

# Digital ethnography for linguists

An introductory crash course

Workshop at the 70. StuTS  
19. November 2021  
Wien



Vinicio Ntouvlis, BA MA  
[vinicio.ntouvlis@univie.ac.at](mailto:vinicio.ntouvlis@univie.ac.at)  
Institut für Sprachwissenschaft  
Universität Wien

# Outline

1. Ethnography & linguistics
2. Digital ethnography & its challenges
3. Applications of digital ethnography
4. Your ideas & questions

## First of all, what is ethnography?

- A scientific tradition for **empirical qualitative social research**.
- Originated in anthropology: Late 19<sup>th</sup> century; e.g. Boas (US), Malinowski (Britain).
- Goal: to describe & understand people's social practices and their (attributed) meaning.
  - Focus on **insiders' perspectives**.
- Features **naturalistic observation** through **fieldwork** → **Immersion** into groups & **communicating with** participants.
  - Not all fieldwork is ethnography.
- Ethnography is **not just “a method”**, but it's not a discipline in itself either.
  - Used in **various disciplines** (e.g., linguistics, sociology, political science, culture studies).
  - It's **an approach, a tradition** for studying social behavior that comes with its own **tenets**.
  - It is less about particular “tools” (e.g. data elicitation methods). → Here, ethnographers are **flexible**.

(Blommaert & Dong, 2020; Savigliano, 2003; Spotti, 2010)

## Ethnography and studying language

There is a history of ethnographic approaches being used to study language.

- 1960s: **Ethnography of communication** (Gumperz, Hymes)
- More recently: “**Linguistic ethnography**” (Rampton, Eckert, Blommaert)

Linguistics and ethnography have a mutually beneficial relationship.

- **Ethnography “opens up” linguistics**: Sensitivity to multiple data types, processes observed, fewer a priori assumptions → **openness**
  - Here is an acknowledgement of communication as inherently **multimodal** (cf. linguistic vs. non-linguistic).
- **Linguistics “ties ethnography down”**: Brings clearer analytical foci (vs. “cultural description”), developed heuristics/tools.
  - It also leaves us freedom to choose what **angle** we can tackle something from (CA? CDA? What CDA?).

(Blommaert & Dong, 2020; Eckert, 1997; Gumperz & Hymes, 1972; Rampton, 2007; Rampton, Maybin & Roberts, 2014; Saville-Troike, 2003)

## Ethnography + Linguistics: Towards another view of language

Influenced by the ethnographic ethos a linguistic ethnographic view of language holds that:

- Language is a **dynamic** (so, variable) **resource** fulfilling **social functions** in varying ways.
  - No “context-less” language use → **situatedness**
  - Situatedness gives rise to **conventionalizations** of function (genres, registers)
- Language amounts to **social behavior** and it is **judged** as such.
- Language’s functional variation can reveal multi-scalar patterns of **inequality**. → critical angle

Because of its core tenets, ethnography is for **emic** linguistic research.

- Incompatible with etic approaches (pre-established categories, researcher’s perspective) because:
  - Ethnographic research foregrounds insiders’ perspective
  - It features an **inductive approach**

(Blommaert, 2006; Blommaert & Dong, 2020; Rampton et al., 2014)

## Ethnography goes online

- “Digital” or “online” (formerly “virtual”) ethnography as a term refers to the ethnographic study of digital spaces.
  - The ethnographic ethos applies, but needs to be **adapted** practically.
- Our lives currently unfold in a “online-offline nexus”.
  - The “online plane” is technologically mediated and characterized by idiosyncrasies that ethnographers need to account for (cf. direct/indirect observation).
  - Focusing on the online only: partial, not “quite the real thing” → What is “real”?
- Some challenges that need to be addressed in digital ethnography include:
  - **Identity uncertainty**: Anonymity, disconnect of offline and online identity → “anchoring”?
  - **Algorithmic mediation**: “Bubble effects”, hidden algorithms
  - **“Lurking” and ethics**: Participants’ consent? Is anonymization enough? → “cultural leaders”
    - **Talking with participants**: always? – The digital ethnographic **interview**

(Androutsopoulos & Stæhr, 2018; Bernard, 2006; Blommaert, 2018; Blommaert & Dong, 2020; Hine, 2000, 2017; Varis, 2015)

## Digital immersion and observation: Warped space and time

- Ethnographic studies focus on particular fieldwork **sites**. But what does a “research site” look like for a digital ethnographer?
  - People’s (online) social practices are characterized by **mobility**.
  - Site choice using: infrastructural pointers + emergent salient information.
  - **Multi-sited** approaches → Not about the site, but about the phenomenon.
- Online spaces mostly feature **asynchronous communication**.
  - Working with (digital) **traces** of human behavior. → **page infrastructure**
- Digital ethnographers’ **presence “at” the research site**: How long?
  - Real-time observation is impossible, but...
  - Frequency is key. Internet content is **ephemeral**.



Posted on r/SuddenlyGay on 21/04/21. Screenshot captured on 15/11/2021.

