

# The potential of ethnographic drama in the representation, interpretation, and democratization of sociolinguistic research

Adrian Blackledge  | Angela Creese 

Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling, Stirling, UK

## Correspondence

Adrian Blackledge, Colin Bell Building,  
University of Stirling, Stirling FK9 4LA, UK.  
Email: [a.j.blackledge@stir.ac.uk](mailto:a.j.blackledge@stir.ac.uk)

## Funding information

Arts and Humanities Research Council,  
Grant/Award Number: AH/L007096/1

## Abstract

In this paper, we discuss the affordances of an approach to the representation, interpretation, and democratization of sociolinguistic research, which utilizes the tools and methods of the theatre. Taking as an example a team ethnographic research project conducted across four cities in the UK, we discuss the process of creating drama from material observed as social practice. Drawing on observations in a welfare advice centre in a Chinese community centre, and a city-based volleyball team, we propose that theatre techniques enable audiences and academic researchers to see communicative encounters in a new light. We propose that ethnographic drama offers three opportunities in particular: (i) it has the potential to make available outcomes of research beyond the academy; (ii) it has the potential to discover understandings of ethnographic material which remain latent in accounts that do not involve performance; and (iii) it has the capacity to democratize voice, privileging the voices of research participants rather than those of academic researchers. Ethnographic drama thus offers considerable potential in the representation, interpretation, and democratization of sociolinguistic research.

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**KEYWORDS**

ethnographic drama theatre, interpretation, representation, sociolinguistics

**摘要**

本文讨论了戏剧在社会语言学研究作为一种方式方法的可供性,即利用戏剧这一工具和方法来表现和解释社会语言学的研究。以一个在英国四个城市所进行的大型团队民族志研究项目为例,我们讨论了对从社会实践观察中所获得的资料进行戏剧创作的过程。通过对华人社区中心的福利咨询中心和城市排球队的观察,我们提出,戏剧这一方式方法能让观众和研究人員以新的眼光看待人际交流。我们认为,民族志戏剧(i)有可能让学术界以外的人士有机会接触到研究成果;(ii)有可能挖掘出对民族志资料其它方面的认知,这些认知在表演之外,却潜藏于文字的叙述之中。(iii)有能力让大家都有表达自己的机会。参与者也有权利表达自己,让更多人听到他们的声音,而不仅仅只是研究员的声音。因此,民族志戏剧在表现、解释和民主大众化社会语言学研究这些方面蕴藏着巨大的潜力。

## 1 | SOCIOLINGUISTICS + ART

What do we see as the potential of ethnographic drama in the representation, interpretation, and democratization of sociolinguistic research? The answer perhaps lies in an apparent paradox: that in order to represent the truth of social practice, we aim to render it in ways that are neither realistic nor naturalistic. That is, in terms recognizable to the sociolinguistic ethnographer, we aim to make the familiar strange. Two recently published ethnographic dramas take small steps in the artistic representation, interpretation, and democratization of sociolinguistic research (Blackledge & Creese, 2021a, 2021b). Relying on performance rather than on more conventional means of reporting, these pieces sit at the interstices of art and sociolinguistics. In this paper, we explore some aspects of this direction of travel in the representation, interpretation, and democratization of sociolinguistic research.

## 2 | SOCIOLINGUISTICS

The context in which we will discuss ethnographic drama in sociolinguistics is a 4-year research project in the UK, Translation and Translanguaging: Investigating Linguistic and Cultural Transformations in Superdiverse Wards in Four U.K. Cities ('TLANG'). The sociolinguistic question we set out to answer in the research project was: 'How do people communicate in increasingly diverse city settings, and what are the implications for policy and practice in public, private, and third sector organisations?' The research was concerned with how people communicate in societies characterised by heightened

social diversity and complexity. The team linguistic ethnography engaged with notions of emergence and constraint, conviviality, everyday encounters, and inequality. Researchers examined interactional encounters characterised by translanguaging and heteroglossia. In multiple research sites, we examined communication and interaction between people of different nationalities, ethnicities, languages, and cultural modes. We collected ethnographic material which enabled us to understand language practices in terms of temporal and spatial trajectories, and mobility, focusing on not only language-in-place but also language-in-motion. We looked at the fine grain of communicative practices in contexts of differential relations of power. We paid close attention to the ways people communicate by negotiating or seeking out common ground and shared terrain. We examined how institutional, generational, legal, and political commonalities intersect with dimensions of difference, and we considered linguistic difference both as a constraint and as a resource in daily interactions.

In four cities, Birmingham, Cardiff, Leeds, and London, we observed language in use and action as people interacted in city markets, art centres, corner shops, libraries, community hubs, and sports clubs. At each of 16 research sites, we worked with a key participant, or pair of key participants, over a period of 4 months, observing and recording their interactions with customers, clients, members of the public, colleagues, team-mates, friends, and family members. Key participants in the research were almost all migrants to the UK – from China, Hong Kong, Iraq, Malaysia, Mozambique, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia, and Sudan.

### 3 | ETHNOGRAPHY

An ethnographic focus on everyday practice allowed us insight into the processes that shape urban encounters. Ethnographers pay close attention to local context, historicity, and specificity, but also to non-local, transnational dynamics, connections, and relations. Investment of time was needed to create fine-grained, ethnographic understandings of lived experience. Careful, detailed observation enabled us to understand communicative encounters in contexts of social diversity. Taking an approach that paid attention to language as social practice, we engaged linguistic ethnography, an interpretive approach that studies interactions of actors from their point of view, and considers how these interactions are embedded in wider social contexts and structures (Rampton, 2015). Through detailed attention to interactions between people, linguistic ethnography links everyday linguistic and cultural practices to wider social processes, ideologies, and relations of power. In the course of our ethnographic research, we wrote field notes, conducted interviews, took photographs, produced films, made audio-recordings and video-recordings, and collected social media posts. We created a finely detailed account of the communicative practices of a wide range of people as they went about their everyday lives in commercial, leisure, and domestic settings in the superdiverse city.

