Thinking through difference. The language of anthropological collaboration.

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‘What is it that we can do together - whoever and wherever that ‘we’ may exist - is largely a question of what is in-between us; what enables us to reach toward or withdraw from each other. What is the materiality of this in-between - the composition and intensity of its durability, viscosity, visibility, and so forth? What is it that enables us to be held in place, to be witnessed, touched, avoided, scrutinized or secured? Infrastructure is about this in-between.’ (Simone 2013). Simone’s account of the infrastructural refers to his experience of life in Johannesburg a city in which he found vibrancy and chronic instability, fear and suspicion, illegality and creativity, a city where he explored the ways in which people are infrastructural to urban life. His questions resonated for me as I thought about language and the production of anthropological knowledge in a collaborative research project. In this short paper I consider how language came to stand between the members of the research team, offering the possibilities for collaborative research practices and outcomes, and at the same time differentiating and holding us apart.

Our ethnographic research project set out to explore the forms of ambiguity, uncertainty and experimentation that are constitutive of neoliberal governance in contemporary Peru. Focusing on the Vilcanota Valley in the administrative region of Cusco, a team of six researchers tracked community, municipal and regional government understandings of the administrative and political practices through which both the process of decentralization and the central state’s claims to sovereignty, are at once authorized and undone. In less abstract terms we worked with and around local municipalities as they engaged in various projects that drew together diverse state agencies - planning a by-pass, improving water, sanitation and waste systems, securing flood defences and in the process engaging the regulatory and technical instruments through which state power is both devolved and re-centralized. The project involved a small team of researchers, two senior academics (one from the US and one from the UK), a post-doctoral researcher (trained in the UK), a post-graduate researcher (trained in Peru), and two Peruvian anthropologists who had yet to complete their undergraduate studies, one a young student1, one an experienced researcher who had worked for many years in a respected Cusco NGO. All members of the team spoke fluent Spanish. Our abilities in Quechua varied considerably. Two team members (one British and one Peruvian spoke no Quechua); two spoke some (the two senior academics) and two spoke fluently (two Peruvians). However, as we know, common language offers no stable ground for effective communication. As I analyse our attempts to enact a collaborative anthropology it is our diverse communicative competences, our differing capacities to use language appropriately and effectively in specific relational settings, that come to the fore.

The project was funded in part by the Wenner Gren Foundation which has an explicit interest in extending anthropological research capacities in countries where there are relatively few opportunities for advanced training2. The research team did not exactly fit a model in which less experienced anthropologists

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1 In what follows I do not attend to the way in which the student formed part of our collaborative project - the issues were different and space is lacking.

2 The research was also funded by the ACLS, the NSF and the AHRC. All these grants were explicitly for collaborative research, although for these foundations the collaboration focused on the research relation between the principal investigators (PIs).

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were trained, on the job, by the more experienced members of the team. Although the Peruvian members of the team had little systematic training in ethnographic methods, they all had extensive fieldwork experience. The framing of the engagement as collaborative foregrounded how we hoped to learn from each other. The experienced ethnographers were far less skilled than the Peruvian team members in linguistic registers through which to negotiate access to institutional settings, or the interpretative skills to read the changing quality of that access. Drawing on previous work with government offices, NGOs and local officials and with extensive personal engagement in political activism, the Peruvian researchers brought acute social and cultural sensibilities to the project that became central to how our work developed. However in the process of undertaking our research project, it became clear that these knowledges constituted a different basis for anthropological thinking than the knowledge we sought to elicit as ethnographers. To explore this difference in more detail I reflect on four aspects of the research process where this tension became explicit. In so doing I aim to show something of how anthropological expertise is relationally and differentially enacted through language.

**Access:** As briefly mentioned above, gaining quality access to the people and the situations that became the basis for our ethnographic study was directly facilitated by our Peruvian researchers. They had experience of working with officials from all levels of government. They had many friends and acquaintances directly engaged in government and public life. The languages of the Town Hall, of bureaucratic procedure, or normative formulation was something they were entirely familiar with - as were the subtle ways of spotting when to gossip and when not to, when to stay formal, and when to relax. Furthermore their personal networks opened doors. On many occasions we got to talk and spend time with public officials because we were introduced as friends and colleagues. In time this element of the team dynamic changed somewhat. As with all ethnographic studies, each researcher found ways to forge their own relationships, and trust and authority were encountered in diverse forms that didn’t always run along the line of prior acquaintance.

**Fieldwork Engagements:** The language of fieldwork engagement raised some further issues. Briggs famously argued that ‘learning how to ask’ is a necessary skill for an ethnographer to acquire. He was referring to the need to foster awareness of appropriate modes of questioning, and that part of the interpretative skill of the ethnographer lies in working out how your interlocutors imagine the conversation in which they are (or are not) engaged. Sociolinguistics has analysed how all linguistic utterances enact subtle, or not-so-subtle differentiations. To know what has been said requires deep understandings of the possibilities through which speech events become meaningful. In our regular team meetings we discussed the importance of learning to listen, of not interrupting or asking leading questions and of trying to exercise patience as a method, even in the context of an interview, in order to allow your interlocutor to frame the terms of the engagement and thereby to find how specific issues are raised and/or dismissed, the concepts used, the analogies, repetitions and patterns. We tried to teach our novice ethnographers that all kinds of unexpected things - actions and utterances - can be interesting. Our job was to engage people, but also to track the form in which such engagement unfolded. We knew that small things that seemed to make little sense or that might appear irrelevant when uttered - could become quite crucial in understanding something else at a later date. Again, as with the negotiation of access, finding ways of conducting interviews or informal conversations did not in present a major hurdle to our collaborations. We all found our way. We laughed about whether this or that comment or event was ‘interesting’ - but the joke carried forward into more fundamental differences as to why or how something becomes ‘interesting’. Becoming ‘interesting’ in this context was about whether fieldwork observations held the potential to become anthropologically interesting.

