

“No, this isn’t the data analysis; this is just the consent form....”

Kyra Pollitt

Gathering data from a multilingual population obviously requires additional planning and preparation of materials, but what happens when the languages involved also operate in different modalities? Further, what happens when only one of the languages has an orthographic form?

British Sign Language (BSL) is one of the United Kingdom’s native languages, yet it has no direct relationship to any form of English (for descriptions and linguistic accounts of BSL see, for example, Brennan 1991, Sutton-Spence and Woll, 1999). Furthermore BSL has no indigenous orthographic form. This is one of the factors that has contributed to a long history of the suppression of this language and the marginalisation of its users by native English speakers and their institutions, particularly those of education (see, for example, Lane 1992).

As early as 1910 George Veditz was describing sign language populations as “people of the eye” (for a more modern, in-depth exploration see Ladd, 2003). For these people the visual is the dominant cultural mode. To understand this one need only be reminded of the story of the small deaf child frustrated by repeatedly opening the front door of his home to discover no-one, whilst other family members succeed in opening it to reveal someone on the doorstep (Padden and Humphries, 1988: 21).

It is only in the 20th and 21st centuries, with the advent of increasingly available forms of recording and transmitting visual communications that sign language communities can begin to contest the dominance of written languages, particularly of written English (see Rose, 1994 for an account of the effects of technology on American Sign Language literature).

The case study at the heart of this presentation derives from an ongoing doctoral study involving both native English speakers and native users of BSL. The presentation will illustrate the experience of creating a consent form which meets the requirements of the University’s research ethics procedure, and by which the relevant sign language users could give their informed consent to participation.

This case study not only seeks to highlight good practice in this area, and acknowledge the processes involved in planning and implementing empirically-based multilingual, multi-modal research but to raise the question of whether the infrastructures of our Higher Education institutions- focussed as they are on the primacy of the written and with still entrenched suspicions of social networking technologies - are yet fully capable of understanding and supporting such multilingual, multi-modal, cross-disciplinary studies.

References

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