### 4 | KEY OUTCOMES OF THE RESEARCH

After analyzing over a million words of field notes, audio-recordings, interviews, video-recordings, and social media posts, we summarised the key findings of the research. We found that when people of different linguistic, biographical, and historical backgrounds come into contact in markets, libraries, sports clubs, art centres, and community hubs, they often translanguage, communicating with available semiotic repertoires. They borrow from each other's 'languages', try things out, and find areas of common ground for sharing meaning. Our analysis provided evidence that translanguaging goes beyond 'languages', as people communicate through their bodies as well as through speech. It became

clear to us that translanguaging includes aspects of communication not always thought of as 'language', including smiles, shrugs, pointing, mime, pats on the back, and so on. To buy 2 kg of chicken's feet, a sign with the hand was often used. To focus an exchange with a client, the library assistant would lightly touch her client on the arm. To offer congratulation on winning a point on the volleyball court, players embraced or offered 'high fives'.

We saw that potentially difficult interactions were made convivial when people played around with different languages. Most of all translanguaging depended on people's willingness to get on with each other despite their apparent differences. Time and again we observed successful exchanges between people who did not share a language in common. They achieved this because they were prepared to accept difference, often appropriating that difference as a communicative resource. Increased diversity often became an asset more than a deficiency. On the volleyball court players horsed around, pretending to fight, often in intimate physical contact. A hand raised in apology, a shrug of the shoulders, ritual clapping, and a punch in the air, all were forms of communication. What we saw on the volleyball court was also true in other areas of social life: we communicate with our bodies.

Communicative practice in multilingual cities involved not only translanguaging, but also translation. If translanguaging suggests communication without keeping languages separate, translation implies communication between and across languages. Like translanguaging, in everyday practice translation can be creative and transformative. In a Chinese community centre, interpreters and welfare advisors were not limited to the transfer of meaning between languages, as they translated and explained the world for their minoritised clients. Performing crucial roles in hidden spaces, advisors acted as mediators between dominant structures and otherwise disenfranchised clients, keeping the city going, giving people access to their rights, and explaining complex processes. In these spaces, translation and translanguaging overlapped, and co-existed, integral to each other. They were the means by which the multilingual city made sense.

Analysis of research material led to articles in peer-reviewed journals, book chapters, edited volumes, briefing papers, films, working papers, and reports. However, there was still further to go in the representation, interpretation, and democratization of the communicative practices we had encountered and observed. In order to pursue this direction of travel, we came to ethnographic drama. In what follows, we exemplify the possibilities offered by ethnographic drama.

## 5 | ETHNOGRAPHY AT THE CROSSROADS

Not for the first time, anthropology and ethnography find themselves at a crossroads. It is already 35 years since James Clifford (1986) questioned the monophonic authority of the pervasive authorial voice in academic ethnography. Pierre Bourdieu (1999), too, questioned the single, central, dominant, quasi-divine point of view of the ethnographic voice. Instead, argued Bourdieu, we must work with the multiple perspectives that correspond to the multiplicity of co-existing, and sometimes directly competing, points of view. The now-traditional ethnographic monograph struggles to limit the power of the academic voice. Notwithstanding the imperative to understand cultural and social practice from the perspective of the research participant, ethnography almost universally narrates that perspective from a position of authorial power. Flattening this hierarchy proves difficult. Ethnographic drama, however, is a medium that has the capacity to foreground the voices of research participants and to background the voice of the academic ethnographer. That is, in ethnographic drama research participants may speak for themselves. For sure, the ethnographer/playwright does not disappear completely. The curation and recreation of the voices of research participants as characters in ethnographic drama is achieved from

a political and ideological perspective. But the authoritative academic voice no longer need be the loudest voice.

In seeking to allow research participants to speak for themselves, to stand on their own feet as it were, we also pull back from the duty to explain the meaning of their lives. In ethnographic accounts, in order to make sense of people's lives from their perspective, we analyse and we write. At this point (if not before), our academic perspective collides, rubs up against, or sometimes integrates with the perspective of those we study. When we have completed our analysis, we provide explanations which may link our study to other research and theoretical ideas about the meaning of social practices. But explanation which seeks to make transparent the culture of others almost inevitably becomes a process of diminution. Underlying the urge to explain the lives of others is a desire for transparency. In order to be clear in our understanding of other cultures, we make comparisons and, perhaps, judgements. We distil them, and we diminish them. However, depreciation may not be inevitable in the representation of observed social practice. Instead of seeking to endow the lives of others with meaning, we could resist trying to reduce human behaviour as simple explanation. Rather than seeking to make the cultural practices of others transparent, we might allow them to remain opaque. If the other remains opaque, if we do not grasp the other, or seek to explain the other, we can still stand in solidarity. This is not to suggest that research participants themselves are, or become, 'opaque', and therefore unknowable, exotic others. But we propose that our principal task may not be to render the life of the research participant transparent in our own terms. Opacity is the force that drives every community, the thing that would bring us together. For Édouard Glissant, consent to opacity is the equivalent of non-barbarism: 'we clamor for the right to opacity for everyone' (Glissant, 1997, p. 194). The ethnographic impetus for explanation of cultures is the opposite of accepting difference. To accept opacity is to accept people's differences as they are.

The impetus towards exegesis, the imperative for explanation of other cultures, remains the overriding purpose and principle of ethnography. Contemporary ethnography may be as concerned with gang rivalry in London or New York as with ritual invocation of the gods in an Iban longhouse in Sarawak, but the purpose of ethnographic research is still to explain the culture of the other. We are by no means opposed to the generation of new knowledge through participation in, and observation of, cultural practices. But, with Glissant, we are willing to resist the urge to make too readily transparent the lives of others. Instead, we are inclined to show things as they are, without explanation. Ethnographic drama enables us to lay before an audience social life, to enact what we have seen and heard, and invite the audience to engage in critical reflection. Rather than endowing others' cultural practices with meaning, even meaning as we believe it to be perceived by the other, it may be that dramatic representation offers the opportunity to make visible the drama in the mundane of contemporary lives, without the need for explanation (Saldaña, 2011).

