

# Introduction: Rethinking Communicative Breakdowns in Ethnography

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As someone interested in the intersections of language and cultural practice, or, more appropriately, the embedded nature of language within cultural practice, I am pleased that this journal issue is devoted to the study of what happens when interaction fails or is threatened. The papers here reflect the presupposition that interaction is not positively fixed by convention, but, as Jacques Derrida (1977) reminds us, convention is constantly being ruptured by the multiple layers of the imposition of context. When we speak of interaction in these papers, the authors and I, coming from diverse backgrounds in linguistic, archaeological, and sociocultural anthropology, refer to the interaction between the ethnographer and the fieldsite community members who are engaged in a particular *activity* during the course of fieldwork. The *activity* as a unit of analysis is a key concept for this issue's theme, because a close study of situated activities provides insights on "how human beings construct the events within interaction" (Goodwin 1990:8). Although much has been written about the power dynamics of ethnography, contact, and representation over the recent decades (see Asad 1973; Said 1989; Abu-Lughod 1991; Scheper-Hughes 2000; Jacobs-Huey 2002), the papers in this issue seek to take a somewhat different turn in their discussions of face-to-face interaction in anthropology. While insights from previous and continuing discussions of power, politics, and anthropology fit appropriately with the incidents discussed in this issue, I encourage us to consider not only the larger political constraints of the ethnographic interaction, but, as Erving Goffman (1964) emphasizes, the situational properties of interaction that are not overly determined by macro-structures but emerge during the progression of ratified co-presence (see Jacobson, this issue).

Most will agree that every ethnographic experience is fraught with the fear of breakdowns in communicative events. This fear assumes, rather appropriately, the differential distribution of fluency in verbal repertoire (Gumperz 1968) and culturally-situated "common sense" (Hanks 2001), both which make themselves known through interaction between, as well as within, "cultures" (see Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz, this issue). However, to assume breakdowns have their beginning and ending point with the situation's seeming resolution would be misleading. A close analysis of breakdowns yields potential insight into another fruitful site of anthropological theory and practice: the diachronic nature of language socialization. As Bambi Schieffelin and Elinor Ochs (1986) argue, language socialization, or socialization to language use *and* to culture through language, is an ongoing process as we enter into new domains of communication. Furthermore, they go on to note that every interaction is

potentially a medium for socialization. Thus, explorations of communicative breakdowns can highlight the horizon of pedagogical resources used by the cultural groups we live and study amongst to assist in transforming particular persons from novice to “competent” members of culture (see Jacobson, this issue). A critical engagement with communicative breaches also allows us as ethnographers to render visible the patterned and expected, but taken-for-granted practices, within everyday activities (Garfinkel 1967:36-38). Indeed, within these reflexive moments, the ethnographer and other co-participants, in addition to the act of place-making, are constantly vulnerable to reconstitution. As such, ethnographic fieldwork shows itself as a situated, co-constructive activity.

### **From Interaction to Textual Representation**

Given that breakdowns are constitutive of fieldwork experiences regardless of the location of the fieldsite or “native/non-native” positionality of the anthropologist (see Jacobs-Huey 2002), the concern for the anthropologist is how to represent these incidents in the ethnographic text. Breakdowns are vulnerable, intersubjective situations within the field, and bringing them out in the ethnographic text calls into question the “social face” (Goffman 1967) of the ethnographer and the discipline. This insight is important when talking about actual or potential failures. As Linda Kent (1992) notes, while there is a multiplicity of discourses on failures within the field, these discussions are often contained so as to preserve what Renato Rosaldo (1993:171) refers to as the “masculine heroics of science.” In the use of the latter phrase, I do not mean this in a manner than can be taken as sexist, but as a provisional signifier to suggest the ever-present popular idealization of the ethnographer as endowed with powers to penetrate the boundaries of communities. As such, failures are seen as necessary, but certain failures are strategically invoked in the ethnographic syntagma whereas others remain virtually unspoken and never entextualized.

This journal issue is an attempt to write against this sort of downplay, which is already determined by the ability of these sorts of incidents to get lost within what appears to be the importance of larger cultural description. By explicitly presenting these situated events and pushing for an analysis of communicative breakdowns in the field, both the author and readers are encouraged to invoke the destabilization of “context” and the complexity of inference during interaction (see Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz, this issue). In these presented incidents, one may also consider Erving Goffman’s understandings of “social face” (1967), the everyday performances we engage in (1959), and the use of frame keys in understanding events within social life (1974) as insightful in critically assessing the significance of the accounts as constantly negotiated between co-present participants (see Kalshoven, this issue). Moreover, a discussion of breakdowns within communication between the anthropologist and the fieldsite can be potentially fruitful for understanding the ways in which both engage in attempts to re-make identity and place during our presence and afterwards (see Giraudo and Westmoreland, this issue).

In addition to the examination of interaction, I encourage the papers to be read as a means for narrating the self (Ochs and Capps 1996): how we as ethnographers make the experience of narrating breaches both personal as well as accessible to a collective speech community of social science scholars. This allows us to discern what the available discursive devices are for narrating ourselves as subjects within particular disciplinary constraints and censorships imposed and tacitly accepted by ourselves as practitioners in a social field (see Bourdieu 1991). What types of registers are we “allowed” to use when we choose to speak of failures? To what degree do these registers allow us to go forward in making the discipline a reflexive account of “us” versus the Self/Other?

In closing, the papers in this issue seek to reposition discussion of breakdowns in the field not as anecdotal and tangential to ethnographic description, but as one of the many constitutive elements of the description that is often downplayed. In short, the “failure” becomes “data,” and the anthropologist is presented as one of the many participants within the framework chosen for analysis. As Matti Bunzl (2004) reiterates the problematic of the Self/Other dichotomy, I would hope to see a concentrated writing about communicative breakdowns as a treatment of incidents in the field where the dichotomy is dissolved and the anthropologist and the fieldsite members are both a part of the same participant framework (see Goodwin 1990). Thus, I invite us to see these explorations on breakdowns as a stage in the ongoing dialogues on the ethnographic enterprise. Consider these papers as an attempt to move beyond anecdotes and into the realm of experiencing and representing ethnography as a series of situational, performative, and open-ended interactions that are constantly in negotiation within and beyond the field, with embedded and emergent constraints and patches of agency for the subjects of inquiry and the subjects who are inquiring.

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