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**Walking interviews, visual diagramming
and participatory ethnography**

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Abstract

Although generally accepted that there can be no ethnographic research without collaboration, there is a growing interest in a more explicit and deliberate collaborative ethnographic research (Lassiter 2005; Campbell & Lassiter 2015). Building on my own experience of Freirean participatory and critical pedagogy and participatory classroom research (Bryers et al 2013; Cooke et al, 2019), I take an explicitly participatory approach to my project: an investigation of the day-to-day language practices in and around the east London borough of Tower Hamlets.

In education settings, participatory approaches make central the reciprocal learning that takes place in classrooms and problematise the teacher-student hierarchy via dialogue and transformative action (Freire 1970). In similar ways, in a research setting, participatory ethnography disrupts the roles of 'researcher' and 'researched' to move toward a new role of 'co-researcher', where knowledge and ideas are more explicitly co-constructed.

In this project, participants take on active co-researcher roles, exploring and reflecting on their own sociolinguistic experiences. I reflect on this approach towards research by describing and discussing the two main methods of data collection: walking interviews, where participants decide their own research sites, lead the interviews and gather other participants along the way; and 'visual diagramming' where participants carry out their own sociolinguistic observations and represent their ideas in a visual format.

1. Introduction

This paper draws from traditions of sociolinguistic ethnography and participatory and critical pedagogy to describe methodological considerations relating to my current doctoral research into multilingual language practices in east London. The study is a multi-sited ethnography designed along participatory lines which explores multilingual encounters in a variety of places chosen by the participants on the project: places such as cafes, shops, schools, workplaces and family homes. In the paper I reflect on both the affordances and the difficulties of this participatory approach, especially in the context of PhD research where resources are limited and where the doctoral researcher is most commonly carrying out the project alone, ensuring a lack of participatory models to draw on. The main thrust of the paper is to explore the extent to which specific data collection methods can support a more participatory research process. To this end, I will focus on describing and evaluating my two principal data collection methods, walking interviews and visual diagrams.

2. Background

The project takes place in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and surrounding areas, and it takes Sylheti¹, the most widely spoken diaspora language in the area, as its central focus. Tower Hamlets is located at the entrance to the port of London and as result has for centuries become home to a diverse mix of peoples and languages. According to the council's 2017 profile of migrant populations, the borough is the fourth most linguistically

¹ Sylheti is the language spoken in the Sylhet region of northeast Bangladesh.

diverse area in the UK². The main and by far the most dominant language is English, but there are over 90 different languages reported to be in daily use. Sylheti is the second most widely used language and the Sylheti diaspora has hugely influenced the cultural and linguistic life of Tower Hamlets for more than four generations. Nevertheless, to call Tower Hamlets a Sylheti or Bangladeshi neighbourhood would be an oversimplification. More accurate would be to draw on Blommaert and Backus' (2013) description:

'Ethnic' neighborhoods have turned from relative homogeneity into highly layered and stratified neighborhoods, where 'old' migrants share spaces with a variety of 'new' migrants now coming from all parts of the world and involved in far more complex and unpredictable patterns of migration than the resident and diaspora ones characterizing earlier migration patterns (2013: 25)

The broader study observes and reflects on the language and communication experiences of 10 people who use and encounter Sylheti on a day-to-day basis and it explores what using Sylheti means to them in their day to day lives. It takes into account social and political transformations, sociolinguistic changes in the local language ecology and the effects of aggressive monolingual ideologies, anti-immigration rhetoric and the UK Government's 'hostile environment for migrants' policy, where the simple fact of using a language other than English can be an act of resistance. Not all the participants are Sylheti speakers or even come from a Sylheti background but I am drawing on Blommaert and Backus' (2011) revisiting of the concept of linguistic repertoire in which they argue that knowledge of language is linked to speakers' life experiences rather than provenance alone. This broad view of language knowledge ranges from 'maximum competence' i.e. knowing a language well, to 'recognising competence' i.e. being able to recognise certain words, sounds or shapes as belonging to particular names languages (ibid). They suggest:

People can no longer be straightforwardly associated with particular (national, ethnic, sociocultural) groups and identities; their meaning-making practices can no longer be presumed to 'belong' to particular languages and cultures (2013: 25).

Adopting this stance, however, does not mean erasure of the importance of ethnic, regional and national identities linked to language. As Hoque (2015:57) points out, 'we do not become part of a linguistic community in a practical, psychological and ideological sense just by speaking a certain language. There are complexities such as race, class, ethnicity and nation that determine membership of a linguistic and cultural community.' Both these perspectives are important in the study.

For all the participants on this project, Sylheti is a part of a very broad linguistic and communicative repertoire that includes a range of named languages, most notably standard Bangla, English, Arabic and Italian as well as registers, styles and varieties connected to these named languages and non-linguistic communication knowledge such as gesture and

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https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough_statistics/Diversity/A_Profile_of_the_Migrant_Population_in_Tower_Hamlets.pdf

tone. Rymes' (2014: 300) definition of communicative repertoire gives a useful focal point for this study.

One's repertoire can include multiple languages, dialects, and registers, in the institutionally defined sense, but also gesture, dress, posture and even knowledge of communicative routines, familiarity with types of food and drink and mass media references.

The communicative repertoire lens has enabled me to make Sylheti – a non-official, non-institutional language – a central focus in the project, whilst also focussing on the other linguistic and communication resources which make up everyday local communication encounters, including fluid mixing practices.

