

An Interview with Dr. Bambi Schieffelin

Nadja Tadic, Di Yu, & Kelly Frantz
Teachers College, Columbia University

INTRODUCTION



On June 12, 2018, Dr. Hansun Zhang Waring’s Language Socialization class at Teachers College, Columbia University had the great pleasure and honor of being joined by Dr. Bambi Schieffelin, Collegiate Professor at New York University. A co-founder (with Elinor Ochs) of the field of language socialization, Dr. Schieffelin has done extensive research on linguistic anthropology, language ideology, literacy, missionization, and much, much more. She is the author of the ethnography *The Give and Take of Everyday Life: Language Socialization of Kaluli Children*, co-author of the classic chapter “Language Acquisition and Socialization: Three Developmental Stories and Their Implications,” and co-author of the *Handbook of Language Socialization*—a foundational reference work for all language socialization scholars. In this interview, she shares her path to Language Socialization (LS), experiences from her groundbreaking LS work in Papua New Guinea, affordances, obstacles, and recent developments in LS research, and key takeaways for LS researchers.

PATH TO LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION

Schieffelin: I received my PhD from Columbia, and I inhabited and haunted these very same buildings in the 1970’s. I was in the Anthropology Department and was able to simultaneously be in the MA program in Developmental Psychology at Teachers College. It was really through my exposure and close association with Dr. Lois Bloom at Teachers College that I got into looking at language in a particular way. Bloom examined early language acquisition through a detail-oriented framework, and when I came to work with her, I brought my own anthropological heart to the project of studying language acquisition. She was really supportive. I was really lucky. I was able to get training that I needed in ethnographic work, developmental psychology, and then in the summers I could get my linguistic anthropology and linguistic training at the summer institutes that the Linguistic Society of America has continued to offer.

Before I began graduate school, I had spent 14 months in Papua New Guinea with my husband, who was a PhD student in Anthropology from University of Chicago. We went to Bosavi, with the Kaluli people, and that pretty much convinced me that I wanted to do anthropology. When I started graduate school, like many anthropologists, I wanted to work in my own place. I didn’t want to go to the place that I felt was already my husband’s research area. I was very interested in Amharic, a language spoken in Ethiopia, and no one had ever done a language acquisition study at the time of a language with that type of triconsonantal root structure. I studied Amharic for two years, and I was ready to go to Ethiopia when the war broke out there and nobody was going for research. So, my faculty advisors said, “Okay, go back to New Guinea. You’ve already done that work. It’ll be fine. You’ll carve out your own niche.” So very often in our academic

careers, things get in the way of our ideal fantasy of what we were going to do. But it was actually good that I went back to Papua New Guinea because I've been able to go back there many, many times and do different projects (tracking change not just at a developmental but also at a historical scale), and I really get to have a kind of parallel life—one here and one in a Bosavi community in New Guinea.

Then in 1974, I attended a panel at the Anthropology meetings organized by Sue Ervin-Tripp and a couple of other people working on child discourse. That was extremely fortuitous because that is where I met Elinor Ochs—she was giving her first paper on repetition at the panel. As soon as we got together, we connected and made a pact for life. She had worked on gender and language in Madagascar, in Malagasy oratory, and when she had twins, she started recording their speech, and that's how she got into analyzing their verbal play and repetition. When I said, "I'm going to New Guinea. I'm going to do this project on language acquisition," we decided that I would do the first study on Kaluli language acquisition, and then she would do a follow-up study when I was done. When she went to Samoa we made sure the methodologies were aligned. We played this collaborative tag team for our whole lives, and when we finally sat down together for an extended period of time, we started talking about developmental pragmatics. But being anthropologists in our hearts, we said, "We're gonna move it one step forward." We felt that all of this incredible work in developmental psycholinguistics was ignoring the whole cultural side of things, and all the anthropologists working on socialization were completely ignoring language. The world had been cut up artificially, and we wanted to see how we could integrate it.

