning from the fact that it is social action destined to be socially relevant. It is different from simply representational language, which provides socially unbiased or neutral information. We argue that the social effects of language use and the dialogical production of meaning can best be assessed from verbatim recordings and transcriptions of what has been said. Therefore, we consider it overdue that this crucial dimension of human social life be associated with a clearly defined method, which we suggest to call participant audition.

Participant audition also raises the central methodological concern of how anthropologists gain access to the worlds of meaning that give orientation to the people they study. In participant audition, the ethnographer has to go along with the flow of social interaction as it unfolds. Being recorded and transcribed word by word, the discursive event is not directed by the ethnographer but rather imposes itself upon him. In a publication, the originally recorded discursive event is clearly separated as data from the analysis and interpretation directly

accessible to the critical eyes of the scientific community – making it easier to control the anthropologist’s interpretive efforts. Thus for all claims the ethnographer makes, he must cite local voices that substantiate his interpretation either explicitly or implicitly.

Insofar, our idea of participant audition can be seen as a reaction to the “crisis of ethnographic representation” (Clifford and Marcus 1986). It is our attempt at reconciling the two options brought about by Lyotard (1979) and quoted in Tyler (1986) that allow to escape the epistemological dilemma of the representation of something alien (the native’s world of meaning) in the language game of the ethnographer (a scientific text): within the same text we “push against limits imposed by conventions of syntax, meaning, and genre” when we quote extensively native voices that have not been directed towards the ethnographer, and we try to write “so clear and commonsensical that its very reasonableness evokes what is beyond reason” when we analyze it (Tyler 1986: 137).

With all this being said, we want to make clear that we do not wish to return to any kind of semantic or meaning-centered anthropology. Neither do we want to over-emphasize the role of verbal communication. For instance, performance-oriented anthropology as it has been developed during the last decades should not be substituted, but rather complemented by recording local conversations before, during and after the performative event so that emic meaning be induced from verifiable discursive practice and not imposed through the ethnographer’s own descriptive or interpretive categories.

In spite of our criticism we should also stress that we see participant audition as a complement to participant observation and interview, not as a substitute. Each method has strengths and weaknesses. The main weakness of participant audition is that it takes a lot of time for the recording and treatment of real time data. Then, any discursive event draws meaning partly from prior events and affects those happening in the future. It is thus impossible for a researcher to draw all the context knowledge he needs from the empirically concrete. Therefore he has to rely on interviews with all their methodological problems.

Participant audition pushes the whole method of ethnography towards the methodological advantage of small units. A small unit of social analysis allows being studied at the level of its concrete empirical appearance. At this level it is possible to witness processes of aggregation of social form from its concrete constituents and to discover the big (macro, structure) in the small (micro, action). Many social processes are, of course, simply too large, complex, and long-lasting to be studied from the concrete. Complex social realities such as the formation of an ethnic group or a state defy Giddens's theorem of structuration. Working with participant audition at the micro-level, though, can give important clues for generally theorizing the processes by which a series of individual acts aggregate to a social form that is more than the parts constituting it. Thus, participant audition can be seen as method that helps explore the relation between structure and action in avoiding the reification and ontologization of structure. Thus, with participant audition we speak ourselves out for a methodologically defined concept of ethnography that broadens one's conceptual horizons by an in-depth and participatory exploration of small units of analysis.

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