Recently, sociolinguistic studies have begun to problematise the term 'diaspora languages' by highlighting that non-standard varieties tend to be subsumed under broader named, usually official, languages of the home country (see Karatsareas 2020 and Gaiser and Matras 2020 for discussions of varieties of Greek and Arabic respectively). These perspectives are very relevant for discussions about Sylheti but the variety is not confined to linguistic form alone. There is also a huge variation in the way people think and talk about Sylheti in Tower Hamlets which include: a named and bounded language in its own right, with its own script and literary history and distinct from the official language of Bangladesh; a variety of, but similar to, the Bangla language; a local language which is quite distinct from both Bangla and other local varieties; an oral language which requires knowledge of another language (Bangla or English) for literacy purposes. All these positions can also be incorporated in the communicative repertoire lens, which as Bradley and Simpson point out, can include specific discourses as a communicative resource (2020:47).

My own interest in this area stems from more than 20 years living and working in Tower Hamlets, teaching English to first generation, predominantly Sylheti speaking, migrants, a job which has meant being immersed in questions of language and language use both through my own observations and through conversations with students, colleagues, and friends. These conversations have at times been formalised by doing classroom research projects and these have allowed more in-depth and reflective observations and understandings of issues relating to language use in Tower Hamlets (see Bryers et al 2013, 2014; Cooke et al 2019). My current project builds on these and I include my own experiences of Sylheti and multilingual practices in Tower Hamlets as part of the ethnography alongside the other participants.

3. Recent sociolinguistic changes

A number of social and political transformations have contributed to sociolinguistic changes in the area over the past 10 years. One such change relates to migration patterns, with most new migration over the past 5 years coming from Italy whereas in 2010 most new migrants were arriving from Bangladesh and Somalia³. According to Tower Hamlets 2020 population

³ <https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Public-Health/JSNA/JSNA-RefugeesNew-migrants-Final-Feb2012.pdf>

reports, the largest driver for population growth for Tower Hamlets has been international migration, contributing more than half the borough's population growth (ONS mid-year estimates 2018). Italian nationals now make up one in five of the borough's economic migrants and the borough has the highest number of Italian national insurance number registrants in the country (NINO 2017/18). Migrants from Italy are ethnically and linguistically diverse but the majority tend to be one of three groups: Italian born migrants with Italian heritage; Bangladeshi born migrants who became Italian citizens after migrating to Italy from the 1990s onwards; young Italian born migrants with Bangladeshi heritage. They bring a whole range of linguistic resources to the area including Italian, varieties of Italian, standard Bangla and other regional varieties of Bangla. However, very few migrants from Italy are Sylheti speakers and so the recent Italian migration has begun to change the dominance of Sylheti in the area and also broaden the communicative repertoires of local Sylheti speakers.

Other transformations involve intensifying processes of gentrification, leading to skyrocketing rents, and an influx of new businesses into the area (see *Save Brick Lane* campaign: <https://battleforbricklane.com/>). This has led many Sylheti speaking families to move out of the area, particularly to the neighbouring borough of Newham or further eastwards to parts of Essex, although people tend to still maintain close ties. The hostile environment policy and ever tighter immigration controls have meant the longstanding continuing migration from Sylhet, based on family reunion, has also slowed.

4. Why participatory ethnography

The study itself is an ethnographic project constructed around participatory or collaborative principles. Before elaborating on what this means, I would like to set the project in context and point to my reasoning and rationale for this way of working.

The first thing to point out is that my PhD is a part of a broader project that has a collaborative element at its core. On its website, CHASE, the consortium that fund my PhD, describes the CDA (Collaborative Doctoral Awards) as:

'doctoral studentship projects which are developed by a university based academic working in collaboration with an organisation outside of higher education. They are intended as a way of facilitating collaboration with a diverse range of partners including smaller, regional partners.'

In my case, the research is carried out in partnership with the Osmani Trust, a well-established, grassroots community organisation that works on issues of marginalisation, social deprivation, youth and anti-poverty projects in the local area. Collaboration is formally built into my research and there is regular dialogue between me and representatives of the Osmani Trust and Centre. Implicit in this framework – although not a formal requirement – is that alongside the production of an academic thesis, and the contribution to the academic research community and my own discipline of sociolinguistics, the work will also be of interest to and important for the communities represented by the Osmani trust. This requires attending, at all times and in all my thinking about the project, to

the tensions between academic requirements and local interest in the research findings, or put more simply, between the academic and non-academic world.

5. Critical pedagogy and collaborative ethnography

The collaborative structure described above, however, also aligns closely with my own background in participatory classroom research in the context of adult migrant education (Cooke et al 2019, Bryers et al 2013, 2014), and my commitment to participatory critical pedagogy. Both are underpinned and inspired by the ideas of Paulo Freire (1970) and by the notion that education from the bottom up – teaching students to question and problematise situations in their own lives – can both develop and educate students and be a transformative force in society. These ideas have fed into my research design.

I also draw from traditions in critical and collaborative ethnography (Lassiter 2005; Campbell and Lassiter 2015; Bell and Pahl 2018; Budach 2020). There are some theoretical and epistemological similarities between ethnographic research and Freirean inspired critical pedagogy, and I have found it useful and productive to draw political, theoretical and practical parallels between these, even though this comparison is not necessarily widely employed by ethnographers (see however Baynham 1988).

Both these distinct but overlapping disciplines challenge and problematise unequal power structures in their own fields and wider society, promote cooperative dialogue as an essential process to develop new knowledge and understanding, and question the very nature of knowledge itself.

5.1 Dialogue as method

Perhaps most central to the understanding and application of participatory ethnography in my project is the understanding of dialogue as a method of inquiry and knowledge production. In Freire-inspired participatory education models, dialogue as a pedagogical method replaces the dominant transactional model in which 'knowledge' is passed from teacher or 'expert' to learner or 'non-expert.' Dialogic education however, according to Freire, 'starts with the conviction that it cannot present its own programme, but must search for this programme, dialogically with the people' (Freire 1972:124).