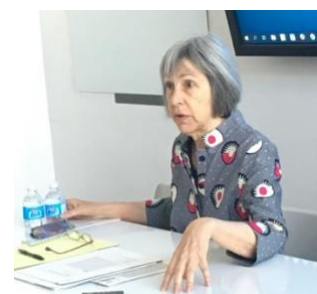
One final theoretical piece, which was emerging at the same time and was very influential in creating the framework of language socialization, was ethnomethodology. Ethnomethodology brought a sensitivity to the fact that talk is public, it can be studied, and it can be studied in a micro-analytic way, turn-by-turn, to show us a lot about how participants come to understand each other. However, it was also really interesting that a lot of the work in ethnomethodology, just as in language acquisition, was being done on the interactional activities of White, English-speaking, middle-class people. I thought that, rather than treating these observations about interaction and language as universal, we could say that ethnomethodology and language acquisition document the *cultural habits*, the cultural dynamics of White middle-class speakers.

So, that is how language socialization came together for me. It is really a hybrid. It touches on these different aspects of what we as people do in society and do to create sociality: We need the psychological to understand the developmental change in an individual over time; we need the ethnographic to understand the layers of cultural beliefs, values, preferences, and choices that we're socialized into; and we need the ethnomethodological, turn-by-turn attention to detail in trying to understand language and culture from the participants' perspective. We can use these different perspectives to try to really understand the language–society–mind connection.

FELDFORK FOR THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION STUDY

Schieffelin: The Kaluli community was far from towns or centers of population, as it was located on the Great Papuan Plateau, a low-density-population part of Southwestern Papua. Bosavi villages are scattered throughout this part of the tropical rainforest. It's not like the Highlands areas or the coastal areas where there is a high population density and longer-term contact with other groups. There was no electricity, no roads, and you had to hike in. In the area I first went to in 1967, local people had seen two White men (one of whom was my husband), but they had never seen a White woman before. So, I was the entertainment. They were just as busy figuring out who I was as I was figuring out what they were up to. They knew that I was completely vulnerable. But I knew before I went in that there were certain things that they wanted but could rarely get, like soap, salt, fishline, and hooks. So, I had these items to trade for food and language lessons.

I went back there many times and did different projects, but they were always on language, on the verbal environment. When I was there for the first time, we came and said, "We want to learn your language. Nobody from the outside knows your language." We gave ourselves a clan name—we called ourselves the "Study People Clan"—and we wanted to learn the language. It was the immersion method. I was in a village where there was no Tok Pisin, there was no English, and there was just me and the local people. I wrote everything down as best as I could, and I decided to do an ethnobotany project. Since it was a tropical rainforest, there was an endless supply of plants. People could bring me plants to get the names. It was a way in, it was focused, and it gave me a way to begin to learn the language.



When I returned for my language socialization study in 1975, I stayed there for 20 months. I knew I had to find children of a certain age that were just starting to talk, I needed a certain number of them, and the villages were small. Fortunately, I was in one of the larger villages of about 100 people. I was lucky that there were a couple of small children that were just starting to talk. So, my day was getting up, eating, and going out early, around 6:30 in the morning with my audio recorder (I was never without my tape recorder, it was like a part of my body). I had my notebook, and having previously arranged it, I would go sit in someone's house, record and take notes, hang out, usually an hour at a time, and then the family would be ready to go off to the gardens, or to get wood, or to chase a pig they couldn't find, or do some other activity. People were incredibly patient with me. They would have to repeat what I heard on the audiotape as I wrote it down (and I would write everything down). I had four families in the study, so I would just rotate, and go to one family every week. If somebody was sick or wasn't there, I would just go to the gardens with the families, or with the kids go swimming, and I would audio-record. I also had arrangements with the people I recorded (I mostly worked with the mothers of the small children). There were things I could do for them. For instance, they didn't have watches or clocks, so I showed them my watch, explained how it goes from here to here, and kept count. When they wanted a certain kind of cloth to wear over their heads, the next time I went out to one of the main centers, I bought them a lot of cloth. Turned out they eventually wanted some axes and machetes, because they had very little steel, and they were still using stone. So next time we went out, we would buy machetes, axes. I would set up a contractual arrangement for X number of hours of work time, in exchange for a machete or cloth.

