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Do concepts and methods have ethics?

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By Petteri Laihonen | June 18, 2020 | Mentoring

Editor's note: We find ourselves in a time of deep global crisis when reflections on research ethics take on new urgency. *Language on the Move* is delighted to bring to you a series of texts that aim to rethink research



ethics in Applied Linguistics. The texts in this series have been authored by members of the [Research Collegium of Language in Changing Society \(RECLAS\)](#) at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland. Their frustrations with a narrow legalistic understanding of ethics brought them together in a series of meetings and long debates in unconventional contexts, where they explored an understanding of ethics as foundational to and intertwined with all aspects of doing research. The result of these meetings and conversations is a series of “rants”, which they share here. In this first rant, Petteri Laihonen reflects on the ethics of methodological approaches and conceptual frameworks.

Approaches, frameworks, methodologies, and research designs have consequences for research ethics. Here I will discuss some things I have learned in my career as a fieldworker and researcher mainly while meeting minority language speakers in remote places and while trying to formulate practical relevance of my research for the wider public. I will specifically address the perception of research by research participants, and the ethics of interviewing and other methods. I will close by sharing my take on researcher activism.

What's in it for research participants?



In general, participants have been happy to discuss language issues with me, some have even considered the interviews as an opportunity to tell their life stories to somebody and to have it recorded. Others mentioned, that, as a linguistic minority, they have been “forgotten”. Participating in research felt like a good way to them to place their lives or their village on the map.




Petteri with research participants during fieldwork (Photo by Karina Tímár)

To meet my participants’ expectations, I have found it especially important to publish and present results not only in dominant languages and academic forums but also in the local language(s) and in accessible forums: in my case that has meant Hungarian and open access journals. Research published in English is largely irrelevant to my participants as it is mastered only by few of them.

In short, I consider it an important part of research(er) ethics to practice multilingual research multilingually (see [Piller 2016](#) on the critique of doing research on multilingualism monolingually).

Beyond the research interview

In [my dissertation](#), I provided detailed analyses on the constraints of the research interview as an ‘objective’ research tool by pointing out that the views on language produced in an interview are co-constructed by the interviewee and the interviewer. This helped me to see the research participants and researchers as equal partners in the production of information and knowledge, and my dissertation work made me very critical also towards objectivizing stances to research interviews. For example, certain things are often mentioned (or not and in a certain way) by an ‘informant’ only because they were asked (or not) by the researcher (in a certain way).

Most importantly, however it turned my attention to research ethics of treating the people v  dy as equal research participants, not merely as ‘informants’.

landscapes. The study of linguistic landscapes, or visual semiotics represents a turn “from spoken, face-to-face discourses to the representations of that interaction order in images and signs” (Scollon & Wong Scollon 2003: 82). In [my current project](#) (2016–2021), my fieldwork and data generation has also been focused on visual methods.

Originally developed to minimize the impact that researchers have on shaping the data, these methods have the potential to address the basic challenge research interviews have: interviewing appears to put the researcher in a dominant position.

Practicing inclusive research

Taking the concerns of research participant’s positionality and agency vis-a-vis the researcher seriously is a cornerstone of [inclusive research](#). In [my current project](#), I employed a local research assistant, who has been a significant help in building shared interest with the participants and partner institutions.

Revitalization program teachers have come to see our research as beneficial, especially due to the use of digital visual methods, which have provided examples of pedagogical experiments. To take one example: we have carried out iMovie projects with children, where the children’s first video recorded their villages and self-selected topics at home with an iPad provided by the project. Then they edited iMovies with the iPads during a revitalization class and finally showed the final recordings to other children, researchers, parents, and teachers.

Fieldwork projects, such as the iMovie project have served my research aims to gain analysable data through visual methods and thus getting access to participant language views and language practices.

Teachers’ views of research may have been changed as well: some more experienced teachers mentioned that previous research has not been similarly rewarding and that it had been difficult to engage the children in activities such as filling out questionnaires and surveys. In our case, they could see an immediate benefit for the program in the heightened student motivation to use the revitalization language.

Should researchers be activists?

To address this question, I need to begin by reflecting on my analytical framework, the study of language ideologies. I define language ideologies broadly as common linkages between language and non-linguistic phenomena in a given community. In the study of language ideologies I follow, it is a basic assumption that no idea or view about language comes from nowhere. As Silverstein (1985: 124) explains:



reflexive entailments for its own praxis, that it will find no absolute Archimedian place to stand – not in absolute “Truth”, nor in absolute “Reality” nor even in absolute deterministic or computable mental or social “Functional Process”. Analysis of ideological factuality is, perforce, relativistic in the best scientific (not scientific) sense.