## 6 | ETHNOGRAPHIC DRAMA

Live performance has the power to heighten the representation of social life (Teman & Saldaña, 2019). If the performative turn has been taken in ethnography, it is equally the case that the ethnographic turn has been taken in theatre. Playwrights including Alecky Blythe and co-workers (Blythe, 2008, 2014; Blythe & Cork, 2011), Anna Deavere Smith (1994, 1997), and David Hare (1976, 2003) have adapted ethnographic monographs, audio-recordings, and interview transcripts, and re-presented them as theatre. Denzin (1997) argues that ethnographic drama is a powerful way for ethnography to recover yet interrogate the meanings of lived experience. Constructed as dramatised field notes, audio-recordings, video-recordings, digital messages, and interviews, ethnographic drama employs theatre techniques to

present live performance of research participants' experiences and researchers' interpretations. Ethnographic drama has the potential to refocus the gaze of the ethnographer, and open the audience to new ways of seeing research participants when they are presented as characters on stage (Denzin, 2003, 2018). Live performance challenges existing ways of knowing and representing the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). It has the power to capture and document the social practices of people participating in the research.

Goldstein (2012) suggests that having come to the crossroads, anthropology has taken a literary turn. Guiding this change of direction is an understanding that ethnographers *invent* rather than represent ethnographic truths. That is, anthropology's literary turn is guided by a recognition that all cultural representations are crafted, and in this sense fictional. Ethnography aims to evoke cultural experience using literary techniques to craft conventional ethnographic materials – interviews, participant observation, fieldnotes, photographs – into a compelling story (Jacobson & Larsen, 2014). After many years conducting and writing ethnographic research, Goldstein took the findings of a critical ethnographic study of bilingual school life and used dramatic techniques to construct an ethnographic play that could be read aloud and discussed by student teachers. Her journal articles and books on bilingual school life had been written for researchers and academics interested in multilingualism in schooling. Her ethnographic play, however, was written for teachers negotiating linguistic, cultural, and racial differences in their classrooms and schools. Ethnographic playwriting offered a productive way of both responding to the dilemmas discussed by postmodern anthropologists, and sharing her research findings with teachers. Goldstein's performed ethnography continues to be hugely influential in making research available for discussion and evaluation, including *Out at School* (2021), based on interviews conducted with 37 LGBTQ families, *Harriet's House* (2012), a performed ethnography about transnational adoption in a lesbian family, and *Zero Tolerance* (2013), which adapts a 595-page report into the shooting and death of a boy in the hallway of his Toronto school.

In both ethnography and theatre, the combination of creative artistry and ethnographic method has already reaped rich rewards and has huge potential for the future. However, there is potential for tension between ethical and aesthetic responsibilities. For the ethnographic dramatist, this tension arises in the ethical obligation to recreate an authentic representation of research, at the same time as producing an aesthetic interpretation of that research. Dialogue in ethnographic drama is often a plausible reconstruction of research data. Characters may be approximate versions of research participants. Ethnographic drama can create validity, authenticity, and integrity, which goes beyond the scope of the academic report. This is achieved through rigorous attention to the aesthetic. At the same time, ethnographic dramatists have an ethical obligation to balance creativity with accuracy, credibility, and trustworthiness. The ethical impetus to maintain fidelity to transcripts and field notes is not oppositional to thinking imaginatively about the potential for performance. Not every ethnography or empirical source offers the necessary detail for authentic dialogue. There are times when the author's imagination rather than sociolinguistic data provides the discourse and events portrayed on stage (Saldaña, 2011). Ethnographic playwrights do not wholly compose their participants' voices, but creatively and strategically edit field notes and transcripts (Saldaña, 2005). They do not so much 'write' ethnographic dramas as adapt them – both in terms of content and theatricality. Ethnographic dramas are not play scripts in the traditional sense, but field work reformatted in performative data displays. The performance of social practice on stage lends it not a reductive but an exponential quality. Ethnographic drama offers opportunities for researchers, artists, and audiences to examine how we and others experience life, and to shape those moments into new aesthetic forms.

We propose that ethnographic drama has the potential to make available outcomes of research beyond the academy; to discover understandings of ethnographic material which remain latent in

accounts that do not involve performance; and to democratize voice, making audible the voice of the research informant.

## 7 | MAKING ETHNOGRAPHIC DRAMA

In what follows, we discuss two ethnographic drama texts that are outcomes of the *TLANG* research project. The research sites concerned were a volleyball club and an advice and advocacy service in a Chinese community centre. The ethnographic drama texts are *Volleyball – An Ethnographic Drama*, and *Interpretations – An Ethnographic Drama*.