Dialogue as method can be powerfully applied to participatory ethnographic research and in contrast to more mainstream ethnographic traditions, collaborative or participatory ethnography creates a dialogic space for knowledge production. Baynham, (1988: 418) also draws this comparison:

Dialogical problem-posing education is a kind of co-operative discovery of the way that social meanings are constructed, a kind of research investigation. Correspondingly, research investigations educate the research team. Collaborative research, in which the roles of researchers and researched are challenged, removes the learning from the domain of the few and makes it something to be shared.

Collaborative ethnographers Bell and Pahl (2018: 106) echo these ideas and state the importance of recognising that 'research does not access a pre-existing reality but is active in the creation of that reality.'

5.2 Expertise and co-creators of new insights roles: Who is the expert?

Freirean dialogic models, therefore, disrupt common sense or mainstream ideas about who holds expertise. Freire (1970: 80) tells us:

The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.

And in participatory and collaborative research, dialogue also challenges our sense of who holds expertise. In a participatory research project, at least in its ideal form, the knowledge, priorities and perspectives of the participants should form the basis for knowledge production. Szabó and Troyer (2014:308) echo this, stating that, 'the emancipatory and the democratizing ambitions of inclusive research re-position participants from being 'informants' that solely serve the information needs of researchers to being co-creators of new insights.'

5.3 Hierarchies of knowledge

And finally, Freirean models and collaborative ethnographic models also challenge the very nature of knowledge itself, the mystification of which plays an active role in maintaining the power hierarchies between teacher and learner, researcher and researched subject. Freirean-inspired participatory pedagogy, like ethnography, takes a 'bottom up' approach and locates the curriculum firmly in people's own lives and experiences. Ethnography also locates knowledge and knowledge discovery and production within people's own lives and experiences rather than viewing knowledge as external and abstracted from people. Hymes (1980: 105) suggested that ethnography is well placed to break down notions of expert knowledge:

Of all forms of scientific knowledge, ethnography is the most open, the most compatible with a democratic way of life, the least likely to produce a world in which experts control knowledge at the expense of those who are studied. The skills of ethnography consist of the enhancement of skills all normal persons employ in everyday life; its discoveries can usually be conveyed in forms of language that non-specialists can read.

Participatory approaches therefore, can challenge the ways in which different types of knowledge or experience are hierarchised in academic research to give more equal weight to non-academic forms of knowledge in the process of knowledge creation. According to Bell and Pahl (2018:106), collaborative ethnographic models, 'tease out forms of knowledge extant within communities that are often overlooked or undervalued by more traditional forms of academic research including embodied, emotional and tacit ways of knowing and representing the world.' This is done with the recognition that access to more mainstream forms of knowledge is most likely to be available to those with privileges afforded by wider

society including wealth, education, gender, race and class. Cameron et al (1993) bring the additional argument that power relations are not only located outside the research project nor 'entirely determined by pre-existing status imported from other contexts' (ibid:81) but are also produced and reproduced in the project itself. It is important therefore, that participatory research be prepared to both democratise the research process and at the same time interrogate the underlying structural and systemic divisions in wider society which underpin institutions, including universities (see also Lassiter and Campbell 2010, Thomas Crockett 2017, Bell and Pahl 2018).

5.4 Dangers

Proponents of collaborative and participatory research models are careful to warn against the dangers of adopting a collaborative research design. Firstly, they warn against 'false equality' (Bell and Pahl 2018:14) – research that either assumes collaboration but fails to make clear the concrete details of exactly how and where the collaboration is going to take place, or research that fails to recognise where collaboration is not possible, for reasons of knowledge or time, for example (ibid). To reduce this risk, Campbell and Lassiter (2015: 5) advise 'making sure to accurately outline the collaborative and non-collaborative aspects of a project and making visible hierarchies which are potentially hidden'. They focus on highlighting the deliberate and explicit nature of engaging participants in the ethnographer's tasks. For example, how far participants are involved in the research questions themselves, key decisions, interviewing, analysing, interpreting and writing up findings. A focus on the concrete helps to mitigate against the dangers of false equality.

It is also important to distinguish a collaborative and participatory research design from more general aspects of collaboration, which are common in most ethnographic projects. As most ethnographers would agree, there is no ethnography without collaboration of some sort (*inter alia* Lassiter 2005, Budach 2020, Back 2010). This however does not necessarily mean that issues of power, and access to knowledge are engaged with. For example, Marcus (2001) is scathing in his critique of the idea of the researcher engaging in instrumental relationship- building in the form of 'rapport' in order to extract information. Lassiter (2005:16 cited in Thomas Crockett 2010) separates collaborative and participatory research from the reciprocation model sometimes employed in ethnography. This model implies that the ethnographer offers something in exchange for the information gained during the ethnographic process, with things such as voluntary work in the community, advocacy work or campaigning. Whilst this may be a part of the project - indeed I have also used this model in this project – he argues that it is important not to misrecognise reciprocation as participatory and collaborative.

Another aspect to consider is terminology and the language used to describe the actors in research. The word 'informant', for example, contains the idea that the ethnographer is relying on the 'researched' to merely inform them (Lassiter 2005 cited in Thomas Crockett 2017). Other terms such as *consultant* and *co-researcher* may overclaim the equal status of those involved. I have used the terms *participants* and *participant-researchers* which, while not perfect, I feel best reflect the participatory stance in this project. Other language used by researchers can reveal hidden hierarchies. In this project I have struggled to drop the use of 'my' when talking about the project or indeed project participants themselves! The

unconscious use of the pronoun of course indicates an inherent hierarchy and the difficulties around the use of personal pronouns can be very revealing.

