Prologue

In the late 1960s, school desegregation in the southern United States became a legislative mandate and a fact of daily life. Academic questions about how children talk when they come to school and what educators should know and do about oral and written language were echoed in practical pleas of teachers who asked: "What do I do in my classroom on Monday morning?"

In the massive reshuffling of students and teachers during desegregation in the South, I became a part of the communities and schools described in this book. I was both ethnographer of communication focusing on child language and teacher-trainer attempting to determine whether or not academic questions could lead to answers appropriate for meeting the needs of children and educators in that regional setting. Described here are two communities – Roadville and Trackton – only a few miles apart in the Piedmont Carolinas. Roadville is a white working-class community of families steeped for four generations in the life of the textile mills. Trackton is a black working-class community whose older generations grew up farming the land, but whose current members work in the mills. Both communities define their lives primarily in terms of their communities and their jobs, yet both are tied in countless ways to the commercial, political, and educational interests of the townspeople – mainstream blacks and whites of the region. The townspeople are school-oriented, and they identify not so much with their immediate neighborhoods as with networks of voluntary associations and institutions whose activities link their common interests across the region.

I was a part-time instructor in anthropology and linguistics at a state university which had an excellent local reputation for teacher-training. Black and white teachers, business leaders, ministers, and mill personnel were in my graduate courses, and with many of them I developed a research-partner relationship. Pres-

sures from desegregation, nationwide condemnation of the Carolinas' low performance in public education, and the general shifting of social and work opportunities for blacks during this period helped create an atmosphere in which individual teachers, businessmen, and mill foremen could initiate changes in their usual practices. Once desegregation began for schools and mills alike, white children went to schools with black teachers and classmates; black teachers faced black and white students; white foremen supervised black mill workers. For the first time, black and white worked side-by-side in the mills, and white foremen, mostly males, worried about ways to instruct black workers, male and female. Communication was a central concern of black and white teachers, parents, and mill personnel who felt the need to know more about how others communicated: why students and teachers often could not understand each other, why questions were sometimes not answered, and why habitual ways of talking and listening did not always seem to work.

In my university courses on anthropology and education and language and culture were teachers, who came to advance their degrees and pay levels, and businessmen and mill personnel, who came either to accompany their teacher-wives or to experience college classroom life again. They brought a central question: What were the effects of preschool home and community environments on the learning of those language structures and uses which were needed in classrooms and job settings? Answers to this question were important for black and white children who were unsuccessful in school, and for their parents who were frustrated in their interactions in credit union agencies (cooperative savings institutions of millworkers), employment offices, and elsewhere as they negotiated for critical goods and services. In my courses, I talked about published research on language differences among black and white children and adults of different socioeconomic classes across the United States. The students in my courses debated the practical applications of this research as well as its appropriateness to the local populations. They pointed out that the vast majority of research on child language had not treated the issue of the community or cultural background of the children studied. In this geographic region, where far more than half of the families qualified for in-state social services on the basis of income, socioeconomic differences among children seemed useless as a

variable against which to set their language differences. Ascribing Black, Southern, or Standard English to speakers by racial membership was also not satisfactory to these students, for almost all of them, black and white, could shift among these varieties as occasion demanded. To categorize children and their families on the basis of either socioeconomic class or race and then to link these categories to discrete language differences was to ignore the realities of the communicative patterns of the region.

As long-time residents of the area, the teachers, businessmen, and mill personnel in my classes had observed differences in the language use and general behavior patterns of children and adults from certain communities or cultural groups. They had an endless store of anecdotes about children learning to use language across and within groups of the region, and they asked why researchers did not describe children learning language as they grew up in their own community cultures. Their questions set the stage for me to encourage them to examine their own ways of using language with their children at home and to record language interactions as thoroughly and accurately as possible, without preconceived judgments about what was happening in the exchanges in which they observed and participated. For those members of my classes for whom such descriptions became a serious objective, their initial focus was on their interactions with their own children; subsequently, they gave attention to communicative situations in their classrooms and the textile mills.