Before we ever considered drama as a means to show the outcomes of ethnographic research, we had published book-length reports, peer-reviewed academic articles, book chapters, reports for House of Commons committees, newspaper articles, and community reports. It was when we saw a ‘verbatim’ play in London that it came to us that in performance we can see what is going on in the social world, in ways that are beyond the reach of academic writing. The play, *Little Revolution*, by Alecky Blythe, was based on riots in London in 2011. Blythe interviewed people at the scene of the riots and edited her recordings. In performance on stage, the actors wore headsets, through which were played the edited recordings. The actors delivered the lines just as they heard them, with the original accent, intonation, delivery, and speech pattern of the interviewees. The play did not seek to explain the causes of the riots, but to show what happened. That performance at the Almeida Theatre led us to question whether academic writing had the capacity to show the complexity of social life. If Alecky Blythe could make powerful, convincing drama based on interviews, why would we not be able to do the same based on the evidence we had collected as field notes, audio-recordings, video-recordings, online and digital communication, photographs, and interviews? We went to work, reading every ethnographic drama script we could find. We also read verbatim theatre scripts and tribunal theatre scripts. We read dramas partly based on evidence, and scripts with a loose connection to evidence. We re-read the complete plays of Beckett, Brecht, Churchill, and Hare. We attended as many productions of evidence-based theatre as we could until Covid-19 restrictions arrived. During the *TLANG* project, we had worked with a theatre company to devise and produce a piece of theatre based on the research. Now, however, we did not work with playwrights or dramaturgs but trusted our own resources. The starting-point was not entirely alien to us as linguistic ethnographers, involving as it did processes of recontextualisation, recreation, and of making the familiar strange. In the next section, we will discuss two ethnographic dramas which are based on research evidence collected and analysed as part of the *TLANG* project.

### 7.1 | Volleyball – An ethnographic drama

First, we will discuss the ethnographic drama based on our observations of a volleyball coach and his team. We begin with excerpts from field notes written as we observed the team train and play over 4 months. On Friday evenings and Sunday afternoons Adrian Blackledge, Angela Creese, and Rachel Hu observed volleyball training sessions and also matches played between volleyball clubs. Each researcher wrote field notes as they observed. As we engaged in observations of the volleyball court, it was clear that here semiotic repertoires were by no means limited to the linguistic (Kusters et al., 2017). Players low-five in solidarity, throw their arms up in frustration, hug each other in celebration, raise a hand in apology. The body is always integral to the semiotic repertoire. Volleyball is a fast-moving sport, with multiple signs in play at any one time. The following are brief excerpts from field notes written by each researcher as they observed a training drill:



Al: 'Right, stop. All the balls please'. The players come to the side of the court and put the balls in the basket. 'So the next drill is a blocking drill, so we have wing blockers. Felix, do you know the step to block?' Felix says yes. 'Demonstrate please'. Felix demonstrates, and Ollie joins in. They practise blocking in pairs. 'You should be jumping together'. They do so, in pairs and then in fours, by turns. There is something balletic about the activity, very co-ordinated and heavily elegant, fingers meeting above the net, touching, then trainers in unison landing on the wooden floor. (AB, field notes)

The next drill starts. They need to jump and block in pairs, then move together along the net, while the pair next to them move downwards at the same time so to make room for them. Then they keep moving to the other side before moving back in the same way. When moving next to the other pair of players all four of them need to jump and block with hands touching each other. Al watches from the side, arms folded in front of his chest. "Stop, stop, when you block, timing is key, it doesn't matter how high you can jump, the four of you should be jumping at the same time, so you need to work on your timing, okay!" (RH field notes)

A different exercise in play – no balls – lovely! They have to time jumping in pairs and then in fours. It's nice, quiet and rhythmic. I think of a dance. It goes wrong quite a lot though. Men touch fingers with one another. Markus finds it difficult to get off the ground. Graham calls out ironically, 'how was that a block?' Good natured, but a telling-off, nonetheless. (AC, field notes)

The excerpts from field notes represent a typical moment in the practice routine: players rehearsing their blocking technique, which during a competitive match they will deploy to prevent the opposition from scoring. The coach, Al, is originally from Hong Kong. Almost all of the players are from elsewhere: France, Germany, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, The Philippines, Romania, Rwanda, Spain, Taiwan, and one player from the UK. Three video-cameras are strategically positioned to record the action. The coach, Al, wears a voice recorder and microphone.

The following excerpt is from Act II, Scene 2 of the ethnographic drama:

- |                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Setting          | A sports hall, where a volleyball training session is in progress.                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Characters       | AL, the coach; BEN, WENDY, and AMY, researchers; players.                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Transcription // | Two or more characters speak simultaneously.<br><i>Researchers BEN, WENDY, and AMY watch the volleyball practice. The researchers appear on stage throughout the play, observing the action, speaking aloud their observations as they show the action to the audience.</i> |
| BEN              | The players perform the blocking drill at the net, in pairs and then in fours, moving sideways with skipping steps after each jump.                                                                                                                                         |
| AL               | Step, step, jump!                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| BEN              | There is something balletic about the activity, choreographed, heavily elegant, fingers meeting above the net, touching, feet landing in unison on the wooden floor.                                                                                                        |
| AL               | And jump, and touch!                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| BEN              | This is full of rhythm and purpose, players concentrating on co-ordinating their movements.                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| AL               | Keep // that rhythm!                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |



WENDY That rhythm!

AMY The players have to time their jumps. It goes wrong often. They are supposed to touch fingers with one another above the net.

AL Jump // and touch!

AMY And touch!

The three researchers remain on stage throughout the play, observing the action, speaking aloud their field notes, presenting the volleyball action to the audience. They make visible both the embodied communication of the players and coach and the process of sociolinguistic research. At times the researchers speak lines in synchrony with the players and coach. They also physically shadow the players and coach, at once part of the action and commentators upon it. None of this simultaneous action and speech is naturalistic or realistic. It draws the attention of the audience to embodied attitudes of team spirit, mutual endeavour, and communicative action. In this scene, the coach, AL, demonstrates the steps and movement he requires of the players as they practise blocking at the net. The actors do more than run through volleyball training drills. The volleyball players become dancers, characters in a Broadway musical chorus line, or a ballet company. The actors represent both the volleyball player and the dancer, both present at all times. The comparison between athletic agility on the court and elegant grace on the ballet or musical theatre stage reveals the metaphoric engine by which embodied action metonymically remakes itself in ethnographic drama. The comparison is not so much stated as performed. One idea turns into another, creating an original means to reflect this new expression. Through an aesthetic sense, the drama reaches for an enhanced view, an expanded understanding, and complements other ways of constructing accounts of social life. The movement and attitude of the actors convey the life of volleyball, and the life of the dance, not realistically or naturalistically, but metaphorically, metonymically.

