Unbounding migration studies: the intersections of language, space and time

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Introduction: disciplinary borders

As the foreign population of Ireland grew at unprecedented rates, it began to receive much academic attention. This early academic work, predominantly located within sociology, social policy and education (see, for example, Devine, 2010; Fanning, 2007), has shaped the study of contemporary migration to Ireland in two important ways. The first is through the definition of the object(s) of study, where research activities focus on specific, often marginalized, (national) 'communities' of migrants and their particular experiences of migration, often in a reactive way (Mac Éinri and White, 2008). The second is through methodology, with a focus on factive or realist interpretations of interview data. While the body of academic research on migration to Ireland has grown substantially in recent years, it is bounded by these substantive and methodological preoccupations.

We work within disciplines that have made more limited contributions to the study of contemporary migration to Ireland. In the case of linguistics, this relative lack of research is not entirely surprising. Sociolinguistic research has a relatively short history in Ireland and most of the research in linguistics has focused on Irish and on structural linguistic and applied issues relating to Irish and, to a much smaller extent, on Second Language Acquisition (Lemée and Regan, 2010). There is, however, a growing tradition of research on the pragmatics of Irish English (see Barron and Schneider, 2005; Vaughan and Clancy, 2011). In contrast, geography has a longer presence in Irish universities, and an established tradition of research on Irish migration, specifically emigration from Ireland. Despite this, geographers have been slow to engage in research on contemporary migration to and from Ireland, with the
exception of a few key individuals (see Gilmartin and White, 2008; Mac Éinri and White, 2008).

In the course of a previous project (Migration and Citizenship Research Initiative (MCRI), 2008), we discovered a shared interest in how and why migrant experiences, and their narration, change, as well as a shared frustration with the fact that the practice of migration research in Ireland was not drawing from a sufficiently broad theoretical base. We also realized that, as a sociolinguist and a geographer, we shared a common fascination with context. For the sociolinguist, that context is connected to language practices – how linguistic practices change, and how these changes are instrumental in negotiating people’s (temporary) alignment (or lack thereof) with people, places and other imaginative spaces. For the geographer, that context is connected to place and space: where conversations take place, how those conversations invoke to specific places and are implicated in socio-spatial relations.

Our similar interests, and our at times different perspectives and disciplinary approaches, shape the questions we ask and the ways we respond to stories. In this chapter, we want to show how working with people from other disciplines has shaped our current research on migration and integration in Ireland. We discuss how we collaboratively defined the object of our research, the methods of data collection and preparation for research, and how we attempt to analyze the data. Through this contextual approach, which brings disciplinary insights into language, space and time into conversation, we show how our challenge to the disciplinary bounding of migration studies opens new possibilities for understanding migration as a process and as a lived experience.

Defining objects, populations and goals

This chapter is based on our experiences as researchers on a two-year project funded by the IRCSS. The project focused on two migrant cohorts, distinguished only by year of arrival in Ireland. We chose 2004 and 2007 as the years of arrival: the first because it corresponded to European Union (EU) enlargement and a significant increase in migration to Ireland, and because it meant a considerable length of time as a migrant; the second because, as our study started in late 2008, it allowed us to meet people early in their time in Ireland. We recruited sixty participants from eighteen different countries, and we generally interviewed each participant at least twice in the course of the research. Interviews were primarily conducted in English. Although people’s competence levels varied, none of the interviewees expressed unease to being mostly ‘limited’ to English during the interview. Like many other researchers on migration to Ireland, we also employed a qualitative research approach.

However, following current trends in the humanities, our project adopts a constructivist approach. We set out to explore how social categories (e.g. nationality, community, gender and migrant) are constituted in migrant narratives of lived experience in Ireland, and how they impact on migrants’ perceptions of Ireland and Irish society and influence negotiations of their own social identities in Ireland.

Our project did not focus on pre-existing nationally based networks of people or so-called ‘communities’ because both our previous project (MCRI, 2008) and current research in the humanities and social sciences has highlighted the fact that people with similar objective social characteristics (e.g. gender, class, ethnicity) may well have very different views and patterns of behaviour due to differences in life histories and aspirations. People’s behaviour is not geared towards reflecting or conforming to uniquely defined social categories, but actively negotiates the content of social categories and their orientation to them. Consequently, people’s behaviour is performative in nature: people act as individuals designing their social behaviour in accordance with the kinds of social personae they want to display to others and their understandings of the types of personae that are socially available. Viewed from this constructivist perspective, nationality, like other frequently invoked social categories, cannot be assumed to determine or explain social behaviour per se or influence it to the same degree for all its holders; its relevance has to be explored through careful consideration of a range of socially relevant factors. Rather than focusing on specific national groups, we thus consciously opted for a bottom-up approach that treats people as individuals rather than as ‘members of communities’ and let each individual define their specific characteristics, of which nationality is just one. We asked people to self-select in order to avoid politically convenient and often necessary presentations of ‘the migrant’ and to get a broad range of people.