THE LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION FRAMEWORK

Schieffelin: I see language socialization and sociolinguistic research as distinct. There has been an enormous generation of talk-in-interaction research, and in a paper that Don Kulick and I wrote in 2004, we made the argument that language socialization was different from research that was about language and social interaction, because language socialization was ethnographic and longitudinal. It had to do with examining talk and activities over time, and it had certain characteristics that distinguished it from being a particular type of study that might be synchronic: e.g., looking at classroom interaction at one point in time or just a short period without documenting change. We argued that language socialization is concerned with issues of change and transformation, requiring some dimension of time. Another distinction between the very large body of work in talk and social interaction on the one hand and language socialization on the other is also LS's concern with novices and experts (of any age). Ochs and a group of her PhD students, for example, did a wonderful study of a set of physics labs in California, high-end physics labs where you had very distinguished senior scientists, junior scientists, and post-doctoral fellows. And in these physics labs, Ochs and her colleagues analyzed how, even within an interactional event, the novice/expert role could shift across a situation. It might have to do with who knew how to operate a piece of equipment, or who knew how to read a particular chart or interpret some statistics. The novice and expert roles were always there, and they could be taken up by different participants. But when Ochs and her team studied that group of physicists, they looked at interactions over a year to understand change. So that's where language socialization differs from work on talk and social interaction: It captures change over various scales of time.

Another very important part of language socialization is the language ideologies that go along with the ways in which people organize language. Don Kulick's work among others highlighted the importance of this notion of how language comes to represent things and people in the world, especially when you have multilingual situations. For example, I have argued that in Bosavi, people have a folk theory of how you show children language. That's part of a language ideology. Other parts of a language ideology in Bosavi would have to do with this notion that the language itself has a surface and an underneath: They have a very elaborated way of talking about what you say and what that can mean underneath. And our own language ideologies can come out here, too. I remember one time when I got to Bosavi, I took the language practices from my White middle-class background, and I would see a kid pushing a stick and I ask, "What are you doing?" And they would just stop and look at me. Then I realized that my question was taken as a rhetorical question meaning "You shouldn't do that." It came out that when I asked a question like that, people thought maybe I hadn't seen it, and they would say something like, "You didn't see?" So, when I asked questions about the obvious or about what someone had said, trying to elicit more, they would say, "You heard it! And you wrote it down!" We always encounter language ideologies and issues of culture in this type of work. That's how we learn.

So, if someone says, "I'm doing a language socialization study," I have a certain set of criteria. I want to know, "What's your longitudinal design? What kind of changes are you interested in? Are you interested in the changes that go on in terms of social organization, or who can speak, or who can use a particular register, or what happens at home/at school, or at religious centers and in other voluntary activities like sports?" So, a lot of it is really about notions of change and

distinction and that attention to the detail of how somebody figures something out, how somebody learns a way to make sense. For example, we know in many communities that children are supposed to listen and take in the information as it's given to them, but they're not allowed or encouraged to ask a lot of questions. In other communities, children are really encouraged to ask a lot of questions. In some places, if a teacher asks a question, there can be many right answers. In other kinds of settings, there's only one. So, I think the question is: How does an individual come to learn that? That's the preference for a language socialization study. It really takes a village (of scholars) to do this kind of research.

DIVERSITY IN LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION RESEARCH

Schieffelin: The early language socialization work was done in more traditional societies, many were monolingual. Following that, Kulick's groundbreaking study on language shift in Papua New Guinea and several studies in the Caribbean—Paul Garrett's work in St. Lucia with Creoles and Amy Paugh's work in Dominica on Creole and other varieties of English—highlighted the insights LS can bring to understanding language in society. There hasn't been much that I can think of in terms of longitudinal studies in Africa, but there has been significant scholarship in urban Asian societies. There has been excellent work on Japanese first and second language acquisition from language socialization. Pat Clancy's early work was foundational, and it was quite accidental because she was doing her dissertation on pear stories. She started recording young Japanese children in Tokyo and came up with significant insights into the socialization of indirection and empathy. This inspired work by Matt Burdeksi on politeness and spurred an interest in understanding more about the cultural meaning of shaming and respect. The scholarship of Kathy Howard, Heidi Fung, Adrienne Lo, among others, has expanded what we know about LS in various Asian communities.

There's an interesting "hidden" language socialization book (the author didn't really name it language socialization, but it was): *Them Children* by Martha Ward. Ward wanted to do language acquisition of African American Vernacular English in the late 1960's, and when she arrived in the New Orleans community, people didn't really want to talk. She couldn't record acquisition data, but she did an important study on the ideologies in this community about kids and language. Linda Sperry also did a study of African American children in the South, focusing on language acquisition and socialization. There is more work being done in Latino communities in the United States, on issues of bilingualism. There is also Peggy Miller's language socialization study of three working-class girls in Baltimore and Ochs's ten-year project at UCLA called the Center for Everyday Life of Families (CELF), which added much to what we know about American families.