In Act IV Scene 2 of *Volleyball – An Ethnographic Drama* the coach pushes the team to make more noise on the court during matches. The volume, dynamics, and tempo of the volleyball team's motivational chant become indexical of their progress. When performed on stage as a stylized ritual, the significance of the team chant is clear. In Act II Scene 4, the coach asks the players to practise their rotation on the court, as they change positions between points. In performance, the players, in the style of the Keystone Cops, take wrong turns, hesitate, grow confused, collide, fall, and collapse in chaos, before recovering through mutual support and collective endeavour. This can be described in words, but the corporeal dynamic, the physical trajectory of the scene is more readily available in performance. Both of these scenes are played with stylized exaggeration, for the entertainment of the audience. And in both scenes, the audience comes to understand something of the power of the volleyball team's collective purpose towards a common goal. Such interpretation is appreciated in performance.

Anna Deavere Smith, a pioneer of ethnographic drama in the United States, focuses on the external life of her characters, building connections through a process of physical approximation of voice, inflection, and gesture. She does not attempt to relate to the character through an exploration of the internal life. She does not seek to naturalise the text by making it psychologically plausible. Largely based on interviews with witnesses to dramatic and violent events, her performances are enacted oral history (Richards, 1993). Smith's performance strategy takes fragmented and partial speeches which constitute representative or emblematic moments, but do not pretend to build a whole (Lyons & Lyons, 1994). Smith draws on the radical drama of Bertolt Brecht (1964/2020), who sought to redefine the role of the theatre audience so that rather than seeking to escape the world, to be transported to another time and place, the audience became questioning and analytical. In Brecht's theatre, the audience links social critique to theatrical representation that does not simply 'reproduce' reality in a neutral and self-evident manner. 'Epic theatre' insists that the audience should not be swept away by the drama before

it, nor should the audience be persuaded to empathise with the characters on stage. There is no illusion that what is being played out on stage might be played out in the real world. Performance is a process of showing, of making strange the action of ordinary life. Brecht introduced theatrical techniques to create critical distance between audience and performance. These techniques allow the spectator to constructively criticise the action on stage from a social point of view. The actors maintain an attitude of showing the action to the audience. There is no sense that they are performing scenes from real life, viewed by the audience as a 'fly on the wall'. Instead, a distance, or estrangement, is created and maintained between the action on stage and the audience, allowing the spectator to become a critical observer of the life represented in the drama.

In *Volleyball – An Ethnographic Drama* alienation techniques create distance between performed action and audience. Researchers shadow volleyball players' physical movement, emphasising that the action is being performed for the entertainment and critical evaluation of the audience. There is a constant awareness that the players are being watched by the researchers. It is also made clear that in turn the characters are being watched by the audience. Brecht (1964/2020) referred to the speaking aloud of stage directions as an alienation technique, resulting in a clash between two tones of voice. In *Volleyball – An Ethnographic Drama*, the researchers speak aloud their observational field notes, which in the theatre become spoken stage directions. When they speak stage directions or observations, the researchers Amy, Ben, and Wendy speak directly to the audience. They have one eye on the action being described, and one eye on the audience. They show the audience apparently natural, familiar moments from ordinary life, and make them unfamiliar. This is achieved partly by the actors speaking the action as it is performed, introducing a layer of estrangement. It is this sense of estrangement that prompts the audience to see social life anew and to look at it with a critical eye. In some instances, the action is described immediately *before* it is performed. In such cases, as in Act II Scene 2, the performed action is particularly alien to the audience, as it takes place after it has already been announced by the researchers. In this scene, WENDY, AMY, and BEN are researchers; RYAN is a volleyball player; AL is the coach:

- WENDY Lukas finds it difficult to get off the ground. Ryan is opposite Hubert. Their timing goes awry, and they get their jump wrong. Ryan is not happy, he shouts across the net to Hubert.
- RYAN What was that? How was that a block?
- BEN Ryan has a smile on his face. Constant peer evaluation goes on during the practice. There seems to be a fine line here between supportive feedback and mockery.
- AMY Al waves his hands above his head, shouts to the players to stop, then demonstrates the moves again, talking them through the sequence.
- AL You block in the middle first, block in the middle first.

Not only are the researchers showing the life of the volleyball team to the audience, but at the same time the actors exemplify the observations of the researchers. The research process is a collaboration between observer and observed.

The researchers' shadowing of the players' speech and movement reaches its peak as the end-of-season relegation match moves towards its conclusion. The scene is the final timeout, with the scores level. Players have come together to listen to the coach, and to give each other encouragement. DAN, RUNI, and FINN are volleyball players. As before, the start of simultaneous speech is indicated with [//].

- DAN Let's do it, we have got ourselves back into it twice already, we can // push from here!
- AMY Push from here!

- RUNI No lazy points, no sitting on our hands, every point, // every point!
- WENDY Every point!
- DAN If we can get one we can get two, come on! It's // only two points!
- BEN Only two points!
- FINN You need to set // the ball high
- WENDY The ball high.
- BEN Watch the spin serve, watch the // spin on the serve!
- AMY Spin on the serve!
- The players and researchers come together and place their hands on top of each other's hands*
- WENDY Guys there's no room for error now, // no more mistakes!
- AMY No more mistakes!
- BEN On our serve, on our serve, serve // away from the body.
- WENDY Away from the body.
- AMY Don't serve directly at them, // they can volley.
- BEN They can volley.
- AMY Come on, let's go!!