Self-selection was instrumental in assuring that our sample was representative of the diversity of people who have come to Ireland. According to the 2006 Census, around 66 per cent of the people with nationalities other than Irish living in Ireland were from the EU (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2008). Our sample reflects this diversity, in that 50 per cent of our interviewees come from EU-10 (e.g. Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), 18 per cent from EU-15 and 32 per cent from outside the EU. It expands on existing studies/samples in that it includes a number of EU-15 (e.g. the UK, Germany, France, Italy, Spain) and non-EU migrants from other predominantly English-speaking countries such as Australia, the USA, Canada and South Africa. These broad migrant groups have to date received only marginal attention in the literature despite their relative numerical importance among migrants to Ireland (Gilmartin and White, 2008). While there is some attention to people coming from accession countries, for example from
research methods, the interview is perhaps the most widely used and practised technique. However, there are limitations to how the interview is structured and used within geographic research on migration. Broader theoretical concerns—such as power relations between the interviewer and interviewee—are certainly highlighted (Secor, 2010). In practice, however, the interview is most often treated uncritically, as a repository of facts, and reported verbatim in presentations and publications.

In contrast to geography, in sociolinguistics (and linguistic anthropology) discussions about methods of data collection have figured prominently. Initially, sociolinguistics dealt with strategies for overcoming the 'observer’s paradox': researchers want to observe what people are doing when they are not being observed, but the only way to find out is through observation. Since people’s vernacular or relaxed style of speaking is only practised in settings where speakers feel relaxed and unobserved (Milroy and Gordon, 2003), William Labov (1972) argued that researchers have to carefully match their interviewees’ demeanour and background, avoid formal, status-based professional behaviour and make the data collection event as relaxed and spontaneous as possible in order to minimize the impact of the researcher. In principle, this means that researchers should attempt to steer clear of the typical formal interview format and closely approximate a peer-like conversational setting. Thus, researchers met in interviewees’ homes, organized group interviews with people who regularly interact, challenged interviewees’ views and made reference to talked about their own experiences.

Although much criticism has been levelled at the sociolinguistic interview and its usefulness as a data collection tool for research on language variation and change, it remains one of the most commonly used methods. However, there is a growing trend towards data triangulation. Drawing on ethnographic methods, researchers also rely on participant-observation (Eckert, 2000) and audio-recordings of spontaneous everyday interactions. The interview is also increasingly used as a way to gain a structured insight into people’s (language) ideologies. Triangulation has significantly improved understandings of the local social structure, including the kinds of social groupings and categories that are salient, the social practices and ideologies linked to them, and the role of language in their construction (Eckert, 2000; Ochs, 1992).

The influence of developments in sociolinguistics was evident in our approach to the interview. People who took part self-selected, and chose when and where we would meet. Thus, interviews took place in settings as diverse as bars and coffee shops, in people’s homes or places of work, and at any time that suited the interviewee, including evenings and weekends. We carried out many interviews together, so there were often three, and at times more, people in conversation. The interview itself was in theory semi-structured, but often did not follow this structure closely. We followed the threads
of conversation introduced by the participant, and also commented on issues and answered questions posed by the interviewees in order to facilitate genuine interaction. Indeed, the interplay between us, as interviewers, was crucial to how the conversation developed. We often commented on our own experiences as migrants, or questioned each other on our views, as part of the interview process. These conversations often continued after we had finished recording the interview or, on occasion, when we remained in contact with participants later. We also resumed the conversation up to a year later, when we met for a follow-up interview that made no attempt to follow similar structures, but rather reflected on the previous interviews and the way in which the participant narrated the intervening time. This approach was not without its difficulties. When we interviewed together, we were often uncomfortable or impatient with the other’s interviewing style. When we interviewed alone, we often missed out on conversational cues that the other person would have followed, particularly related to that person’s area of research interest. We were often sidelined by our particular preoccupations at the time of the interview, whether that was discrimination, housing, work or current political events. In short, we were forced to reflect critically on our positionality during each interview, and to fight against any assumption that we were, or could be, neutral in this process. Similarly, we were forced to interrogate the constructed nature of the interview narrative, and look for the ways in which participants told stories that were not quite consistent in either space or time.

