

The Importance of Being Ethical: Language Choice for Research Matters

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As English has become the de facto lingua franca of research papers, interviews often occur using this language. However, there may be ethical implications when data collection involves non-native English speakers.

THINK magazine explores the topic with **Dr Natalie Schembri**, Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Linguistics and Language Technology, UM.





Dr Natalie Schembri, a linguist, has always been interested in language – specifically, how people use languages when participating in research for qualitative (chiefly interview-based) and quantitative (for the most part corpus-based) approaches to data collection.

English is the primary language of research publishing; this ensures an international appeal. As a result, given that research is published in English, this language is often used between interviewers and interviewees for data collection. However, for non-native speakers of English, such an environment may hinder the expression of thought.

'When you have an interview, there is a language choice for both the interviewer and the interviewee. This language choice is obviously motivated. For our recent research, we were interested to see how the choice of language happens: whether the interviewer or the interviewee proposes it. If the interview is not conducted in the native language of the interviewees, are they allowed to code-switch? These are all essential points of focus to investigate the ethical effects of language choice,' Schembri says.

Her research reflects an intriguing aspect of research. It is vital to acknowledge that if an interview is conducted in English and the interviewee's linguistic proficiency is not up to scratch, it may affect the



validity of the collected data. This can create a problem that appears during the data collection phase but is endemic to the whole research process.



Dr Natalie Schembri
Photo by James Moffett

TIME AND MONEY

'Furthermore, when research is carried out in the interviewee's first language instead of English, other problems may arise. For example, the choice of examples may lead to data deculturalisation, because less culturally-specific examples are easier to translate,' says Schembri. These and other problems related to translation of data may encourage researchers to select people who are proficient in the English language, which may lead to the exclusion of informants who may be more appropriate for the research agenda at hand. In such a scenario, the question of representativeness arises.

'Researchers have to assess each situation individually. Along this road, ethical issues emerge,' she adds. But these choices do not happen in a vacuum. Researchers are always bound by pressing constraints. The two most dominant pressures they face are time and money. Both affect data collection. On the one hand, research must be published as quickly as possible to ensure the data does not become outdated. On the other hand, as financing is often an issue, human resources are usually insufficient. As a result, it is highly likely that conducting an interview in the native language of the interviewee, transcribing the interview, and then translating that evidence into English (making sure that the translation is culturally apt) would involve ➤



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a time and human resource burden the researcher cannot afford. So what can a researcher do, then?

'I think this is where our research brings value to the community. It raises awareness of these underlying ethical issues and helps researchers approach the process with more cognisance to ensure the research is as ethical as it can be and the collected data is as representative as it can be,' Schembri says.

FAIRLY LOCAL

Schembri's research takes on an even more exciting flavour in Malta. As set in the constitution, Maltese is the native language, and English is also an official language. However, language proficiency in English, and to some extent Maltese, ranges over a wide spectrum.

'What you get is not a homogeneous phenomenon. You cannot make a generic statement about the status of Maltese and English. Their first and second language status varies a great deal. There are several factors affecting this. Geography is one – where you live on the island – as it affects the status of Maltese and English and the interplay between these two languages,' she says.

Bilingualism has many definitions. In Malta, what typically happens is that certain functions are taken

over by one language while another covers other functions. In Malta, the roles of these two languages are fluid and can vary from one individual to another.

'It is a very bilingual country we live in, as we use both languages in whatever way suits us best, depending on our upbringing and proficiency at the end of the day,' she says. In such an environment, the ethical issues of the selected language for research are even more prominent. And the role of the interviewer is even more critical.

Suppose the interview is being conducted in English and this is the language the interviewee has less proficiency in. In that case, the interviewer can always help them speak their mind with follow-up questions or encourage them to code-switch to their native language briefly to explain their ideas.

Despite these difficulties, however, researchers are doing a good job navigating such challenging terrain.

'Now, I see more awareness of ethical issues in general, so awareness must rise relating to language-based power play, too. Once there is awareness, you do not have to formulate rules. Interviewees will code-switch, and the interviewers will facilitate an environment where ethical issues are kept in check. Creating this awareness is a positive move forward – that is what we want to achieve,' she concludes. 