

Researching multilingually – ABSTRACT

The contribution which I might be able to make to the AHRC project series of workshops on the theme of ‘multilingual research’ derives directly from the ESRC-funded *Pragmatics and Intercultural Communication* (PIC) Project <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/projects/pic/> of which I was the initiator, principal investigator and project director between 2003 and 2006. Since that time, a number of research papers based on the project’s findings have been published. Since 2007, I have also been committed as a co-author to completing a book for *Cambridge University Press* (currently still under contract) on the methodology adopted by the project and its contribution to the field of intercultural pragmatics. Work on the book continues following my 6-month fellowship at Konstanz University from January to July 2011, during which my approach to the analysis of the PIC data shifted from a focus on cultural difference towards one based rather on contextual determinants and situational positioning. Since the analysis was based on transcripts of live interactions and post-hoc reflections and was grounded in the structure of the language used, and since each of the two types of data appertaining to the same informant was in a different language (English or French), interpreting them raises specific methodological issues which seem to me to be relevant to the objectives of the AHRC series.

The PIC project involved 71 university students who were undertaking their third year of study abroad as language teaching assistants: 37 from England and 34 from France. Its aim was to investigate the sources of misunderstanding between them and the members of staff (‘mentors’ or ‘responsables’) in the schools to which they had been allocated, initially arising out of a live interchange in which the student assistants sought information from their mentors. Their private reactions to the interchange were themselves tape-recorded immediately following the conversation and the development of their relationship with the mentors written up over the subsequent three month period. Records were also kept of two closing workshops held in each of the two host countries at which the participants reflected out loud and in writing on what they had recorded three months previously.

As noted above, the data was bi-lingual in two senses. The live interactions took place in the language of the host country (ie the student informants in virtually all cases were speaking in a foreign language), while the retrospective reflections were spoken or written in their native tongue. At the same time, any generalised cultural comparisons between the conventions governing the ‘activity types’ in the two countries naturally involved performances in two different languages. A third factor needed also to be borne in mind. The research team were all British in origin, even though at least two of them might legitimately have described themselves as bi-lingual and were deeply embedded in French culture, more or less since childhood.

The bi-linguality of the data is especially significant since the methodology focuses on the analysis of linguistic features as much as on contextual structure. Its aim is less to compare speech acts (cf Kasper and House, Trosberg etc.) or aspects of politeness (cf Leech or Watts) than to analyse the relational positioning of the interlocutors reflected in deictics and other positioning features. The fact that the retrospective data is in the native language of the informants enables the sources of misunderstanding (linguistic, personal, cultural) to be deconstructed.

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