Analysing data

From this research, we have gathered three specific sources of primary data: the interview recordings, the interview transcripts, and our observations in and around individual interviews as well as the interview process. In analysing these data, we look at the interactions between all three sources in a form of triangulation. In this way, we draw on work within sociolinguistics, particularly discourse-based research that focuses on social concepts and their linguistic instantiation (Ochs, 1992). This research shows how social categories and the meanings that instantiate them are negotiated through alternation between codes, including styles of speaking, the use of certain speech acts or interactional routines and interactional devices (e.g. turn-taking, the use of silence, overlapping speech and hedging). This research also revealed that people’s conceptions of social categories — including conceptions of the self and other, and their sense of belonging — and the ways to negotiate them do not only vary across people and cultures, but are inherently variable even within the same society. People constantly negotiate and renegotiate them in everyday interactions through verbal interaction. Thus, social facts are dynamic and contingent on everything else in the context. Changes are often incremental and only emerge through detailed analysis of situated texts or discourses. In our analysis of the interviews it is thus not sufficient to simply focus on what Pavlenko describes as ‘subject reality’: using content and thematic analysis to ultimately present ‘a laundry list of observations, factors, or categories, illustrated by quotes from participants’ (2007: 167). In order to fully capture the social dynamics of migrants’ lives as they are encapsulated in their narratives, we have to pay attention to what is being said and how it is said as well as what is not being said. Therefore, in our analysis, we see that during the interview, we tend to focus on the content — specifically what is said — and take note of the context. Afterwards, we reflect also on what is not said (by us and by the participants) in the interview, on the form of language, and on the broader context for the interaction (Pavlenko, 2007).

Understanding migrants’ perspectives: negotiating the self across time and space

We want to illustrate our analysis in progress through a case study of one of our research participants, Mike. Mike was the fourth person we interviewed as part of this project, and he got in touch with us after a friend distributed a request for participants at his place of work. We first met on a snowy February night in 2009, when Mike came to Bettina’s home for the interview. The second interview was in March 2010, when Bettina met with Mike in his office. Mike moved to Ireland from the UK in May 2007 to take up a job as an architect. He had arranged a job prior to his move, and had remained in the same job since arriving in Ireland. He was thirty years old when we first met him. In the context of research on migration to Ireland, Mike is both usual and unusual. As a UK national, he is a member of the second largest migrant group in Ireland, though, paradoxically, the group about which least is known. However, in contrast to the majority of UK nationals in Ireland, he lives in Dublin city in rented accommodation, he is single and he does not have children. Mike is a skilled labour migrant, and he works in a construction-related activity, like the majority of men from the UK living in Ireland. With Irish parents, he may well see himself as ethnically Irish, as is the case with around 17 per cent of UK nationals living in Ireland (CSO, 2008). He moved to Ireland partially because he has always had an affinity for the country due to many happy summers spent in Ireland during his childhood (see Chapter 1, this volume, for a more detailed discussion). We have presented Mike based on the information he gave us during the two interviews, and in the broader context of UK migration to Ireland. We have limited means of verifying Mike’s narrative: we do know where he works, but we have to take his word about his marital status, where he lives and his parents’ background. This is a broader issue with interview-based research on
migration in the social sciences: migrant narratives are most often accepted as representations of reality, despite the clear ways in which they serve as dynamic social constructions of identity and place.

If we analyze the interview as a site of social construction, then it is possible to identify other patterns of interaction that shape and influence the ways in which Mike presented himself to us. When we first met Mike, in a context that was familiar to us but unfamiliar to him, he was hesitant and reluctant. A standard, fictive transcript of that first interview does not fully capture the hesitancy, evident in the qualifiers, pauses, reformulations and hedges that permeate his talk. For example, when we asked him how he is seen in the west of Ireland, where his parents grew up, he replied in a tentative manner: 'I don't know I kind of hope that they kind of, yes they wouldn't kind of see us as kind of a stranger back there like you know that so.' In some instances in social science research, 'I don't know', 'I hope' and the repetitive 'kind of' might be edited out to provide a more fluid narrative about the meaning of belonging. Although these hedges do not add referential information, they are vital for understanding an interviewee's positioning to the referential information (i.e. the content of the sentence); in this case, Mike suggests that he's unsure about whether or not he's viewed as an outsider among his Irish family. In this first interview, there are moments when Mike relaxes — most often when he tells a joke or laughs. However, when we directly questioned him, particularly on personal issues, he was very tentative. His engagement with us, and in the process of story-telling, was deliberate and guarded: he was clearly in control of the level and type of information he was willing to share.