(Androutsopoulos & Stæhr, 2018; Hine, 2017; Varis, 2015)



# So, what is digital linguistic ethnography good for? (1/3)

## 1. Studying online communicative practices and their social function

### Example 1

435 Likes

Anna Mariiiiia ❤️❤️❤️❤️😊  
Like · Reply · December 29, 2015 at 6:37pm  
Maria my luv!! <333  
Like · Reply · 1 · December 29, 2015 at 6:41 pm  
Maxine My gorgeous gyal ❤️❤️❤️❤️😊😊  
Like · Reply · December 29, 2015 at 6:48pm  
Maria You too!!!!  
Like · Reply · December 29, 2015 at 6:49pm  
Laura so buff!!!!!!!!!!!!!!  
Like · Reply · 1 · December 29, 2015 at 6:51pm  
Maria Lyyyy  
Like · Reply · December 29, 2015 at 6:55 pm

Sara Beautiful ❤️❤️❤️😊😊😊  
Like · Reply · December 29, 2015 at 6:56pm  
Maria Miss u! X  
Like · Reply · December 29, 2015 at 6:57pm  
Hannah Woah so much beauty ❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️  
Like · Reply · December 29, 2015 at 6:59pm  
Maria thaaank u babe xxx  
Like · Reply · December 29, 2015 at 7:05pm  
Beth Sooooo hot  
Like · Reply · December 29, 2015 at 7:19pm  
Maria beth baby 🙄😊

Example from Georgakopoulou (2016, p. 194).

“Ritual appreciation involves positive assessments of the post and/or poster, expressed in highly conventionalized language coupled with emojis. These semiotic choices result in congruent sequences of atomized contributions, which despite not directly engaging with one another, are strikingly similar, visually and linguistically.” (ibid., p. 182, my emphasis).

12) Elena: [next to selfie of her and her best friend Anna, which is not reproduced here].

Waaaay up I feel blessed. With Hannah Bates.

Hannah: Awh luv u. xx  
May 7 at 9 pm Like 2  
Elena: Luv u too ❤️. We're gonna have so many more great times esp. now that we've got Mike 😊  
May 7 at 10.47 pm Like 3  
Hannah: Ha ha very tru ❤️❤️ let's hope we don't run into bryan again tho . . .  
May 7 at 10.58pm

Example from Georgakopoulou (2016, p. 198).

“Doing alignment through **knowing participation** [...] creates specific alignment responses by bringing in and displaying knowledge from offline, preposting activities or any other knowledge specific to the post or poster.” (ibid., p. 182, my emphasis)



## So, what is digital linguistic ethnography good for? (2/3)

### 2. Gaining emic insights: Participants' "lay sociolinguistics"/metapragmatic judgements

#### Example 1. "Alex" (by email)

The ending –er is spelt as –a. All endings with –s are spelt as –z. Some hardcore rap freaks even respell every S as Z or double ZZ within words. This is judged as "underground" affiliation.

#### Example 3. Guest book entry

Yo Leude! Was sup? Phatte Seite. Grüße gehen raus an jeden einzelnen Head, der Hip Hop liebt und auch supported! smoke weed und schieß auf peace. I am out tha 'Scarface'

*'Yo people! Whas sup? Phat page. Greetings to all heads who love hip-hop and support it too. smoke weed and don't give a damn about peace. I am out tha 'Scarface'*

#### Example 5. "Wolfgang" (face-to-face interview)

**Wolfgang:** Based on this statement you notice that (.) that he is using again those ah clichés, well this 'yo', 'leute' spelt with a 'd', 'wassup', was geht, a mixture of German and English, 'phatte seite' with a 'ph', double 't', 'heads' of course once again, 'supported', 'smoke weed', and ah –

**Jannis:** Well is it all clichés then?

**Wolfgang:** Well these are those typical words that you use in hip-hop (.) now if you – let's put it this way, I don't go to my friend and say, "hey alter, wassu::p, und äh supportest du mich," I talk normally to people, well I never met one like this one who would come over to me and (.) "wassu::p, ich supporte dich, smoke nich so viel weed" and so on—well I never met such a guy.

(All examples from Androutsopoulos, 2008, pp. 12, 14-15.)

## So, what is digital linguistic ethnography good for? (3/3)

### 3. Freeing us from a strict focus on “the linguistic” & structuralist concerns

- Consider Spanish: *los niños* ‘the boys’, *las niñas* ‘the girls’ > *I@s niñ@s* ‘the children’ (also: *les niñes*, *Latinx*).
  - The *Diccionario Panhispánico de Dudas* dismisses @’s use in Spanish on the grounds that “it is not a linguistic sign” (“género”, n.d., my translation from Spanish).