I'll be honest, language socialization requires a kind of multidisciplinary training, which is not always easy for people to get. It has to be done in stages. Sometimes people might first do ethnographic work and some baseline language study. For example, Shannon Ward is working on a variety of Tibetan called Amdo Tibetan, which she learned as a non-native speaker. When she went to do her dissertation research in China, she spent the first ten months doing basic work on language and on the community. I could see how much labor it took because there wasn't a lot of descriptive material even on Amdo phonology. She's back there this summer for

another two months, and it's taken years. It's not something she can go do in a one-off study, and it's something that she will be working on for years because the system is so complicated and so rich. These can be lifetime projects, and often are. 1

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION RESEARCH



Schieffelin: As someone who has been in the business of being an academic, being a professor, thinking about thinking, I think it's always good to think about knowledge production. Knowledge production can involve taking things that we already know and reframing them in a way that provides a new set of insights into those phenomena—coming up with a new paradigm, a new perspective that allows us to re-examine things. That's one of the things that the language socialization framework has enabled us to do. It's enabled us to look at things that we already know in a new way. The second thing that we can do in terms of knowledge production is figure out new things. We can consolidate facts and ideas that were assumed but not articulated or put together in a framework, or we can generate new knowledge itself. I would like to suggest that generation of new knowledge is also something that the language socialization framework has enabled. It has allowed us to go into situations and find out things that we didn't know, and achieve a deeper understanding of the interplay of language, culture, and cognition.

One of the areas of work within language socialization that has really sustained me over decades is a comment that was made to me through my fieldwork in the 70's with the Kaluli people. Somebody had died in the village and people were crying. And I said to one of my buddies, "How do you think so-and-so feels?" And they looked at me like I had just arrived from outer space and said: "How do I know? How does anyone know what another person thinks or feels?" That stuck with me. It just literally stopped me in my tracks because so much of anthropology (and so much of psychology) is premised on this notion that we can know what is in other people's heads. As native English speakers, we are trained to verbally speculate from the very beginning about everything. And when I had this revelation that people could say "We don't know. How can you know?," that completely changed how I was seeing my language acquisition and socialization data. What this really means in many communities all over the Pacific islands is that it's a kind of a violation of verbal etiquette, if you'd like, to go into somebody else's head and to articulate what they might or might not be thinking or feeling. It's not that people don't know. Of course they know. You couldn't have a society if you didn't have some variety of intersubjectivity. But when you have communities where it only matters what you do or say—the consequence and not the intention—it really changes the way we think about theories of mind. And I think for me this has been an area that has been one of the most productive and has allowed me to consider language, subjectivities, intersubjectivity, and notions of how we make sense of each other and ourselves.

Another issue which I've always thought a lot about, and which I'd like to leave you with, is authenticity: The issue of what's the authentic, where things come from, and what they mean.

1Dr. Ward is now Assistant Professor of Anthropology, Dept of Community, Culture, and Global Studies. University of British Columbia Okanagan.

When Duranti and Ochs carried out ethnographic and linguistic research in Samoa, one of the many things they studied was the literacy activities. And in the literacy class at the church-school, they found a Samoan alphabet chart, called Pi Tautau, and they saw that, in this alphabet chart, every image for every letter of the Samoan alphabet was developed by Western missionaries. So, the word for boat, which could have been a Samoan canoe, was illustrated by a Western boat. The word for bird was an introduced bird and not an indigenous bird, and the word for dress was the European woman's dress rather than the traditional Samoan outfit. The entire alphabet chart was a form of westernization through literacy. Years later, Duranti and Ochs did a study of the Samoan diaspora community in LA. They went into a pastor school where one of the main activities was teaching Samoan, and they saw English-speaking Samoan kids using the same alphabet chart as in the village. Identical. The chart was not changed at all, but its significance was profoundly changed. Now it was a symbol of Samoan-ness. The kids were being asked in English to talk about the Samoan letters and to think about the Samoan language from this perspective. So, it became an emblem or a sign of Samoan-ness. It was recontextualized and now indexed something authentic from Samoa. So this is a thought I want to leave you with in terms of the kind of issues of where do things come from, and how does meaning shift according to context, and how does something like an alphabet chart used by missionaries to promote westernization in Samoa get transformed into a resource for promoting Samoan-ness in LA. I think it's an interesting thing to ponder.