The researchers take over the team talk, graduating from speaking and moving in synchrony with the players to effectively speaking the lines of the players in synchrony with each other. There is no sense that these are real events in the real world. The researchers lay out the social and communicative world of the volleyball court for the critical evaluation of the audience. Here, they seem to say, what do you think? Ethnographic drama not only represents the known but moves towards the unknown, intensifying and clarifying observed experience through performance. It is here that ethnographic drama has rich potential for the future of social research: not only in the representation of research findings to non-traditional audiences but also as a means of interpretation. Ethnographic drama developed from research material is not only representation but also interpretation and democratization. These are not separate processes, but one and the same. The embodied practices of the characters on stage accrue new resonances as they are played out in action. The performance of ethnographic outcomes is a means of displaying for an audience a version of the social practices observed by the research team. It is a means of proposing exponential connotations of those social practices. And it is a means of laying those social practices before the audience for critical evaluation. In order for the research material to achieve its potential, it is performed on stage, living a new life each time it is performed.

## 7.2 | Interpretations – An ethnographic drama

In the advice and advocacy service at the Chinese community centre, we audio-recorded 79 sessions between advisors and their clients, each averaging 1 h in duration. Our colleague Rachel Hu observed advice and advocacy sessions for 11 weeks, noting her observations as field notes. Rachel wrote 22 sets of field notes, amounting to 109,338 words. The field notes describe what Rachel could see and hear as she observed the advice service at work, and in breaks between sessions. Rachel also regularly joined staff and volunteers for lunch provided by the community centre. After writing field notes for 5 weeks, we asked one of the advisors to audio-record herself, while Rachel continued to observe her at work. In all cases, the advisor explained the research project to her client and asked them to sign a consent form giving permission for observation, audio-recording, and subsequent public use of linguistic material. She also gave them the option not to give consent. We interviewed 10 staff,

volunteers, board members, and other stakeholders at the community centre. The research team met weekly for 2 h to discuss field notes, transcripts of audio-recordings, and interview transcripts. We wrote a book-length research report, together with peer-reviewed academic articles, and book chapters. We wrote a community-oriented report, which we presented to the Chinese community centre at a meeting which included local politicians, staff and volunteers, and other stakeholders in the city.

Clients came to the service for help and advice as they attempted to negotiate bureaucratic systems related to welfare benefits, health, education, insurance, immigration status, and so on. Many of the clients were unable to access resources to which they were entitled because they had limited comprehension of English and because they had little understanding of the complex bureaucratic discourse with which they were confronted. Most advice sessions were conducted in Chinese languages. In the following excerpt from a transcript of one of the advice sessions, a client, 'T', needs help dealing with an insurance claim, following a fire at his business premises. The advice worker, 'K', has telephoned a representative at an insurance company on behalf of her client. T cannot understand why his claim has been turned down by the insurance company. K tells her client that as part of the standard procedure for processing his claim, the insurance company requires him to complete a disclosure form. A 'disclosure' is a check made with the Police National Computer for details of criminal convictions. The discussion takes place largely in Mandarin. As we join the interaction, K has been on the telephone with the insurance company. She spoke in English with the insurance representative on the phone. Text in pointed brackets [< >] is the English translation.

- K 首先,她刚才说的,他们已经联络Staffordshire警方了,现在正在等警察的回复。  
< First, she said they've contacted Staffordshire Police and are waiting for their response >
- T Mm
- K 同时呢,这个叫做disclosure 的文件需要你填,看你有没有以往的犯罪记录。  
< At the same time you will need to fill out the form called disclosure to see if you've ever committed a crime >
- T Mm
- K 这个表格你要填好后寄回给他们,这样他们就可以查出,看你有没有以往的犯罪记录。这个手续费是25磅,可以在网上填写。她告诉我需要两个星期的时间才能得到结果。所以这个就是disclosure表格。除此之外,还要有另外一个表格,她刚重新发送给你了。你看看有没有新的邮件进来?  
< You need to fill in this form. Once it is sent back they can see if you have a criminal record. The application fee is twenty-five pounds. She says apply online, and she told me it will take at least fourteen days before you get the result. So this is the disclosure form. Then there's another form, which she just sent you. Have you got an email coming in? >
- T 让我看看哈。  
< Let me have a look >
- K 你有这样的记录吗?  
< Do you have a record? >
- T 什么记录?  
< What record? >
- K 就是叫做 conviction 包括任何的违法记录  
刑事的,民事的或是经济类的。这个是你必须如实回答,提供相关信息的  
< It's called a conviction, it includes everything, whether it's criminal law, civil law, or economic law. It is compulsory, you have to be honest in disclosing the information >
- T 我为什么要告诉他么?  
< Why should I tell them? >

K 这是他么处理这些事情的程序。如果你不配合,会影响你将来的索赔。他们这样要求,你就得这样执行,不然他们就不会处理你的案子。

< It is their procedure for dealing with these things. If you don't comply it might affect your claim. You have to do as they ask, or they won't process your case >

T 所以我得犯罪才行?

< So I have to commit a crime? >

In weekly research team meetings, we analysed transcriptions of audio-recordings of the original advice sessions. The material was annotated, annotations annotated, summaries written, initial analysis shared, further analytical meetings held, and additional summaries written. The analysis became a chapter in a book-length research report. In addition to reports and articles in academic journals, an outcome of the research was *Interpretations – An Ethnographic Drama*, a full-length (133-page) performance script. A scene in the ethnographic drama is based on the above transcript. In the scene, the character of the advisor, K, is renamed 'Lifan', and the character of the client, T, is renamed 'Chang'. In the scene, Lifan moves between addressing the insurance representative on the phone in English and speaking to Chang in Mandarin. In academic reporting of the research, we present dialogue in Chinese script, with English translation. As *Interpretations – An Ethnographic Drama* is a text for performance to mainly English-speaking audiences, we represent dialogue in English. As we write, however, we are developing a multilingual version of the drama with a group of Chinese students, which will be performed in varieties of Chinese and English. In the following scene, performed in English, speech in Mandarin is in Times New Roman font; speech in English is in Calibri font.