(2a) *Αγαπημεν@, σας χαιρετιζω ολ@*  
*agapimen@ sas xeretizo ol@*  
 Dears-PTCP-@ you-ACC.PL greet-1.SG all.ACC-@  
 ‘My dears, I greet you all’

(4) *δεν είμαι μόν@ [...] δεν είμαι εξωγήιν@*  
*den ime mon@ [...] den ime eksoyiin@*  
 NEG be-1SG alone-@ [...] NEG be-1SG alien-@  
 ‘I am not alone [...] I am not an alien’

(6) *καλύτεροι φεμινιστ@*  
*kaliter-i feminist-@*  
 better-M.PL feminist-@  
 ‘better feminists’

“From an ethnographic perspective, [...] any distinction between the linguistic and the non-linguistic is seen as a fundamentally artificial one.” (Varis, 2016, p. 57)

→ This opens the door to investigations of **multimodal** meaning-making or complex constructs like **literacies**.

(Examples 2a, 4, and 6 from Ntouvliis, 2020, pp. 19, 21-22).

## In a nutshell...

- Digital ethnography is an approach for the **qualitative** study of **people’s communicative behavior in online spaces** through **fieldwork**.
- The tenets of ethnographic research applied to linguistics have engendered **a particular view of language**.
- (Digital) ethnography **“opens up” linguistics** (e.g., going beyond “the linguistic”, getting varied data, understand the social). → **openness, flexibility**
- Linguistics offers **valuable tools** to analyze human communication through an ethnographic lens (“ties down” ethnography).
  - There is some **freedom** in our choice of analytical frameworks here.
- Doing digital ethnography necessitates an **understanding of “the online plane”** and **adapting** to that research reality.
- Ultimately, through digital ethnography, we can understand **how linguistic practices function socially** on the online plane, making use of **participants’ own insights**, and **focusing on function rather than form**.

## References (1/2)

- Androutsopoulos, J. (2008). Potentials and limitations of discourse-centred online ethnography. *Language@Internet*, 5, 1–20.
- Androutsopoulos, J. (2013). Online data collection. In C. Mallinson, B. Childs, & G. V. Herk (Eds.), *Data collection in sociolinguistics. Methods and applications* (pp. 236–250). Routledge.
- Androutsopoulos, J., & Stæhr, A. (2018). Moving methods online. In A. Creese & A. Blackledge (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of language and superdiversity* (1st ed., pp. 118–132). Routledge.
- Bernard, H. R. (2006). *Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (4<sup>th</sup> edition). Altamira Press.
- Blommaert, J. (2006). Ethnography as counter-hegemony: Remarks on epistemology and method. *Working Papers in Urban Language & Literacies*, 34.
- Blommaert, J. (2018). *Durkheim and the internet: Sociolinguistics and the sociological imagination*. Bloomsbury.
- Blommaert, J. & Dong, J. (2020). *Ethnographic fieldwork: A beginner's guide* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Bloomsbury.
- De Fina, A. (2020). The ethnographic interview. In K. Tusting (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of linguistic ethnography* (pp. 229-240). Routledge.
- Eckert, P. (1997). Why ethnography? In U.-B. Kotsinas, A.-B. Stenstrom, & A.-M. Karlsson (Eds.), *Ungdomsspråk i Norden* (pp. 52-62). Stockholm University.
- Georgakopoulou, A. (2016). 'Friendly' comments: Interactional displays of alignment on Facebook and YouTube. In S. Leppänen, E. Westinen, & S. Kytölä (Eds.), *Social media discourse, (dis)identification and diversities* (pp. 179–207). Routledge.
- Género. (n.d.). In *Diccionario panhispánico de dudas* (1st ed.). <http://www.rae.es/recursos/diccionarios/dpd>

## References (2/2)

- Gumperz, J. & Hymes, D. (Eds.) (1972). *Directions in sociolinguistics: The ethnography of communication*. Blackwell.
- Hine, C. (2000). *Virtual ethnography*. Sage.
- Hine, C. (2017). Ethnography and the Internet: Taking account of emerging technological landscapes. *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 10(3), 315–329.
- Leech, B. L. (2002). Asking questions: Techniques for semistructured interviews. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 35(4), 665-668.
- Meyerhoff, M. (2016). Methods, innovations and extensions: Reflections on half a century of methodology in social dialectology. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 20(4), 431-452.
- Ntouvlis, V. (2020). Online writing and linguistic sexism: The use of gender-inclusive @ on a Greek feminist Facebook page. *Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies*, 245.
- Rampton, B. (2007). Neo-Hymesian linguistic ethnography in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 11 (5), 584-607.
- Rampton, B., Maybin, J., & Roberts, C. (2014). Methodological foundations in linguistic ethnography. *Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies*, 102.
- Saville-Troike, M. (2003). *The ethnography of communication: An introduction* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). Blackwell.
- Spotti, M. (2010). Every ethnographer is a Borat but is every Borat an ethnographer? *Kielen kanoilla*, 1-3.
- Varis, P. (2016). Digital ethnography. In A. Georgakopoulou & T. Spilioti (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of language and digital communication* (pp. 55–68). Routledge.

Thank you for your attention! – The floor is yours 😊

- Questions?
- Ideas?
- Concerns?