I have tried to be cognizant of these dangers in this project, making sure not to get carried away with claims that are not realistic and making sure to focus on specific concrete and explicit participatory methods. Equally important is active reflexivity and self-awareness of my own position of power in the process, both as the researcher from an institutional point of view (enrolled at a university as a doctoral researcher) and from a personal point of view in relation to the structural forces that impact on our lives, mainly but of course not only relating to gender, race and class. In a participatory project however this kind of reflexivity is important for everyone and discussions about who we are, how we are positioned by society, how we reconcile with legacies of historical and contemporary injustices and inequalities and how our own lives and those around us have been shaped by these, should, and do, form part of the dialogic process. Yin's (2015:24) words here refer to researchers but participant-researchers are also involved in these important reflections about:

..the way one's history has shaped one's worldviews, values, and beliefs, which are often taken for granted as "common sense." Insights gained through critical self- reflection are emancipatory in the sense that researchers can be aware of the sources of their current values, taken-for-granted worldviews, or ways of being which position them (with their tacit consent) in established societal or institutional hierarchies.

In the next two sections I will describe and discuss some of the 'concrete and explicit' ways I have developed a participatory research design and have guided participants to take on active co-researcher roles, exploring and reflecting on their own sociolinguistic experiences via a series of participatory activities.

6. Research while walking

The first participatory task I employed was to ask the participant-researchers to identify the research site itself. I did this by asking the question: Which places in our day-to-day lives are the most interesting from the point of view of language and communication? My own answers to this question brought me, first of all, to places where many languages could be heard mixing and colliding with each other – my home, my workplace, where I do my local shopping – and secondly to where learning was taking place – my Sylheti class and my ESOL classes.

When I asked the project participant-researchers this same question, their answers combined with mine to produce a fascinating array of social spaces that included homes, shops, parks, workplaces, cafes, school gates, classrooms, mosques, iconic streets, backstreets and even particular rooms in houses. These places became the principal research sites and the very act of choosing became an integral part of the participatory ethnography model, with the participants involved in decision making processes that fed into the wider project.

The next stage was to go together to each of these places to observe, describe and discuss communication practices there, and thus began the walking phase of the research. There was huge variation in these walks: some were a quick round the block, some covered a couple of miles and others one road or even just a part of a road. Most were thought about and planned in advance by each participant but one or two were completely spontaneous or changed route at the last minute. One even took place online using google maps streetview. All were devised and led without interventions on my part. Some of the walks included just me and the participant and followed Anderson's (2004) description of 'bimbling', whiling away the time chatting whilst walking. Others were more dynamic and involved a whole range of other participants, met and engaged with along the way.

During the tours we chatted about why the participants had chosen a particular place, the participants' and other peoples' communication practices in the various sites, changes they had noticed, possible reasons for these changes and much more. This was an incredibly invigorating – at times moving – experience, particularly for me as I was able to experience the whole range of 'tours', but it felt as if each individual walk was mutually enriching. This feeling was enhanced further because these walks took place during the Covid 19 pandemic, where for long periods the only social contact possible was outdoors with one other person, making it one of the few face-to-face research activities, and indeed social activities possible. Especially at the beginning, during the toughest lockdowns, the streets were sometimes empty, and places were closed up, but despite this we were still there, albeit often inside doorways as we talked. As the pandemic moved on, the shutters opened up and we were also able to enter and spend more time inside, giving further stimulus to the conversations.

6.1 *What walking interviews can do to the research process*

There has been a great deal of ethnographic research carried out using walking interviews, although much of this has taken place in other disciplines, notably anthropology, sociology and cultural geography (see *inter alia* Anderson 2004; Carpiano 2009; Trell and Van Hoven 2010; Back 2012). In sociolinguistics it is less frequently drawn upon as a method, although linguistic landscape studies are perhaps an obvious exception (see Szabó and Troyer, 2017). Many of these scholars have pointed out that walking interviews offer an opportunity to create more inclusive or collaborative research. Szabó and Troyer suggest that the very nature of walking can disrupt hierarchies in the research process. They say, 'several walking-based methods have emphasized that walking as an action and as a sensory experience transforms interaction and re-positions both the researcher and the research participants in the fieldwork setting' (2010: 309). Similarly, Wells describes the dynamics between her and one of her research participants:

Walking through an environment unknown to me allowed him instead to take a more active guiding role in ways which allowed him to bring to my attention and explain subjects which it would not have occurred to me to ask about. (2020:144)

Another affordance of walking is that it takes into account notions of 'spatiality' (Canagarajah, 2018: 33). A focus on spatiality allows us to go beyond linguistic orientations

and include how space interacts with communication activity. The physical space is an integral part of that communication, so being 'in situ', in an embodied way, can allow for a deeper, more comprehensive understanding.

Finally, scholars point out that walking can generate different knowledge than more static methods, such as interviews. Anderson (2004: 260) points out that the knowledge produced is less reliant on intellect and rationale. 'Talking whilst walking does not perhaps function cognitively and rationally [...] Nonetheless, it can successfully tap into the non-mechanistic framework of the mind and its interconnections with place to recall episodes and meanings buried in the archaeology of knowledge.' He goes on to say, 'the knowledge produced is importantly different: atmospheres, emotions, reflections and beliefs can be accessed, as well as intellects, rationales and ideas' (Anderson, 2004). The fact of broadening knowledge from intellectual to emotional can also begin to challenge and disrupt the balance between non-academic and academic knowledge which is important for the development of participatory ethnographies such as this one.

6.2 Examples from the project

By disrupting the hierarchies that exist between researcher and researched, walking research methods can democratise the research process. They can produce different kinds of knowledge and their embodied nature bring aspects of spatiality into our understanding of communication. The following two examples of walking tours with project participants, Joy and Gulabi, illustrate some of these ideas.

The first example is with Joy and it is a walk around a large department store where he works. We strolled around the store for an hour chatting together and then chatting to his colleagues. The conversations and discussions were enhanced, not only by the engagement of his colleagues, but also by being in the space itself. As we chatted, we experienced the normal comings and goings of the space including sensory aspects, visual, acoustic, olfactive, as well as linguistic. Similar to Wells' description above, as we were in his longstanding place of work, Joy was very much in the driving seat of the whole process. This excerpt shows how he takes on the researcher role, selecting colleagues to talk to, asking consent, giving information about the project, asking questions, making evaluative comments.