From an “activist” approach, we could investigate how inequality is constructed through language ideologies and then show how such language ideologies are untrue, or “bad” representations of reality or how ideology is produced by “false consciousness” (as argued by Marx, see Blommaert 2006). Such an interpretation of ideology as a distortion of reality performed in order to naturalize a questionable political ideology, has been embraced by certain strands of Critical Discourse Analysis, where the analyses thus examine different linguistic forms and processes of twisting the truth (e.g., the use of metaphors to mislead interpretation, see [Reisigl & Wodak 2001](#)).

However, the activist goal of “speaking truth to power” is not an aim shared by researchers in linguistic anthropology, since language ideologies are everywhere and due to the lack of the “Archimedian place” mentioned by Silverstein above, they are false or true according to the perspective we choose or premise we follow (see also [Gal, 2002](#)).

To conclude, our research participants and their communities should benefit from the research. To reach this goal, my approach has been to focus on inclusive ethnography and methods of data collection that provide meaningful activities, events and discussions for the research participants and participating institutions. I have focused on examples of best practices, and at the same time remained critical by not trying to pretend that I can speak truth to power.

Finally, a goal for every study should also be to help people understand why research in general is needed and beneficial for people outside of academia.

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Are funding decisions based on “societal impact” ethical?

Taina Saarinen

June 24, 2020





Mentoring

Female academics and shamans face the same glass ceiling



Ingrid Piller
March 8, 2020





Where does academic authority come from?



Ingrid Piller

December 16, 2019

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MORE POSTS BY PETTERI LAIHONEN



Join the discussion

Johanna

June 24, 2020 at 6:05 pm

[Reply](#)

Petteri, thank you so much! I understand the “map quote” so much better now, and I’m so impressed with how your work is supporting your participants. You said to keep the conversation going, and if you met me you know not to say that lightly...so here we go. I think I’m starting to see your point a bit better. I think you might be reacting to the notion that research activism that speaks about “truth” or “justice” claims to know what those are, which conflicts with researcher curiosity and open questions. If that’s the case, then what we need to figure out is a way to remain curious and have genuine questions while still taking a stance. I wonder how you feel about this example from my current work: I am looking at how epistemic injustice (superiority of some knowledges over others) is constructed in classroom discourse in a refugee-serving school. In this work, I accept as “truths” that Finland is a racist society. We have enough evidence of this (see for instance <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2018/being-black-eu>) and also know that there is systemic racism and Eurocentrism in schools. Going back on this would imo be unethical both vis a vis my participants and also vis a vis prior work that has provided evidence for that. The “truth” I speak to “power” includes things like resisting and challenging dominant discourses of Finnish education wanting to be “colorblind” or being proud of “treating everyone the same”. Despite this “truth”, I have very genuine open questions, for instance I am currently very interested in how epistemic justice is claimed/withheld/negotiated ... and how we can support schools in moving closer to epistemic justice, which to me includes linguistic justice. (I’d have to explain this, but I don’t wanna use up too much space here.) In short, I am not asking IF there is racism (truth) but HOW it operates and how this can be changed (curiosity). Anyway, what I’m trying to say is I think there’s ways to have both: a stance and real curiosity, openness, space to learn. We need both!

I loved Ingrid’s and Laura’s posts (and relate on so many levels, both personally and professionally). I agree there are different types of research endeavors and for each researchers have to do the complex work of figuring out their “truth”, their curiosity-driven questions, their positionality (see my upcoming rant), the hopes, interests, and resources of a community, as well as how to please the academy enough to be able to participate in it (see Taina’s rant). It’s a big job.

**Petteri Laihonon**

June 26, 2020 at 11:10 pm

[Reply](#)

racism is present in the Finnish society and education, as I am afraid most of it still remains hidden for most people in Finland not suffering from it. I also look forward to reading about your findings how it operates and in which situations + how different practices in educations could be changed to treat all knowledge equally. I also hope your message will be heard by those with power to change the system.

I am looking forward to your rant!

Laura

June 29, 2020 at 2:41 pm

[Reply](#)

Thanks so much, Petteri and Johanna, for this fascinating discussion. I'm so glad that LOTM readers have this chance to have a window into your interesting and thought-provoking rants, and also your research. Looking forward to reading your post, Johanna!

Laura

June 19, 2020 at 10:13 am

[Reply](#)

What an engaging and thoughtful rant, Petteri! 😊

I too do a lot of work on language ideologies, and similar to Johanna, this has included research relating to refugees. Actually, my PhD thesis explored the discursive construction of truthfulness or credibility in refugee decision-making procedures. I would identify it as activist in the sense that I used CDA to identify and then challenge the language ideologies underlying credibility assessments in refugee claims. I did this by drawing on existing sociolinguistic research to argue, like you do above, that the "facts" and language produced in asylum interviews "are co-constructed by the interviewee and the interviewer". This (and some other points) helped challenge the legitimacy of asylum credibility assessments in their current form. I've blogged about this research recently <https://www.languageonthemove.com/five-language-myths-about-refugee-credibility/>

My follow-up question from the post and from Johanna's comment is to ask is it possible to debunk someone else's problematic and inequality-reinforcing idea without relying on an alternative one? At what point can relying on a developed and tested body of academic inquiry move beyond being an ideology? Or is more a matter

ideologies underlying the work we do and the work we rely upon in constructing our version of the truth, and that it would be ethically more problematic to say nothing?