A year later, when Bettina arrived at his workplace unannounced for the second interview, Mike interacted quite differently. Although objectively speaking his personal situation was rather uncertain — many people had been let go from his workplace and the salaries of the remaining people had been reduced significantly — he was less guarded in his responses to questions. For instance, he let Bettina know that he had a girlfriend — he did not mention romantic relationships in the first interview — and disclosed the fact that he and a sibling owned land and farmed in the west of Ireland. He kept emphasizing how happy he had been and even went so far as to say that a move to the UK would be entirely work-oriented, suggesting that Ireland had now become the place he called home. This change was also reflected in his language use: he employed comparatively few hedges even when talking about personal issues and his speech was not hesitant and involved few reformulations. While there are several possible reasons for the changes in his self-projection (he may have felt more comfortable in his workplace; he may have preferred speaking to one person rather than two; he may have felt that there were no negative consequences from the first interview; or he may have felt more secure in the way his life had developed), careful analysis of non-referential information revealed that objective factors such as job security, level of income and overall economic situation are not reliable indicators of people's inner states and their feelings of belonging and well being. Contrasting the two interviews allowed us to identify some factual omissions during the first interview, and also allowed us a glimpse of the variable nature of Mike's self-presentation and how he narrated this change.

The role of an interviewer in migrants' narration of the self

Interviewers are central to the interview process, but their role is often obscured because they are often explicitly written out of transcripts or quotations. In the discipline of geography, beyond the almost obligatory confessional paragraph that provides academic and/or personal context for the study, the practice of the interview is rarely interrogated. Yet, the interactional nature of the interview is central to how narrative and meaning are constructed. How we as interviewers question, listen and respond shapes the ways in which interviews develop, and how we position ourselves matters. Methodological guides in geography, for example, often suggest the need for selective self-disclosure by the interviewer for fear of damaging a rapport with the interviewee (Valentine, 2005). This assumes, however, a level of fixity about the identity of both interviewer and interviewee, rather than recognizing the range of voices both take on in the interaction of the interview. In the first interview, which happened early on in the research project, it is clear to see how Mary (the geographer) was guarded in what she said and in how she interacted with Mike: her questions are short and to the point, and she gives little information about her own views. In contrast, Bettina (the sociolinguist) is much more forthcoming about her own experiences as a migrant both in order to put Mike at ease and in order to entice him to give his own opinions, saying 'but here everybody knows a brother and a sister and whatever. It's actually quite frightening if you think about it when you are from the outside because like how are you going to push in?' In the second interview, Bettina is just as forthcoming, and she also exchanges information with Mike about social welfare benefits. At this time, perhaps reflecting her preoccupations at that point, Bettina was clearly most interested in questions of work and cost of living, and in how Mike was coping with the recession in Ireland, though at the same time trying to reassure him (and herself) that 'there are probably lots of people who are in the same and even worse situations'.

