

Researching multilingually – thinking laterally

To look at this issue with the freshness it deserves it is important to move away from two established viewpoints – a modernist view of research in which data is considered independent of the researcher, and a modernist view of language and culture in which the former maps precisely onto the latter. A more postmodern, and critical cosmopolitan viewpoint enables a series of propositions which complicate issues of research and language and raise the healthy possibility that things may not be what they seem.

- a. In all circumstances, even where all parties share the same big ‘L’ language, there is a problematic yet enriching translation between the inevitably different discourse and world-views of the researcher and participants. Even where the data is verbatim, when the researcher writes the discussion, the data becomes integrated into this discussion, does not stand independently, and is therefore mediated by the discourse of the researcher. Sharing the same big ‘L’ language does not release the researcher from being implicated in this way.
- b. Big ‘L’ languages can themselves transmute across different cultural realities. Cultural realities can be expressed equally well in ‘foreign’ big ‘L’ languages. Cultural differences between social groups who share big ‘L’ languages can be as great as differences between big ‘L’ language groups.
- c. All researchers, in all circumstances, should strive to be multilingual in the sense that they must find methodologies to carry meanings across linguistic, discursive and cultural boundaries. Working within the same big ‘L’ languages may lead to complacency in this respect.
- d. Everyone has the potential, depending on circumstances, to carry and innovate with meaning and practice across unfamiliar cultural boundaries. To presume that participants and researchers cannot do this would be patronising and essentialist.

In the presentation, these propositions will be considered in the light of conversations with researchers and participants who have been involved in multi- and single- big ‘L’ language projects.

References

- Holliday, A. R. (2011). *Intercultural communication and ideology*. London: Sage.
Holliday, A. R. (2007). *Doing and writing qualitative research* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.