Excerpt 1:

1. Joy: **Hello guys (shouts over)**⁴
2. Joy (to me): Oscar and Shay. Shay is Bengali an
3. Becky: (laughs) they're looking over at me (inaudible).
4. Joy: Oscar is er from Greek Cypriot.
5. Becky: ok
6. Joy: Sorry I'm just talking part in a research and Becky's, **me and Becky** we're just having a conversation about work.
7. Joy: **Hope you don't mind Oscar?**

⁴ Turns in bold show the participant taking on explicit researcher roles

8. Colleague: Not at all mate.
9. Colleague: (inaudible from a distance)
10. Joy: **Yeah (laughs) no no no It's getting recorded.**
11. Joy: **We're talking about languages at work, all different talk.. especially Bangla.**
12. Joy: **Shay do you speak a lot of Bangla at work? (reply inaudible)**
13. Joy: **Don't you? even when you're talking to Anwar and people like that?**
14. Colleague: Only if I'm talking something private.
15. Joy: **(laughs). Did you hear that?**
16. Becky: (laughs) that's a good reason.
17. Joy: **So when you want to talk about something that you don't want Oscar to understand you talk in Bangla?**
18. Colleague. Yeah

As we can see, Joy is enjoying the role very much: he is in control and he is carrying out a whole series of researcher roles. He recruits participants, (line 1) 'hello guys'. He then gives necessary information about the research (line 6). He gets consent (line 7), and informs them of audio recording (line 10). He then goes on to ask questions, follow them up and explore further (lines 11-17). Particularly interesting is line 6 where he initially is about to introduce me as the researcher but then self corrects to 'me and Becky' clearly positioning himself as collaborator in the work. None of these moves had been discussed in advance and I was struck with how natural this collaboration felt, and how smoothly he conducted the research interview.

As I have mentioned, not all the interviews were so dynamic or contained multiple interactions. Some, like the following example, were more akin to Anderson's 'bimbling' (2004). In this extract, Gulabi, beautifully illustrates the idea that walking methods can unlock ideas, feelings and knowledge that more static methods cannot. As we walked together and chatted along the Regents Canal tow path we found the conversation flowing: we talked about her school friends, her family, ESOL and language learning; we listened in to people's conversations as they strolled past us, trying to guess the various languages and each topic just melted into the next. Reflecting on this during the interview she commented:

Excerpt 2: Gulabi

It feels like it's long-lasting walk and it doesn't end. There is no end and when you're walking with someone and you're having a conversation with them, the conversation kind of just flows with the environment that you live in, the environment that you're walking in and I guess when you're walking within this area, you get things that kind of pop up in your head, certain things and I guess it just kind of sparks the conversation.

Szabó and Troyer (2017) have argued that embodied methods such as walking interviews can transform the landscape through interaction. They claim that, 'interactions between researcher and participants become woven into the history of the landscape and will alter the participant's future understanding of the place and possible the agentive role in its modification' (ibid: 323). Prior to my own experiences I would have been considerably more

wary of such transformative claims. However, we undoubtedly experienced powerful moments of communication during the conversations that took place between one lockdown and another.

7. Visual diagramming

In the next stage of the project, following on from the walks, we all focused on one place to do a more in-depth investigation. Each participant chose a place from their list where they wanted to take a close look at the communication practices and then went to spend some time there. The task was to observe the communication practices including multimodal practices such as gesture, writing, facial expression and even objects that impacted in the communication, and to represent their observations visually using a simple visual diagramming technique.

7.1 *What visual methods can do to the research process*

Visual methods are becoming popular in participatory research and in multilingualism research (see *inter alia* Busch 2017, Kalaja and Melo-Pfeifer 2019). There are three threads that run through the literature on visual methods. Firstly, that using visual methods allows more agency and control for participants in the research process. Secondly that these methods are democratising or empowering and finally that the knowledge produced is broader and counters the intellectual bias in academic research. These methods also claim to be more inclusive, disrupt or 'break' the power of the written word, offering an alternative means to communicate important meaning. These threads are indeed very similar to the threads in the literature on walking research methods described above and all three are relevant to my project.

One example of visual approaches is Lytra et al's (2017) work investigating children's literacy practices in faith settings. This drew on the use of participatory scrapbooks as mediational tools to facilitate a dialogic approach to ethnography and foreground the participant perspective. They explain,

From the outset we rejected the idea of giving the children a limited and limiting set of questions that we, the researchers, had devised. Instead, we conceived the scrapbooks as a discursive space where the children could select and present aspects of the faith that mattered to them, using writing as well as other as other semiotic resources. They did this with limited researcher guidance or other adult intervention (2017:220).

In a way that recalls Anderson's earlier arguments regarding walking (see page 8), Busch (2017, 2013) and other proponents of visual methods suggest that they support the researcher to capture the full range of knowledge available and that methods which rely on linguistic expression alone (interviews for example), are limiting. Talking about her work on language portraits (2018:6), Busch states: 'The visualization of the linguistic repertoire favours a representation that allows us to deal with language attitudes or bodily and emotional aspects of lived experience of language' (Busch, 2018:6). Similarly, Kalaja and

Melo-Pfeifer (2019:276) (also citing Block, 2014) suggest that using visual methods challenges a 'lingualist', methodological, epistemological and heuristic landscape which tends to value text and discourse above all the possible array of outputs individuals may be called on to produce. They argue that verbal methods which combine with visual methods are better placed to allow knowledge production to include aspects such as emotions, representations, motivation, the symbolic and the 'untold'. Many of these ideas also align with critical pedagogy, in particular Freire-inspired *Reflect* education models pioneered by ActionAid (Archer & Newman 2003), which use collectively created visuals to allow people with lower literacy and education levels to have their voice represented. They claim to be more inclusive, give more agency, and they disrupt or 'break' the power of the written word, offering an alternative means to communicate important meaning. In the next section, I explore some of these ideas with reference to examples from the project.