It was, however, not enough to enable these townspeople – mainstream blacks and whites – to strive to become objective and accurate recorders of the language habits of their own interactions. Their questions pointed to the need for a full description of the primary face-to-face interactions of children from community cultures other than their own mainstream one. The ways of living, eating, sleeping, worshiping, using space, and filling time which surrounded these language learners would have to be accounted for as part of the milieu in which the processes of language learning took place. Though I did not then set out to do so, my next years were to be spent recording and interpreting the language learning habits of the children of Roadville and Trackton. With these accounts of worlds about which the townspeople actually knew very little, cross-cultural comparisons of the variations of language socialization in the predominant groups of the

region would be possible. Using detailed facts on the interactions of the townspeople, and my ethnographies of communication in the communities of Roadville and Trackton, we could then move to answer the central question: For each of these groups, what were the effects of the preschool home and community environment on the learning of those language structures and uses which were needed in classrooms and job settings?

The townspeople in my courses studied their own mainstream ways of teaching, modeling, and using language with their children and with those with whom they worked in classrooms or the mills. They then compared these ways with those described in both the research literature and my accounts of Roadville and Trackton, communities similar to those from which most millworkers and about 70 percent of the students in the local schools came. Mill foremen agreed to teach me about a world of learning very different from that of school classrooms. With their help, I was able to spend part of my time in the textile mills, learning about the varieties of language uses adults from Roadville and Trackton met there, from the weaving rooms to the credit union offices. In addition, teachers welcomed me as teacher-aide or co-teacher in their classrooms. Together, we took fieldnotes, identified patterns of communicative interactions, and delineated what the school and the mill defined as "communication problems." We searched for solutions, wrote curricula, and tried new methods, materials, and motivations to help working-class black and white children learn more effectively than they had in the past. Fifteen of the teachers had preschool children, and this cluster and their families form one portion of the group referred to in this book as the townspeople. This cluster recorded, analyzed, and compared their own habits of interacting with their young children with those of Roadville and Trackton. As associate, colleague, aide, and sometime-co-author of curricular materials, I became a part of the home lives, classrooms, and workplaces of many of the townspeople. They came to recognize that in schools, commercial establishments, and mills, mainstream language values and skills were the expected norm, and individuals from communities such as Roadville and Trackton brought different language values and skills to these situations. The story of these townspeople, especially the teachers, as learning researchers fills the final chapters of this book.

Between communities and classrooms

In the years between 1969 and 1978, I lived, worked, and played with the children and their families and friends in Roadville and Trackton. My entry into these specific communities came through a naturally occurring chain of events. In each case, I knew an old-time resident in the community, and my relationship with that individual opened the community to me. I had grown up in a rural Piedmont area in a neighboring state, so the customs of both communities were very familiar to me though many years had passed since I had been a daily part of such cultural ways. I am white, but while I was growing up, my family's nearest neighbors were black families; the black church was across the road from my house, and the three black school teachers in our area lived just down the road. In our area, both white and black children lived too far from the nearest school to walk, so we took buses to our respective schools, but in the afternoons and the summers, we joined each other for ballgames, bike-riding, and trips to the creek to look for "crawfish." In the summers, we all worked for local tobacco farmers, black and white. These shared experiences and unconscious habits of interaction eased my transition into both Trackton and Roadville.

Over the period of my experiences in the two communities, neither ever had a population exceeding 150, and during some summers, when visits to families in distant locations were frequent, each had as few as 30 residents. There were usually about 40 residents in each community. Most of the households contained one or more members who worked in jobs providing salaries equal to or slightly above that of beginning public school teachers in the Carolinas. They worked in textile mills or construction work, and they farmed or gardened as supplementary activities. Jobs were sometimes seasonal, and work was not always steady. The income levels and occupational lives of adults in the two communities were very similar; one or two families would sometimes make as much as $12,000 in one year; most made between $8,000 and $10,000; and a few had rough years in which disaster struck, and their income went below $3,000. All were accustomed to ups and downs, good times and bad, and most believed good times followed bad.

