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# *Political and Ethical Dilemmas for Researchers in Educational Linguistics*

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## 1. Introduction: Who Says What Is Ethical?

This chapter deals with the ethical and methodological challenges of using discourse analysis in research involving language learners. The focus is on the challenges faced in analyzing narratives of adult refugees. The ethical guidelines for research have been shaped by social, cultural, historical, and political worldviews, particularly those of the global West/North. These guidelines emphasize informed consent, privacy/confidentiality, and accuracy, and oppose deception in research. However, researchers in qualitative research have long questioned the applicability of these guidelines in situated research, particularly those involving participants across linguistically, culturally, and/or ethnically diverse populations. Scholars argue that culture shapes understandings of research and ethics, and that ethics is a dialogic process.

Several common ethical issues that researchers in educational linguistics may face include power relationships, participant representation, and ethical determination. Educational linguistics also invites ethical questions related to language, particularly when researching communities with differing language proficiencies. These issues include selecting the appropriate language for data collection and analysis, including participants, using translators, and recognizing and accounting for differences in meaning.

## 2. The Macro-Microethics Continuum

Researchers in educational linguistics can address ethical issues by distinguishing between codified ethical rules and ethical decisions made during research. Scholars like Guillemin and Gillam distinguish between macroethics and microethics, which refer to the ethically important moments in conducting research. Kubanyiova (2008) draws on Haverkamp's distinction between virtue ethics, the researcher's ability to discern ethically important situations, and ethics of care, which recognize the relational character of research. Decision-making in situated research requires a careful balance between macroethical principles, ethics of care, and virtue ethics. Microethics suggests that the researcher, in consultation with participants, determines ethical behavior based on the context of the research. A researcher's ethical competence and reflexivity are crucial, involving the researcher's willingness to acknowledge the ethical dimension of research practice and think through ethical issues appropriately. Recognizing the culturally situated nature of research and ethics is crucial, as researchers need to engage in culturally reflexive inquiry, which is predicated on cultural competence. Matters of microethics and macroethics are complex in research on the culturally saturated site of discourse.

## 3. What Counts as Discourse

Discourse definitions are crucial for research ethics and methodologies. They vary within and across fields, making it difficult to blindly apply concepts across disciplinary boundaries. An exchange between Corcorran and Potter in discursive psychology literature highlights the focus on what discourse does rather than what it means. Different epistemological approaches to discourse shape research approaches, making it essential to consider both its purpose and meaning.

**4. Who Says What Discourse Means**

Discourse can be studied for the objects, ideas, events, and more that it describes, as a system through which meaning is communicated. Gee's theory distinguishes Discourse and discourse, though both are inextricably linked. Big "D" Discourse is defined as behavior, values, ways of thinking, clothes, food, customs, perspectives; that is to say, big "D" Discourse encompasses the ways of being in the world to achieve a certain meaning or identity. Little "d" discourse, termed language-in-use, is the specific linguistic bits one uses in attempts to construct that intended meaning or identity. Both can be analyzed for meaning. Meaning is a primary consideration in educational linguistic research; as a result, researchers must consider ethical issues in relation to meaning and who determines it. Research involving linguistically diverse communities represents a challenge, because language and culture—and accompanying meanings— Decisions about translators may also present ethical dilemmas, as meanings may not necessarily be shared. Cultural congruence between research participants and the selected interpreters is important for accurately translating and interpreting social cultural patterns as well as language. However, cultural congruence will not solve all dilemmas related to meaning. Janusch explained that her Chinese interpreters had to translate complex concepts in addition to words, which there was perhaps no direct translation across the two cultures.

## 5. Who Says What Discourse Is Doing

Discourse can be studied for its performative quality and how descriptions of the world are built and maintained as fact. Understanding discourse involves focusing on its performative quality rather than using it as a simple pathway to events and objects in the world. Through discourse, understandings and positions are established, invoked, challenged, masked, and disregarded, shaping the world in turn. Big "D" discourse allows one to enact a certain cultural identity, while little "d" discourse, or language markers in use, are involved in pulling off this specific way of being. Determining what discourse is doing in a particular data sample may present similar ethical and methodological challenges as determining what that data sample means. If the meaning of a given discourse is contested, understanding what that discourse is doing may be even more problematic, particularly to a linguistic or cultural outsider. The consideration of silence in discourse represents one methodological and ethical challenge that linguistic researchers may face in working with language learners.