7.2 The language circle: Example from the project

In figure 2, we can see the diagram, drawn by Gulabi, after she had observed the communication practices in her local café (figure 1). The café, described by Gulabi as a 'community hub', has an old-fashioned feel and is very distinct from some of the new gentrified coffee places in east London. It has a slower pace, a regular customer base and it is the kind of place where you can, and many do, stay all day without being expected to buy very much. The downstairs toilets are available for use by the locals, without requirement to purchase, or even ask. Everyone seems to know each other – it belongs to a dying breed of east London working class cafes. The café is co-owned by three business partners from Bangladesh. They are friendly, open and laid back, and perfectly in tune with the atmosphere of the café. They moved to the area three years ago after between 15 and 20 years living in Italy. Unlike most of the Bangladeshis in the immediate vicinity, they originally come from Dhaka and are not Sylheti speakers (see §3). The café itself is not characterised by 'Bangladeshiness', there are no Bangladeshi food or products, and the pictures on the walls are of Paris, New York and Tokyo. The café goers are of no particular national, ethnic or cultural background.



Figure 1 café where the observations took place

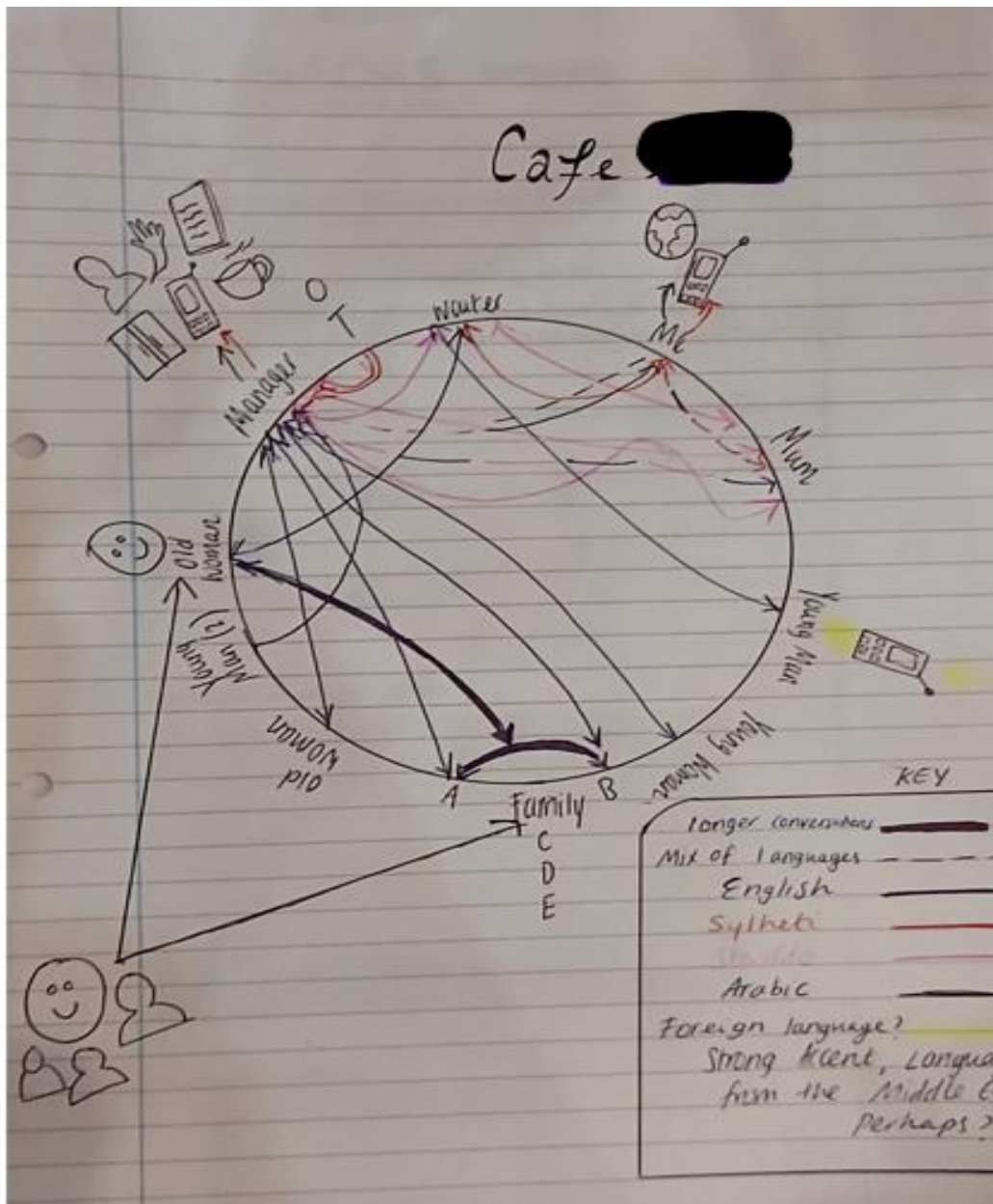


Figure 2 Gulabi's first drawing

The diagram above (figure 2) shows Gulabi's own perception of the range of communication practices taking place during the time she was observing. The languages and varieties she observed are indicated in the coloured key on the bottom right: English, Sylheti, *Shuddho* (standard Bengali), Arabic, varieties of English. The speakers are represented by describing written around the circle and the conversations they have are represented by the arrows across the circle. On closer observation we can see a range of language mixing practices represented by broken lines. She also includes some embodied communication which we can observe in the small drawings of phone, doors, coffee cups and visual hand gestures, and she took some photographs which can be viewed alongside the visual for a fuller picture (see figure 1).

