

Bridging the language gap: Theoretical and methodological approaches to Herero notions of development through Talk-in-Interaction

(= Habilitation thesis, ms., July 2008. University of Frankfurt.)

Rose Marie Beck

Abstract

I set out on this study from a diagnosis that processes of understanding need to be theoretically founded, conceptually based and methodologically secured in order to be academically sound. Background to this is the research project "Language, Gender and Sustainability" where we were interested in local notions of development: But how can we make sure that what we think are local notions are not only the projections of our own ideas about them? As one of my academic teachers has said a long time ago, not to find the Easter eggs which we ourselves went to hide? On the assumption that I write from the point of view of a linguist who is interested in how the sociality of language can be conceived, and on the assumption of a research interest in local notions of development, namely that a 'local perspective' or 'inside view' is relevant in various ways: which theoretical and methodological apparatus might allow us to systematically explore locally situated realities or local perspectives, the social 'landscapes' of others, and reconstruct these realities as 'inside views'? What data do we use and which methods of analysis? Which hermeneutic framework is adequate in a context where we have no 'natural' access to local hermeneutic, sense-making practices?

In order to address these complex questions, the book is divided into two parts. In the first part I seek to establish a theoretical, conceptual and methodological framework that is tested in the second part against empirical data and a particular research question that is not inherent in the framework exposed in the first part. Following this overall concept, the *second* chapter deals with how to integrate language into the social world. Here a notion of social action in the framework of a constructivist sociology of knowledge is developed and applied to verbal action. In the *third* chapter, the sociology of knowledge is called upon to expound the notion of common sense as an indispensable resource for making sense of social action. Verbal action as social action also relies on common sense to produce and interpret the world. In this chapter I also show how ethnomethodology and the sociology of knowledge share the notion of common sense and of routines and practices on which social action/verbal action rests. Most important here is that in and through social/verbal action common sense categories are made use of in order to achieve social goals. From the notion of social action it follows that in verbal interaction, participants in talk display to each other

that they use categories, which categories they use, and how they use them. Ethnomethodologists speak of 'accountability' in this context. The fact that social/verbal action is 'accountable' is used by analysts to get hold of and reconstruct practices and to show how common sense categories are employed. How this can be done in a context of linguistic, cultural and social distance is discussed in chapter *four*. In particular, I describe the method of Locally Mediated Research (a term coined by Bearth 2007c) in which a local researcher teams up with an expatriate researcher in order to compensate for a lack of social competence of the latter in an ethnographic context.

The second part of the book contains an empirical study which is based on field research undertaken in the context of the research project on "Language, Gender, and Sustainability". Its research interest, namely to understand notions of development from a local perspective, led to the specific research question pursued throughout the analysis of the data: How can we find instances and traces of local notions of development in and through talk by members of a small community based organisation to the west of north central Namibia, in a way that is theoretically supported, has a firm conceptual framework and is methodologically controlled? In chapter *five* and *six* the research background and local backgrounds are described, and in chapter *seven* I proceed to a test of the potential of the proposed theoretical, conceptual and methodological framework. More precisely, in order to reconstruct the local social dynamics and the development of the community based organisation which manages its own borehole, I start out from an interactional linguistic description of turn-taking as a chairperson's right and obligation, and of how the participants use that underlying, abstract notion, in order to negotiate their respective roles in the organisation and the topics at hand. This provides me with a point of departure for analyzing common sense categories of gender and speech and for showing, again, how these categories are used in the context of development. Finally, in a case study on financial reporting within the organisation, I intend to show how 'new' knowledge is appropriated through the application of interactional routines and tested as to its local problem solving capacity. In chapter *eight* the results are summarised both from an empirical (local notions of development) and a methodological (strengths and weaknesses, challenges) point of view, and open questions are discussed.

This study aims at bridging three kinds of gap which are caused either by notions of language or by language itself. First, the gap between linguistics and sociology. This is the topic of chapter 2. Second, between understanding based on mother-tongue competence and non-mother-tongue competence. This is the topic of chapters 3 and 4. And third, between local communities and the expert community. This is the topic of chapters 5 to 8.

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