*Setting* An advice service in a Chinese community centre

*Characters* LIFAN, an advisor; CHANG, her client.

*Transcription* Times New Roman font = Mandarin; Calibri font = English.

LIFAN She said they have contacted the police and they are still waiting for a response.

CHANG The police?

LIFAN There's this form called disclosure, it's to see if you have ever committed a crime.

CHANG I have never committed a crime.

LIFAN She says your claim is not valid.

CHANG Why is it not valid?

LIFAN [To Insurance Representative, on phone] He says why is his claim not valid. [To CHANG] She says when you took out the policy you failed to complete the disclosure. She says you should have completed the disclosure.

CHANG What is the disclosure?

LIFAN He says what is the disclosure. She means the criminal disclosure. Do you mean the criminal disclosure? She says yes, the criminal disclosure.

CHANG I haven't made a disclosure.

LIFAN He says he hasn't made a disclosure. She says you failed to complete the basic criminal disclosure check, it shows your convictions.

CHANG I have no convictions.

LIFAN He says he has no convictions. She says you don't have to have convictions.

CHANG I have no convictions.

LIFAN He says he has no convictions. She says you failed to complete a disclosure.

CHANG They didn't ask me to complete a disclosure.

LIFAN He says you didn't ask him to complete a disclosure. She says they did.

CHANG I have never heard of it before.

LIFAN He says he has never heard of it before. She says it is standard procedure. You have to send your ID, like a credit card or driving licence, and twenty-five pounds. You have to pay for the disclosure. Do you have a record?

CHANG What record?

LIFAN It's called a conviction. It includes everything, criminal law, civil law, economic, any kind of conviction has to be disclosed. It's compulsory, you have to disclose your convictions.

CHANG Why should I tell them?

LIFAN It's the procedure. It's their way of dealing with things. There are things they need to know. If you don't comply, it might affect your insurance claim. You have to do as they say, disclose any convictions, or they won't process your claim.

CHANG So I have to commit a crime?

In the ethnographic drama script, the original interaction is recontextualised, not least through the addition of *rhythm*. The effect of this is most evident in performance. Quick-fire dialogue, repetition, successive question-and-answer sequences, ventriloquation of the present-yet-absent voice of the insurance representative, humour, and movement between languages, all contribute to interpretation of the original interaction. Audiences respond to the action with their own stories, as they recognize something of their worlds in the performed piece. If rhythm and humour create a strangeness in performance, stepping back from the realistic, the audience nevertheless finds something familiar and empathizes with the characters in the performance. While Brecht (1964/2020) proposed that the audience should not invest emotionally in the lives of characters on stage, he acknowledged that empathy will nevertheless occur. Both empathy and a more estranged showing, or demonstration, or exemplification, co-exist in performance. Brecht characterised empathy and estrangement as two mutually hostile processes that are combined in the actors' work. New meanings and interpretations emerge from the tussle and tension of the two opposites. This is the dialectic of the theatre and is not the least of the potential of ethnographic theatre in sociolinguistic research.

## 8 | DISCUSSION

We have proposed that ethnographic drama offers three opportunities: (i) it has the potential to make available outcomes of research beyond the academy; (ii) it has the potential to discover understandings of ethnographic material which remain latent in accounts which do not involve performance; and (iii) it has the capacity to democratize voice, making audible the voice of the research participant rather than that of the academic researcher.

The two ethnographic drama texts we have discussed in this paper were published in 2021. The Covid-19 crisis hit live theatre performance particularly hard. In the UK, as elsewhere, theatres were closed for over a year, as all performance activity was subject to government restriction. This was a difficult milieu in which to extend the reach of research outcomes through ethnographic drama. However, we are confident that the performance of the plays will engage audiences with sociolinguistic research. We have introduced the play scripts to our students, with significant success. We have been awarded funds to work with a group of Chinese students and a professional drama practitioner to devise, rehearse, and perform a multilingual production of *Interpretations – An Ethnographic Drama*. As we write, this project is in full swing, and not yet played out, but students are thoroughly engaged with the material. In New York early in 2020, we were Distinguished Visiting Fellows at the Advanced



Research Collaborative, The Graduate Center, City University New York. During our tenure in New York, we introduced *Interpretations – An Ethnographic Drama* to international audiences in Madison-Wisconsin, Washington, DC, Pennsylvania, as well as New York. The enthusiastic responses of those involved gave us cause to be encouraged that ethnographic drama has much potential to engage a variety of audiences in discussion of research. We had scheduled further opportunities to share the ethnographic drama in cities in the United States, but these were curtailed when Covid-19 struck.

We further propose that, beyond widening public engagement with research, ethnographic drama has the potential to discover understandings of sociolinguistic material which remain hidden, or unnoticed, in written accounts where performance is not involved. The playwright David Hare (2008) has argued that the truth of what goes on is revealed in performance, whereas it is not so clearly revealed by being written down on the page. When research material is enacted before an audience it may be viewed in a new light. *Volleyball – An Ethnographic Drama* offers examples of research material in action. As we have seen, the characters of three researchers are on stage throughout the ethnographic drama. The researchers explicitly show the actions and words of the volleyball players to the audience. At some points, the researchers speak in synchrony with the volleyball players – or at least they speak the same words as the volleyball players, but a fraction of a second ahead of them. It is as if the research participants are doing the bidding of the researchers, becoming themselves by reciting the lines given to them by the researchers. Some of the time the researchers *move* in synchrony with the volleyball players – or at least they perform the same actions as the volleyball players, but a fraction of a second ahead of them. It is as if the players are performing the movements of the researchers, only able to act in the world when given leave to do so by the researchers. Researcher-informant relations are called into question, subject to evaluation, made new in the originality of the performance. In the same play, embodied performance accrues new connotations. Field note observations of action on the volleyball court had recorded occasional confusion as the players sought to follow the complex instructions of the coach. In the ethnographic drama, corporeal confusion is exaggerated to the extent that the players move in comic, high-speed patterns, à la Keystone Cops, crashing into each other and falling over, before eventually recovering their poise. Observational field notes also made reference to the balletic, or Broadway-musical, character of the volleyball training sessions. In the ethnographic drama, this trope is played out in embodied action which allows the players to *become* dancers, moving between the literal and the figurative to explore the elaborate ballet of sport.