In the top part of the circle, we can see how Gulabi has used colours and broken lines to represent the complexity of communication between British-born Bangladeshis with a Sylheti background and little exposure to the standard national language, Bangla (Gulabi and her younger siblings), their mum, born and schooled in Sylhet and therefore able to communicate using Sylheti and standard Bangla⁵, and the café manager and waiter who are from Dhaka and only speak the smatterings of Sylheti phrases they have picked up living in east London. The overlapping pink, red, black and broken lines show well that the speakers are drawing on all their collective linguistic and communicative resources to manage the conversation.

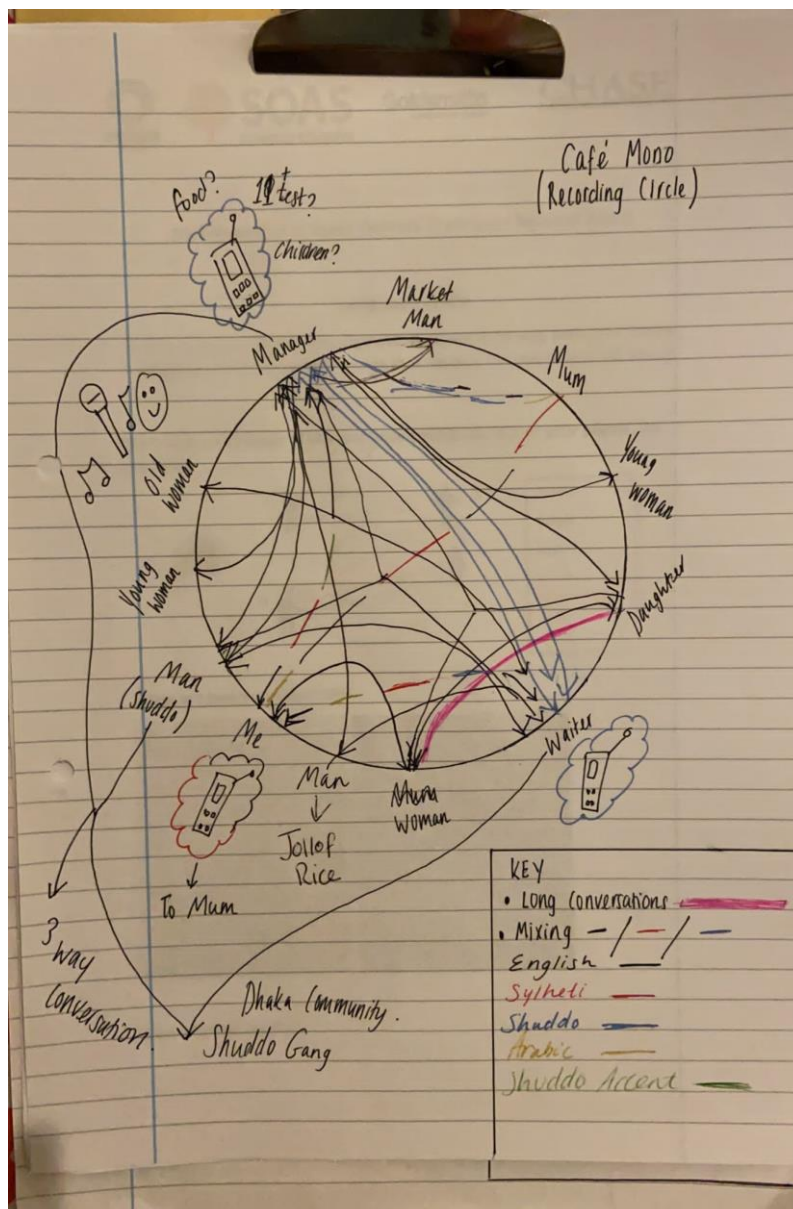


Figure 3 Gulabi's second drawing

⁵ The standard variety of Bangla is the language of the national education system. People born and schooled in Sylhet tend to be fluent in both languages

The second diagram (figure 3) shows another observation but this time, she also made an audio recording of an hour of the café activity. She later listened to the recording and drew the above diagram to represent this. In this second diagram we see similar communication patterns represented in the arrowed lines and the same languages being used. But we also see a different communication practice occurring with Gulabi representing her own communication with the café owner with a broken line to show mixing of English- Sylheti - Arabic and what she called 'shuddho accent'. Later she explained that this showed her attempt at standard Bengali, perhaps to accommodate to the standard Bengali speaking café owner, and in order to do this she stylised her Sylheti to sound like standard Bengali. Visual diagrams such as these can enhance participants' own understanding of their perceptions of the language practices they have taken part in. Being able to create a visual description or narrative and then observe and comment on it allows for reflective space but also agency and ownership of the information contained. Gulabi would easily be able to use this visual to describe to others the language practices in her local café, making the information accessible and interesting for a non-specialist audience, also challenging the distinction between academic and non-academic knowledge mentioned in §5.3. Visual and embodied methods therefore create a different dynamic and focus for the conversations between the researcher and the research participant which, as a consequence, tend not to be unidirectional questions but can be stimulated by both interlocutors viewing the visual and commenting on, questioning each other, and reacting to various points in the visual. Busch (2018.6) also argues that using images 'functions as a means of opening a conversation, and as a point of reference within the conversation', and she goes on (ibid:6) to highlight the role of visual methods to alter the timing and pace of conversations. She argues that, 'for participants the creative process of visualisation offers the possibility of pausing in order to use the pictorial representation to reflect on linguistic practices and preferences that normally pass without awareness, and then to talk about them'.