Silence as an absent presence is also complex in discourse analysis for what it does. So often the topic of silence with learners of other languages is that the people are silenced (i.e., stifled in their opportunity to use their voice, marginalized), but silence within discourse can also be seen as an agentive action, as in people using silence strategically or even unconsciously. Mazzei offered a methodology to discursively analyze silences, which was a project to "challenge the limits of spoken words in search of that which was unspoken" among teachers who were "research subjects" but not passive participants to which a barrage of one-way questions was directed.

In a research project in which participants are co-researchers, how does one ethically engage in the task of exploring the silences that structure their interactions? When a silence might be that which the speaker is unready to investigate or acknowledge, who gets to choose the silences that are worthy and safe (or unsafe) to examine in an ethical manner so as not prompt harmful conditions? The complexities are exacerbated when a language learner is engaging in a mutual research process.

## 6. Whose Data Is It

Qualitative researchers often face an ethical dilemma regarding data ownership in their studies. This issue is present throughout the research design, data collection, analysis, and presentations. Critics question the ethics of decisions, designs, questions, and interpretations of participants' voices. Recognizing the inherent power dynamic in these choices can lead researchers to think more reflexively about the research and the data.

Depending on the research design and the researcher's epistemological and ethical perspectives, decisions about the research may (a) be made entirely by the researcher, with little (if any) consultation of participants, (b) be completely shared with participants, or (c) fall somewhere between. Similarly, data may be perceived to be owned by the researcher, owned by the participants, or jointly shared.

In computer-mediated communication (CMC) studies, power relationships can be hierarchical, with researchers holding all or most of the power. This results in data being perceived as belonging entirely to the researcher. Conversely, in less hierarchical studies, participants may be involved in the entire research process, from asking research questions to developing the research design. This leads to data and findings being perceived as co-owned between participants and researchers or as belonging entirely to participants.

## 7. Who Decides How People Are Represented

As mentioned previously , power considerations in educational linguistics include the ways in which individuals—both participants and researchers—are present and represented in research. Dona suggested that "representation can refer to 'speaking of '—constructing accounts and writing texts—or it can mean 'speaking for' advocating and mediating" . Ethical issues in this category may be related to: (a) how researchers conceptualize the nature of the researched community, including the researcher's own relationship to the researched community, (b) how vulnerability is perceived, and (c) how the researched community is described in research representations.

## 8. What Is the Researcher's Relationship to the Researched

Dona's research on refugees identifies four ways of representing individuals in research: as objects, subjects, social actors, and participants and co-researchers. These perspectives are connected to larger debates about a researcher's status as an "insider" or "outsider" in the researched community. These debates typically focus on whether an "outsider" can truly understand the research context and the community or whether an "insider" can distance herself enough for data and findings to be considered valid.

Recent scholarship questions this debate, suggesting that it rely on static notions of culture and Eurocentric thinking. This dualistic thinking may not be helpful when considering a researcher's potential relationship with the community as a continuum, where various research participants may view the researcher in different ways. For example, in Perry's research with Sudanese refugees, participants often introduced her by referencing her two years of living in southern Africa. Participants treated her as neither a full member of the Sudanese community nor a full outsider; rather, they appeared to view her relationship with them as somewhere in between.

## 9. Who Determines Vulnerability

Researchers' perspectives on participants' vulnerability in research can significantly impact their decision-making process. Macroethical principles typically categorize entire groups, such as pregnant women, children, or non-native speakers of English, as vulnerable. This can lead to institutional review boards (IRBs) holding the power to determine vulnerability based on a priori categories and require researchers to put additional safeguards in place for those individuals. In some cases, university IRBs may even restrict research, requiring language proficiency assessments for potential participants or the use of institutionally approved translators in the informed consent and data collection processes.

mitigated, and the ways in which dilemmas emerging from "ethically important moments" will be the language in which data are gathered. Interviewing participants in a second language, in which they may feel less competent or less able to express their ideas clearly, may increase vulnerability. Garcia and Trillo found that the personal function of discourse, meaning Halliday's categorization on discourse related to the thinking, feeling, perceiving of our personal world, was the most common language function for both sets of five-year-olds.

Leaders in discourse analysis have examined naming others with pronouns, which insert people into speech and opens opportunity to position those people. Yates and Hiles demonstrated the inconsistencies in using pronouns to talk about one's actions and the position one holds in self-described social worlds. Pronouns are among the function words that show how the individual or thing fits into the communication and the constructed world from which the communication stems and help researchers make informed analyses about how a participant sees the world and the participant's place in it.