With the exception of their jobs, life was essentially confined to

the home community for adults as well as children. Approximately 80 percent of the occasions when adults went outside the community were work-related. Family trips to town or to the nearby metropolitan center were multi-purpose, major events. Those who came to visit either community knew it by name and knew how to find it. By both geographic location and historical patterns of choice of neighbors and circle of friends, each community tended to be closed, somewhat set apart, with an evolved identity and inner life of its own. Throughout the Piedmont Carolinas, there were many "Roadvilles" and "Tracktons," sometimes "out in the country," sometimes no more than a few blocks from the city hall of a town of 40,000 or more citizens. The youngsters from Roadville and Trackton had much in common with most of the children in the classrooms of the region. Approximately 70 percent of the children in the six counties of the Piedmont region in which I traveled, teaching off-campus courses, visiting homes, and working in schools, came from homes and communities which shared a majority of the features described for Roadville and Trackton.

For my work on children learning language in the two communities, I focused primarily on the face-to-face network in which each child learns the ways of acting, believing, and valuing of those about him. For the children of Roadville and Trackton, their primary community is geographically and socially their immediate neighborhood. Thus, these ethnographies of communication focus on each of the communities in which the children are socialized as talkers, readers, and writers to describe:

- the boundaries of the physical and social community in which communication to or by them is possible;
- the limits and features of the situations in which such communication occurs;
- the what, how, and why of patterns of choice children can exercise in their uses of language, whether in talking, reading, or writing;
- the values or significance these choices of language have for the children's physical and social activities.

Added to all the details of the daily existence of children which the above imply are the history and current ecology of the community. Opportunities, values, motivations, and resources available for

communication in each community are influenced by that group's social history as well as by current environmental conditions. Once beyond the preschool years, the children move into school, and descriptions of their language uses there must similarly focus on boundaries, limits, and features of communicative situations, and the significance of choices among language uses. For children in this region in this decade, all these aspects of schooling were in an almost constant state of change.

These ethnographies of communication attempt to let the reader follow the children of Roadville and Trackton from their home and community experiences into their classrooms and schools. The reader will come to know these children and their teachers and will see how both groups retained some of their language and cultural habits and altered others. The influence of these mutual adjustments on an individual level often exceeded that of the major educational policy shifts and reshufflings of teachers and students which marked these times.

Because ethnographic research, especially in education, is currently undertaken by a variety of scholars from a range of disciplines, there is some general sense of a search for a model. This book is not, however, intended as a model for future ethnographic studies of education in and out of schools. To be sure, many features of it could be adapted for use by other anthropologists studying communities and schools, but many could not. The on-going relationship over nearly a decade between anthropologist and communities and institutions studied is not likely to be repeated by another researcher. Conditions of access and accountability for social scientists researching minority communities and schools now largely preclude the open access and cooperation I enjoyed. Furthermore, no deadlines, plans, or demands from an outside funding agency set limits on the time or direction of the cooperative arrangements between teachers and anthropologist. The timing, location, and particular interplay of people and historic and social conditions make this, like every ethnography, a unique piece of social history.

By many standards of judgment, this book also cannot be considered a model piece of educational or child language research. For example, educators should not look here for experiments, controlled conditions, and systematic score-keeping on the academic gains and losses of specific children. Nor should psycho-

linguists look here for data taped at periodic intervals under similar conditions over a predesignated period of time. What this book does do is record the natural flow of community and classroom life over nearly a decade. The descriptions here of the actual processes, activities, and attitudes involved in the enculturation of children in Roadville and Trackton will allow readers to see these in comparison with those of mainstream homes and institutions.

Often the approaches to research in education have been quantitative, global, sociodemographic, and dependent on large-scale comparisons of many different schools. Terms from business predominate: input, output, accountability, management strategies, etc. Input factors (independent variables) are said to influence, predict, or determine output factors (dependent variables). Pieces of data about social groups, such as number of siblings or time of mother–child interactions in preschool daily experiences, are correlated with the output of students, expressed in terms of test scores, subsequent income, and continued schooling. The effects of formal instruction have been evaluated by correlating these input factors with educational output.