REFERENCES

- Arnold, J., Graesch, A., Ragazzini, E., & Ochs, E. (2012). *Life at home in the 21st century: 32 families open their doors*. Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press.
- Burdelski, M. (2011). Language Socialization and Politeness Routines. In A. Duranti, E. Ochs, E., & B. B. Schieffelin (Eds.), *The handbook of language socialization* (pp. 275–295). Cambridge University Press.
- Clancy, P. M. (1986). The acquisition of communicative style in Japanese. In B. B. Schieffelin & E. Ochs (Eds.), *Studies in the social and cultural foundations of language: Language socialization across cultures* (pp. 213–250). Cambridge University Press.
- Duranti, A., & Ochs, E. (1986). Literacy instruction in a Samoan village. In B. B. Schieffelin (Ed.), *The acquisition of literacy: Ethnographic perspectives* (pp. 213–232). Ablex.
- Duranti, A., Ochs, E., & Schieffelin, B. B. (Eds.). (2011). *The handbook of language socialization* (Vol. 72). John Wiley & Sons.
- Garrett, P. B. (2005). What a language is good for: Language socialization, language shift, and the persistence of code-specific genres in St. Lucia. *Language in Society*, 34(3), 327–361.
- Howard, K. M. (2009). Breaking in and spinning out: Repetition and decalibration in Thai children's play genres. *Language in Society*, 38(3), 339–363.
- Keenan (Ochs), E. (1975). Making it last: Repetition in children's discourse. *Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*, 1, 279–294
- Kulick, D. (1997). *Language shift and cultural reproduction: Socialization, self and syncretism in a Papua New Guinean village* (No. 14). Cambridge University Press.
- Kulick, D., & Schieffelin, B.B. (2004). Language socialization. In A. Duranti (Ed.), *A companion to linguistic anthropology* (pp. 349–368). Blackwell.

- Lo, A., & Fung, H. (2011). Language socialization and shaming. In A. Duranti, E. Ochs, E., & B. B. Schieffelin (Eds.), *The handbook of language socialization* (pp. 169–189). Cambridge University Press.
- Miller, P. (1986). Teasing as language socialization and verbal play in a white working-class community. In B. B. Schieffelin & E. Ochs (Eds.), *Language socialization across cultures* (199–212). Cambridge University Press.
- Ochs, E., Gonzales, P., & Jacoby, S. (1996). "When I come down I'm in the domain state": Grammar and graphic representation in the interpretive activity of physicists. *Studies in Interactional Sociolinguistics*, 13, 328–369.
- Ochs, E., & Jacoby, S. (1997). Down to the wire: The cultural clock of physicists and the discourse of consensus. *Language in Society*, 26(4), 479–505.
- Ochs, E., & Kremer-Sadlik, T. (Eds.) (2013). *Fast forward family: Home, work and relationships in middle class America*. University of California Press.
- Ochs, E., & Schieffelin, B. (1984). Language acquisition and socialization. In R. Shweder & R. LeVine (Eds.), *Culture theory: Essays on mind, self, and emotion* (pp. 276–320). Cambridge University Press.
- Paugh, A. L. (2005). Multilingual play: Children's code-switching, role play, and agency in Dominica, West Indies. *Language in Society*, 34(1), 63–86.
- Schieffelin, B. B. (1990). *The give and take of everyday life: Language, socialization of Kaluli children* (No. 9). CUP Archive.
- Ward, M. C. (1971). *Them children: A study in language learning*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Ward, S. (2019). *Learning language, transforming knowledge: Language socialization in Amdo Tibet*. [Doctoral dissertation, New York University]. ProQuest.

Nadja Tadic is a doctoral candidate in Applied Linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her research interests include classroom interaction and critical pedagogy, with a focus on identifying interactional patterns that promote marginalized students' participation and learning.

Di Yu is a doctoral candidate in Applied Linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University. She received her M.A. in TESOL and Ed.M. in Applied Linguistics from Teachers College as well. Her research interests include media discourse, political discourse, humor, and the use of multimodal resources in interaction.

Kelly Frantz is a doctoral student in Applied Linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University. She studies discourse in language classrooms and peer-tutoring sessions, with a particular interest in how participants demonstrate understanding and learning processes. She is currently a teaching fellow at the Community Language Program at Teachers College.