**Field notes:** This translation from observation to potential anthropological knowledge surfaced as a
problem in our ambition to share field notes. We had envisaged that we would draw on each other’s notes when we were ready to begin formulating ethnographic arguments. One of the English speaking team members wrote extensively and in Spanish. The result was a wonderful record of her observations. But these notes were also quite problematic. Writing in Spanish, and writing for others to read, changed what field notes were for this researcher and in many ways led her to feel somewhat distanced from her own observations. And while the notes in Spanish were now available for all team members to read, the rhythms of fieldwork and field note writing left little time for the extensive notes of others to be read in any detail. Information was more usefully shared in weekly meetings when team members would talk about what they had been doing, and compare notes about what was ‘interesting’, eliciting points of common interest through an unfolding conversation which was always more fluid and easily collaborative than the attempt to generate a collective resource of shared field notes. However, we could not relinquish the need for shared notes as the PIs knew that we would need these notes when we came to write the anthropological monograph which we wanted to produce out of this project. There was a language problem here which concerns the ways in which we needed the field notes to register rich descriptions of events, concepts, and gestures - but also continue to build on the awareness of what was ‘interesting’. Field notes are always personal because they are highly selective. This selectivity is guided by sensibilities that were not shared, but related, in anthropological terms to what we had read, who we were in dialogue with, the kinds of anthropology we valued, the conversations in which we sought to intervene. Thus, although there was no need for the field notes to be analytical, we soon found that from the perspective of the PIs, other team members’ field notes could be rich and useful but only to a certain extent. They would also always have problematic gaps. Our own field notes were also incomplete. We wrote far less than our collaborators. But gaps in one’s own field notes are of a different order. Your memory registers some of the most impactful, embodied ways of learning, precisely those things that are either not fully conscious or communicable at the time in which they are registered are ‘interesting’. We were also writing analytically from the start teasing out what was ‘interesting’ in relation to our own diverse professional audiences primarily in the USA and in Europe.

**Publication and Engagement:** I turn finally to the area in which language came between us in the sense of holding us apart. The PIs had to negotiate differences in their collaborative writing but these differences were familiar and manageable - indeed our collaboration was explicitly framed around a common interest in learning from each other’s interests and preoccupations. We were interested in how the concepts and modes of argument deployed in the anthropology of law could engage those found in the anthropology of science and technology. We could debate with each other about what constitutes good anthropology, but our arguments would be made with reference to texts we had both read, or heard presented in seminars and conferences. Negotiating a common language with the rest of the research team was far more difficult. The relative importance of the English language anthropological conversation in the formation of what the PIs found interesting clearly stood between them and other members of the research team. But I would contend that this was not the main problem. There are many Spanish language publications accessible to all our team that created anthropological knowledge from international conversations. The difference had more to do with our different perspectives on how to mobilise our anthropological knowledge to create new possibilities: new ways of thinking, new ways of organizing, new ways of participating, perhaps new ways of collaborating. The conditions of our anthropological formation differentiated how we envisaged taking our work forward - and in retrospect shaped the ways in which we carried out the research. The researchers trained in US and UK academy prioritised the significance of finding how things were working on the ground. We had no ambition to ‘improve’ the workings of the Regional Government or the local state. On the contrary, we were in many ways tracking the effects of decades of external development initiatives and we did not assume to apply any external measure of good practice. Our approach assumed rather that things were working, and it was our job to better understand how things worked and to what effect. This approach, from our perspective,
extended the possibilities for thinking about decentralization in Peru. As we develop our analysis we are looking to develop ways of describing how the specific ways in which the tensions between decentralization and central (regulatory) control play out in Southern Peru and become the ground on which local political initiatives and struggles are realised. In Peru, by contrast, the anthropological tradition is far more entangled with a commitment to social intervention. When our project funding ended our collaborators did not have the security of academic posts. They took up jobs in state agencies where they may or may not develop academic languages for their knowledges of Peruvian statecraft. For now their interventions are more likely to be voiced in the genres of the on-going conversations through which they drew us into their worlds in the first place. I would also assume that their engagements will also reflect an altered ethnographic sensibility.

In the course of our research project we learnt from each other. We did not all learn, or even intend, to become anthropologists in the same way. Collaboration does not require a common language - it requires a space of engagement in which different knowledges, skills and possibilities can be drawn into productive dialogue. As Brenneis argued: ‘political action resides at the convergence of genres of speaking, rather than in any one genre’ (Brenneis 1984). It is in this sense that language that stands between us could and should become a source of creativity.

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