Finally, we propose that ethnographic drama has the capacity to democratize voice, privileging the voice of the research informant rather than that of the academic researcher. In ethnographic drama, the voice of the researcher gives way to the voices of research participants. No longer does the authoritative, unimpeachably legitimate voice of the academic researcher dominate the voices of ‘the researched’. In *Interpretations – An Ethnographic Drama* the action takes us into the hidden space of an upstairs room in a Chinese community centre. Here people come because they require assistance to navigate the murky waters of government and other institutional bureaucratic discourse. They require assistance from untrained, poorly paid advisors, who are also translators, interpreters, advocates, agents, and mediators – essential figures in the multilingual city. Sherry Simon points out that “it is necessary to draw the portraits of the significant individuals who play this role” (2012, p. 6). Ethnographic drama contributes to this project by democratizing voice, opening up a space in which the unheard may be heard. In ethnographic drama, we listen in to the hidden spaces where, day after day, translation enables those with limited resources to gain access to meanings which are otherwise elusive.

Advisors listen, and mediate, as far as they can making the opaque transparent, the obscure meaningful, the unjust just. They do this not only by rendering one language into another, but by rewording, explaining, advocating, and advising. Translation here is not restricted to transfer from one ‘language’ to another. Indeed when meaning remains out of reach it is often not because the text is ‘in English’,



but because bureaucratic systems and processes are unwieldy, and lack transparency, in any language. In each scene of the drama the advisor must take a newly nuanced role, as she becomes counsellor, advocate, gatekeeper, poacher, gamekeeper, subversive, empathizer, expert, improviser, lawyer, judge, teacher, clinician, broker, and more. In all of these roles she translates the world, translates the other, and translates herself. Each scene brings a new client with their own story to tell. A woman arrives who does not understand why she is no longer receiving welfare benefits. A man wants to apply for government support to pay his rent, but he does not know where to begin. A woman has a long tale to tell about her increasing inability to support her husband's complex needs. A young man needs assistance to complete an online questionnaire in order to access mental health support. Each character tells a story. Each story is both commonplace and extraordinary. Each tells of a life trajectory which has veered off course and needs a little help to be put back on the right path. Each scene gives voice to those who are otherwise unheard, and unaccounted for. These are not stories which are explained in social, political, or academic terms. They are presented to an audience as if to say, here, this is how things are, this is how lives are lived in the hidden spaces, the nooks and crannies of social life. This is how the city keeps moving.

## 9 | SUMMARY

The aim of sociolinguistic research is to come to new understandings of communication in social life. We propose that ethnographic drama is suited to this purpose. We have argued that ethnographic drama offers the potential to make available outcomes of research beyond the academy. Further, it has the potential to discover understandings of ethnographic material which remain unconsidered in accounts which do not involve performance. And it has the capacity to democratize voice, foregrounding the voice of the research informant rather than that of the academic researcher. Typically in sociolinguistic analysis, we take human interaction and represent it in analysis on the page. In doing so, we risk erasing its context. Comprehensive field notes and recordings preserve the social context as far as possible. But the written account may under-represent the energy, movement, noise, relationships, joy, tensions, frustrations, and contradictions of everyday social practice. Ethnographic drama recreates communicative encounters, making them available for scrutiny, and prompting otherwise unthought interpretations. In ethnographic drama, we are able to gain new ways of seeing, and develop an enhanced analysis of communicative encounters. In performance, we lay out the observed world for the audience to consider and to critically evaluate. We move beyond naturalistic or realistic representation, mediating social action through techniques which enable the audience to see communicative encounters in a new light. Theatre has the capacity to bring to the surface the latent energy of words, actions, and rhythms in human interaction. Making strange the familiarity of everyday experience, we look again at what we have seen many times before. In performance, ethnographic drama enables us to see aspects of communication in social life which may have previously escaped us. Performance on stage offers experience which may not be evident on the page. In the theatre, sociolinguistic research has the potential to move us beyond what we already know. We do not aim to hold up a mirror to social practice. Instead, through ethnographic drama, we strive to create something revealing out of the stuff of everyday life. This is what we see as the potential of artistic representation, interpretation, and democratization in sociolinguistic research.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (1 April 2014–31 March 2018) as a Translating Cultures Large Grant: 'Translation and Translanguaging: Investigating

Linguistic and Cultural Transformations in Superdiverse Wards in Four UK Cities' ((AH/L007096/1) £1,973,527), Principal Investigator, Angela Creese, with Mike Baynham, Adrian Blackledge, Jessica Bradley, John Callaghan, Lisa Goodson, Ian Grosvenor, Amal Hallak, Jolana Hanusova, Rachel Hu, Agnieszka Lyons, Bharat Malkani, Sarah Martin, Emilee Moore De Luca, Li Wei, Jenny Phillimore, Mike Robinson, Frances Rock, James Simpson, Jaspreet Kaur Takhi, Caroline Tagg, Janice Thompson, Kiran Trehan, Piotr Wegorowski, and Zhu Hua. We are grateful to Zhe (Zoey) Zheng, Yiao Dai, and Rachel Hu for their support with translation and transcription.

## ORCID

Adrian Blackledge  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6440-2154>

Angela Creese  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6943-0039>

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**How to cite this article:** Blackledge, A., & Creese, A. (2022). The potential of ethnographic drama in the representation, interpretation, and democratization of sociolinguistic research. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12546>