From an ethnographic perspective, the irony of such research is that it ignores the social and cultural context which created the input factors for individuals and groups. Detailed descriptions of what actually happens to children as they learn to use language and form their values about its structures and functions tell us what children do to become and remain acceptable members of their own communities. Throughout the years of this study, parents, children, teachers, and students pursued, to the extent possible in that period of history in that region, their normal priorities of meeting daily needs and sustaining their self-identities. As a matter of policy, I never took into either community objects which were not already familiar to the residents' daily life, and as far as possible I tried not to use any of the items in the communities in ways unfamiliar to them. I spent many hours cooking, chopping wood, gardening, sewing, and minding children by the rules of the communities. For example, in the early years of interaction in the communities, audio and video recorders were unfamiliar to community residents; therefore, I did no taping of any kind then. By the mid-1970s, cassette players were becoming popular gifts, and community members used them to

record music, church services, and sometimes special performances in the community. When such recordings became a common community-initiated practice, I audiotaped, but only in accordance with community practices. Often I was able to write in a field notebook while minding children, tending food, or watching television with the families; otherwise, I wrote fieldnotes as soon as possible afterwards when I left the community on an errand or to go to school. In the classrooms, I often audiotaped; we sometimes videotaped; and both the teachers and I took fieldnotes as a matter of course on many days of each year.

Neither community members and teachers nor I considered that any special demands of data collection should alter normal habits; pressures of the changing times, both socially and economically, made enough demands. The usual tasks expected of a preplanned "research project" could not have been tolerated by such a large number of people over such a long period of time. Thus, the question of how "scientific" this work is will have to depend on each reader's conceptions of science and valuation of long-term participation and observation in accounting for the ways of life of particular groups of people in their communities and schools.

Ethnography and social history

It is important to say something about this book as both ethnography and social history. Anthropologists study social life as and where it is lived through the medium of a particular social group, but the ethnographic present never remains as it is described, nor does description of the current times fully capture the influences and forces of history on the present. Roadville, Trackton, and the townspeople of this book are products of the region's history which determined the times, places, and ways they could interact. Historians who have studied the Piedmont Carolinas since the colonial period tell of the relations among these groups and of the economic forces and political events which provide the legacy of ideas, values, and actions these groups bear today. The ethnography in these pages tells something of a recent chapter in that history, the decade between the late 1960s and the end of the 1970s, a time of rapid multi-directional change for blacks and whites everywhere – especially in the South. Here communities linked to the textile industry felt the influence of wide-ranging

industrial forces at the same time as they faced extraordinary technical and organizational changes because of foreign competition. The character of the face-to-face network which affected the work settings, schools, and ultimately the home life of Roadville and Trackton shifted throughout the decade. Economic and political forces which originated outside the region greatly influenced the urgency and dedication of the teachers described here.

A natural tendency of readers of this book will be to highlight the different racial memberships of Trackton and Roadville. Some readers will want to explain the differences between the attitudes, events, and patterns of communication of the two communities in terms of race only, overlooking the fact that the blacks and whites who were the townspeople had far more in common with each other than with either Roadville or Trackton. Explanation of social facts is never simple, and the story of language learning in these two communities and all that follows from that is no exception. The various approaches of these communities to acquiring, using, and valuing language are the products of their history and current situation.

It is because one of the communities of focus in this book is black and the other is white that the social history of such communities in the Piedmont region is especially critical to understanding the ethnographic present. For more than two centuries, social and economic factors kept the majority of blacks and whites of this region apart in many ways. People in each group developed a separate set of techniques for adjusting to their physical and social environments. For example, their religious institutions developed along somewhat divergent paths and fostered different types of communication, world views, and patterns of social relations. The Trackton blacks and Roadville whites described in this book have different ways of using language in worship, for social control, and in asserting their sense of identity. They do so, however, because they have had different historical forces shaping these ways. Only in the past few decades have blacks and whites of working-class communities come together in institutions of work, commerce, politics, and schooling where each has met yet a third set of ways of using language to get things done. It is the townspeople – blacks and whites of the mainstream middle class – who have the most familiarity with the communicative habits and preferences of these public institutions. Unlike