Ingrid Piller

June 19, 2020 at 4:12 pm

[Reply](#)

Thanks, Johanna and Laura, for great questions! I'll be looking forward to Petteri's response. In the meantime, my take on language activism is that there are two types of language activism: one deals with injustices resulting from linguistic arrangements – the right to a fair trial, for instance, as in your example, Laura. In such cases, we have a moral duty to intervene, as I argue at some length in *Linguistic Diversity and Social Justice*. However, there is a second type of language activism where language itself – rather than justice – is at stake, as is the case in language revitalization efforts. These, I feel, are much more morally ambiguous and different responses – support for language maintenance or language shift – may be equally ethically valid, [as I explain here](#) drawing on Moradewun Adejunmobi's powerful book *Vernacular Palaver*.

Petteri Laihonon

June 26, 2020 at 1:14 am


[Reply](#)

Thanks, Ingrid for making the distinction between the two kinds of language activism! I could not agree more. In the case of language itself, there is a diversity of opinions among the minority and majority speakers alike, and a lot depends on the context and particular situation.

Petteri Laihonon

June 25, 2020 at 4:52 am

[Reply](#)

Thank you Laura for your insightful comment and the follow-up question! Your blog post is a nice example how the common beliefs (also found in much mainstream research) about the interview as an objective and neutral one-way information gathering tool can lead to misunderstandings and wrong conclusions. I wonder if the interview can serve a purpose in such fundamental hierarchical situations at all. 

I think debunking — I would use “analysing” here — ideologies most often lead

interviewer not having an influence on the interviews outcome). And yes, we have ideologies too, but if we reflect on them critically and are ready to accept diversity of opinions, then I reckon we would be on the safe side.

Johanna Ennsner-Kananen

[Reply](#)


June 18, 2020 at 9:13 pm

I have two questions to the author. He argues that his research are an opportunity to “place minoritized languages on the map”, and I agree that is a benefit. Additionally, I wonder though: Which map does his (and mine) research place languages on? Aren't they the maps of a particular academic elite limited to particular geographical, linguistic, ethnic, and cultural spaces? What maps have the languages in Petteri's research already been on that many of us in Northern universities (referring eg to Finland now, feel free to add/correct me) have failed to read or acknowledge? Secondly, it seems Petteri takes issue with the phrase of “speaking truth to power”, particularly the “truth” part. (The phrase has a long history, which is easy to google, so I'm not gonna add that here.) I never understood this word to stand for “objectivity” or “absolute truth”, I don't think any activist researcher would claim to be ideology-free and in possession of absolute truth. I think what it means is to demand justice, to be confront those in power, to speak back (and not be silent) against injustices. I wonder what Petteri's stance is if he tries not to get hung up on the word “truth” here. While we agree that there is no such thing as an ideology-free space, I think we also agree that not all stances are equally valid or human? In many situations, it is possible for a researcher to see who has and who lacks power in a particular context (example from my research: refugee-background Finnish-learning SOC vs local white Finnish-speaking bus driver who makes fun of them) and while it may not always be clear cut and fixed, I wonder, under what circumstances Petteri would take a stance and become an activist? (I'm asking this in intentionally provocative ways because the current world – white supremacy, injustices made more visible by the pandemic, rise of abuse, climate crisis, etc – forces is to take sides. In the face of injustice, there is no “neutral”.)

Petteri Laihonon

[Reply](#)

June 24, 2020 at 7:07 am

Thanks Johanna for these questions, there is a difficult one and a hard one
1) The expression “place on the map” was used by one of my participants,  the expression “forgotten”. I had those moments in mind when a participant I



article in a local language was read by her and others and how they felt good that now their village was “put on the map”. I was not thinking about our academic circles here, but still doing research in unconventional regions and lesser known languages surely increases the scope of our understanding as well. All that being said, I share the concern about our maps getting smaller and smaller in many ways.

2) My research has not addressed such issues where there would be a clear cut “truth” or “power” to speak. Of course I would not suggest anybody should remain silent or “neutral” in cases such as what Johanna brings up. However I have hard time in seeing myself a researcher in such situations. Instead of speaking, which I do too much! I have tried to learn is to listen more/first, and thus to learn the different perspectives and views, especially those not my own. Speaking truth to power appears to me as there is nothing to learn or to be critical about, which are the basic motivations to do research for me. I know this does not suffice as an answer, but lets keep the conversation going!

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