8. Discussion

8.1 *To what extent have using such methods allowed me to adopt more participatory methodology*

Whilst some of the outcomes of this process will be further reflected on in the next stage of my research, there is nevertheless good evidence of these methods disrupting traditional roles and hierarchies. I have found that both the walking and the visual work helped to provide an interactional environment where I did not feel I was always leading the conversation with my questions. Topic initiation and openings were much more likely to come from the participants, even when they were aware that I had a set of possible questions to refer to. The physical environment in the walking interview and the visual diagram worked as mediational tools which allowed a dialogic space to open up between the researcher and the participants, extending the conversation allowing both myself and the participants to move away from the limits of a single set of thoughts. Szabó and Troyer (2017: 322) make a similar observation:

Inclusive ethnography can challenge the dichotomy of observer vs. observed and highlights the mediating role that embodiment, devices, and verbal interaction play in shaping the generation of multimodal data and research narratives.

From the perspective of my study, so far perhaps the most interesting aspect of using these methods is how they allowed the researcher and participants to step back from each other and observe something together from a distance in more collaborative ways. This appeared to reduce the dependency on the affordances and limitations of the personal relationship between the researcher and the participants. The visual and embodied methods have also helped to bring the research participants far closer to the research process and increase their control over the information exchange from participant to researcher and contribute to the co-production of knowledge. I felt strongly that these methods reduced the danger of positioning participants as 'informants' who pass over information to the research without being active in the research process, knowledge creation and ideas generation.

At the outset of our conversation following the language circle observations (see figures 1 and 2), Gulabi had laid out a set of instructions to guide the discussion as we can see in the following excerpt from our discussion:

Excerpt 3:

- Becky: So, let me have a look at your circle.
Gulabi: Err.. so before I give you the.. circle, I want you to first look at it, think of, think about it and kind of consolidate the information I've written.
Becky: Ok, so you mean before you say anything?
Gulabi: Yes.

I found this very interesting. Having done her own research Gulabi now had clear ideas about what she wanted me to do. I argue that these are small significant moments which open up the research process and allow for more genuine collaboration between the researcher and the participant researchers. This openness makes it more difficult to locate the production of new knowledge either with the researcher or with the participant researchers. Additionally, having had a more active role in the data collection, participants may be more open to and interesting in being part of the ongoing data analysis and perhaps also write up. For example, Gulabi and, Shapla, another participant, have already supported the transcribing of data. This means I can draw on the multilingual resources of the participant-researchers. Rather than seeing my own partial Sylheti only as a disadvantage, the active inclusion of participants in transcription and translation processes can give scope for additional and interesting dialogue.

8.2 Some reflections on struggles and limitations

As well as disrupting hierarches, participatory projects – both ethnographic and pedagogical – are part of attempts to challenge injustice and inequality both in their fields and in wider society. As Bell and Pahl (2018:106) point out, the very reason to disrupt traditional forms of academic research is precisely because they undervalue forms of knowledge which are different from the rational or intellectual knowledge such as 'embodied, emotional and tacit

ways of knowing and representing the world', and because the dominant forms of knowledge tend to be dominated by those who have dominated academic knowledge production in terms of gender, race and class.

I certainly would not wish to make claims that the research process is an equal dialogue between me and the participants. Of course, there are many ways that this is not the case, not least the sheer amount of time that I am able to dedicate to it and the resources I am able to draw on (scholarship funding for example). I aim to follow the guidance of other collaborative ethnographers (*inter alia*, Bell and Pahl 2018, Cambell and Lassiter 2015) to be completely open and transparent about the ways in which my project is participatory and the way in which it is not. Bell and Pahl (2018) talk about remuneration and unrecognised labour. This is very difficult for me as a PhD researcher because there are very limited resources attached to my project but I have tried to be very careful to be respectful of people's work and time and never take the participation for granted. Although I am careful not to misrecognise the reciprocation model as participatory research, (see §5.4), I have nevertheless tried to reciprocate when I can, in recognition that my time is resourced, whilst the participants time is not. Therefore, when situations have arisen where I can share my skills, or give time to the participants' other projects, I have made sure I made time to do this.

The other difficult question is whether participatory ethnographic projects such as this one can follow the participatory or Freirean tradition by contributing to processes of change and transformation in wider society. Again, this is something to hope for but it is difficult to establish the extent of any real impact, and it will be something to consider carefully as the project progresses. Stroud's concept of linguistic citizenship (Stroud 2018, see also Rampton et al 2018, 2021) can support my thinking in this regard. Stroud's focus on democratic, voice, linguistic heterogeneity and enhanced understanding about language certainly aligns well with the project, as does its particular focus on non-standard or non-institutional languages. In addition, the active involvement of participants in research relating to linguistic diversity in the UK, and in particular to minority, non-standardised language such as Sylheti, could certainly be described as activist sociolinguistics, working towards the recognition and enhancement of linguistic diversity in the UK, especially when combined with participatory research methodology that foregrounds non-academic ways of working and forms of knowledge.

The final consideration regards the nature and amount of data collected using the participatory method. With large amounts of data covering numerous themes and research sites and participants likely to have different observations and conclusions, coming from me and each other, I recognise the difficulties ahead in bringing the project together coherently. However, it is worth pointing out that a unified conclusion to a project such as this is not only unlikely but also undesirable, given the complexity of voices and experiences. The task is more to understand the complex linguistic and communicative networks that we are all part of.

8.3 Next steps

Moving forward into my period of analysis and write up, I feel that having used a participatory model, it is more likely that participants will be involved in the analysis and interpretation. Some have already indicated that they would like to. I hope that having taken an active role will demystify the academic research process and break down the barrier between academic and non-academic contribution to research. For me there is little doubt that participant researchers on this project are potentially 'co-creators of new insights' (Szabó and Troyer 2014:308). The extent to which this is realised in more concrete terms, however, will depend on the next stages of the research. But the fruits of the participatory data collection, engagement and personal transformation that has taken place gives me room for cautious optimism.

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