Researching in Multilingual Communities

– An Act to Balance the Paradigms

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Language issues in conducting research multilingually were traditionally discussed in connection with translation theories. Back translation, for example, was often reported as effective in researching multilingually (Fink, 1963; Werner & Campbell, 1970). As the term suggests, back translation is the practice of translating a translated text back into the language of the original text, done without reference to the original text, and is primarily used as a check on the accuracy of the original translation. This positivist paradigm has recently shifted to an interpretivist perspective which recognises the practical and theoretical challenges of translation research. Because of the dynamics of the language-culture relationship and the notion of cultural untranslatability (Snell-Hornby, 2006), it is theoretically unsound to expect universal conceptual equivalences across languages and cultures at all times (Jagosh & Boudreau, 2009). Thanks to this paradigm shift, there seems to be a consensus that while the positivist approach to searching for linguistic equivalencies across languages should not be abandoned, the search should be contextualised in the broader field of language, culture, and meaning.

In the last three years, I have been engaged in a nation-wide research project entitled trilingualism in China. This project has taken me to many fascinating regions where minority groups dominate. Language issues have constantly popped up during the whole process of the research study, including designing of research tools and methods for field work, analysing data, writing up papers and disseminating research findings. Some researchers in the network in China have expressed vastly different views. Talking about the general principles, some, for example, state firmly that to research in minority dominated communities, the researcher should first of all be a (balanced) trilingual the minority home language (L1), the majority Han language (L2), and English (L3) him/herself. Otherwise, they argue subtle cues and vital information would be lost at any stage of research. Some, on the other hand, are complacent for the 'fact' that they have never experienced any problem in conducting research using only L2, the dominant language. They further argue that there is clearly an imbalance between the research that needs to be done and qualified researchers from minority background. Hence, most research in minority education has indeed been conducted by researchers who don't speak L1. As the PI of the project, however, although no rigid rules were made, I insisted at the initial stage that issues on which language to use in research, whether for questionnaire surveys, in interviews in the real world or in data analysis, should not be ignored. Decisions should be made according to clearly-defined criteria such as the degree of ethnolinguistic vitality in each context.

We have a national network of researchers spreading in nine major minority dominant regions including Xinjiang, Tibet, Yunnan, Guangxi, Qinhai, Guizhou, Gansu, the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in Jilin and the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan. How do the researchers deal with the language issues in the field? What if they do not speak the home language, L1, of the informants? What if they don't even speak their L2? How does a researcher feel when he/she speaks all the three and can move freely across the languages? This talk will address these questions by presenting the perceptions, strategies and experience of three researchers working in three regions where indigenous minority groups dominate. Researcher 1 can be said to be a (balanced) trilingual leading the research team in a Korean speech community. She is professor in TESOL and speaks L1 and L2 equally fluently. Researcher 2 is a native English speaker working in a minority region in Guizhou. He speaks Chinese reasonably well but has only a beginner's competence in L1 spoken in the region. There is, therefore, much involvement of interpreters in his research. Researcher 3 is a native Chinese speaker with strong competence in English but little knowledge of the L1 used in the region where he conducts research. Their experiences in the field seem to indicate that on many occasions pragmatic decisions are often made to balance the positivistic and interpretivist perspectives of research.

Reference List

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