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Narrating social space

Just as the interview itself is a social construct, geographers also argue that space is socially constructed. In this way, interview narratives are as implicated in constructing space as they are in the process of identity formation. Bringing a geographic imagination to these interviews means that we paid attention, both in the interview and afterwards, to how Mike described places and his relationship with them. In the first interview, Mike spoke about Ireland as a place filled with emotion and meaning because of his family connections: a place he would spend holidays, a place he wanted to live in, and a place — particularly the west of Ireland — where he hoped he belonged. Despite this, he struggled when we asked him where he thought of as home, finally saying that he supposed it was the town in the UK where he grew up and his mother and some of his siblings still lived. Interestingly, his idea of Ireland was quite bifurcated. On the one hand, he spoke of the romanticized west, where aunts and uncles and cousins live, where his mother hoped to return, where he and his brother are seen as special, and where he thought he might like to be in ten years’ time. On the other hand, he currently lives in Dublin, and in this first interview spoke of the place as young and vibrant, with a great music scene and with lots of opportunities for socializing in the ‘smaller kinds of pubs’ he likes. He showed his ‘insider’ knowledge of Dublin in that first interview, making disparaging comments about Temple Bar and saying that his knowledge of the city ‘would be kind of so you know like somebody who was brought up here but you know’. By the second interview, Mike was much more certain about feeling at home in Dublin and in Ireland. ‘I don’t want to move,’ he said, while recognizing that limited work opportunities might leave him with no option. Later he said, ‘Yes well I have just been very happy about how the move went and enjoyed my time here and it was just, I don’t know, a lot of the people then when you are talking about going over to the UK, it seems like all the roads lead to London and I wouldn’t be that keen to head to London’ — this was in contrast to the first interview, when he told us he had job interviews in London before moving to Dublin, and said ‘I think London would be like be a pretty exciting place to live as well like it’s’. When Mike talked about moving to the UK in the second interview, he did so from a perspective that suggested that he now considered Ireland home: ‘because whatever happens, even if I was to go away, I would always have the plan to come back, it wouldn’t be like I would be going back over to the UK, it would be just to go for a period of time to let things settle and to see what happens in the market here and to see where it is going to go and where the work is going and that, and then to come back.’ In all his narratives of moving in the second interview, he invoked the figure of his girlfriend — an Irish woman who works in the same business, and who by then appeared central to his decision-making.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have argued that migration research in Ireland is in thrall to a specific set of research practices that prioritize marginalized communities and a particular form of qualitative analysis. As a result, there are significant gaps in our knowledge of migration to Ireland and in our awareness of migrant experiences. We have also argued, more broadly, that disciplinary approaches to migration studies are bounded by the dominant research practices that emerge in specific disciplines. Within geography, this is of particular relevance in the tendency to treat interviews as repositories of facts rather than as social constructions; within linguistics, this is of relevance because of the prioritization of language ideologies over other forms of social construction.

Our study of migration to Ireland thus challenges the ways in which migration research is bounded in a variety of ways. In defining the object of study, we have significantly broadened the definition of ‘migrant’, moved beyond a community-based approach to migrant experiences and paid particular attention to the question of self-presentation. In our methodology, we have used insights from recent waves of sociolinguistics to challenge conventional structures and practices of the interview. In our analysis, we have prioritized language form as well as content, and highlighted a range of social constructions — including space — that emerge from the interaction. We have shown this in practice through our analysis of interviews with just one respondent, Mike, but he is definitely not unique. Our analysis shows, on one level, the unreliability of the interview as a source of facts, but it also shows the richness of the interview as a source of information about social interac-
tion and social construction, all key aspects of the migrant experience. This analysis involves a level of analysis of the self-presentation of the researcher that is often missing from migration research.

Our approach to migration research thus prioritizes context, and analyses language and space over time. We aim to expand the ways in which the interview is understood in migration research, in Ireland and more broadly, drawing on insights from sociolinguistics, but expanding them to consider ideologies other than language. In doing so, we also aim to expand the ways in which migration in Ireland is theorized and understood. Attention to the intersections of language, space and time thus led us in new, and often perplexing, directions. Time complicates and changes migrant experiences and stories; socio-spatial narratives alter; and language, as a means of getting at migrant experiences, is unreliable yet also illuminating. And all of these are framed by changing contexts, for us as researchers and for the people we meet, at a range of different scales. Paying attention to the complexities of narrated and emplaced migrant experiences in all their 'throwntogetherness' (Massey, 2005) is messy and difficult, but it helps us to unbound migration studies and deepen our understanding of migration and the migrant experience, in Ireland and further afield.

Notes

1 An earlier version of this chapter was presented by Mary Gilmarin at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers, Washington DC, 15 April 2010 in the session on ‘Contemporary Geographic Research on (Imm)igration 4: Immigration and the Politics of Belonging and Identity’.

2 This is in contrast to academic research on emigration from Ireland, which is dominated by historians and, to a lesser extent, historical geographers.

3 The project, entitled ‘Towards a Dynamic Approach to Research on Migration and Integration’, ran from December 2008 to December 2010, and was funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences. We were the Principal Investigators on this project.

4 Only one interview was carried out in a language other than English (German).

5 People do not respond in the same way to similar conversational strategies or topics, and language use or styles of speaking vary not only in relation to the context (formal/informal) and topic, but also in relation to other dimensions such as the audience (Bell, 1984), the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, and the identities assumed by the interlocutors (Coupland, 2001; Eckert, 2001). The interview is a specific speech style that is not common to all communities (Briggs, 1984).

6 Within geography, a more nuanced approach is suggested by Wiles et al. (2005), though in the context of health research.

7 ‘Mike’ is a pseudonym.

References


