Interpreting the Data: Reflections on ASL-English Cross Language Research

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Abstract

Cross language research typically ignores the role the translator and translation play in the research process. This paper adds to the literature by examining some of the challenges experienced during the translation and interpretation aspect of research. This autoethnography explores the positionality of a non-native user of American Sign Language who conducted research with native American Sign Language users. Findings indicate that translation and interpretation in research is not simply a matter of rote process and deserves more attention as an integral aspect of cross-language research.

Keywords

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Reflections on ASL-English Cross Language Research

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Cross language research typically ignores the role the translator and translation play in the research process. This paper adds to the literature by examining some of the challenges experienced during the translation and interpretation aspect of research. This autoethnography explores the positionality of a non-native user of American Sign Language who conducted research with native American Sign Language users. Findings indicate that translation and interpretation in research is not simply a matter of rote process and deserves more attention as an integral aspect of cross-language research. Keywords: Deaf, Bilingual Research, Cross Language Research, Interpreter, Translator, Sign Language, Interpreting, Autoethnography

Translation and interpretation play a significant role in cross-language research, research that is conducted with participants who use one language (e.g., Spanish) and then presented to the research world in another language (e.g., English). However, within this body of research, the interpretation and translation processes are often treated simplistically, as a technical process, or as a matter of form, or ignored entirely (Temple & Young, 2004). While other researchers have investigated the unique positionality of the bilingual researcher (e.g., Temple, 2002, 2006; Shklarov, 2007), this research usually assumes that the researcher/interpreter is more of an insider. This type of research has rarely been conducted with among the Deaf Community (see Obasi, 2014; Stone & West, 2012).

This autoethnography challenges and rejects the tendency to oversimplify the translation process in cross-language research by examining the positionality and reflexivity of a bilingual American Sign Language (ASL) to English interpreter during a study with Deaf individuals. Reflexivity is an important and accepted part of qualitative inquiry and requires that the researcher critically examine his or her self in the context of society and the research (Acker-Verney, 2016; Creswell, 2009; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003; May, 2002). Positionality in research is important because the researchers' background and life experiences influence what she or he observes and analyzes (Ahmed et al., 2011; Berger, 2015; Carter et al., 2014; Cormier, 2018; May, 2002). The interpreter's background and experiences also influence his or her interpretation.

The Deaf community in United States and Canada consider themselves a cultural and linguistic minority, rather than as persons with disabilities. This is due to their shared history and experience and because of their common values with each other. While their linguistic needs often lead to them being characterized as "disabled" by the world at large, members of the Deaf community reject this deficit thinking. The Deaf community functions as a culture because those within it have a common set of shared experiences (Padden & Humphries, 1988; Ladd, 2003). This community consists primarily of those deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals who share "a common language, common experiences and values, and a common way of interacting with each other, and with hearing people" (Ladd, 2003, p. 41). Deaf people find a positive self-identity by "re-framing...the disadvantage they experience; the disadvantage results from the negative attitudes of a hearing society which fails to communicate effectively

with deaf people in either sign or spoken language" (Atkin et al., 2002, p. 23). Individuals who learn ASL later in life, and especially sign language interpreters, are an important aspect of the Deaf community. Despite their frequent utilization by those in the Deaf community, ASL interpreters are not automatically considered insiders or members of the Deaf community because of their position as members of the majority (hearing, non-Deaf) culture. In this study, I outline some challenges encountered as an ASL interpreter while conducting qualitative research with Deaf participants from a positivist framework, provide a rationale for the resolutions I chose, and discuss how the implications from this research process extend to other facets of cross-language research as well as future research with Deaf participants.

Review of the Literature

As suggested above, the role of researcher reflexivity is an important one in qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba describe researcher reflexivity as "the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, the *human as instrument*" (2000, p. 183). This type of reflection allows the reader to understand why I came to the conclusions s/he did, and allows for an explanation of the individual researcher's values and expectations, and of how these values and expectations influence the conduct and conclusions of the study (Merriam, 2009).

Many times, the interpretation process in cross language research is viewed simplistically, as just another aspect of data collection. When the interpretation process is analyzed within the research framework, the literature most often looks at problems that arise from the process interpretation in cross-language research and the related issues of how to increase objectivity (e.g., Ballantyne et al., 2013; Chidlow et al., 2014; Esposito, 2001; Santos et al., 2015; Squires, 2009). These studies typically do not explore the cultural positionality of the interpreter; the interpreter's positionality as insider or outsider of the culture under consideration is not a factor.

A smaller body of research focusing on bilingual researchers exists (see Cormier, 2018; Temple, 2006; Temple, 2008). This smaller body of literature assumes that the investigator is a member of the culture being investigated. As a member of the culture, paternalistic attitudes can be avoided due to a deeper cultural understanding. However, this is not always so for ASL bilinguals and especially interpreters who are often not members of Deaf culture. This research addresses the gap in literature regarding cross language research with Deaf participants.

Reflexivity, Positionality, and Researcher Role

I initiated this research from a positivist perspective, viewing myself as an objective instrument of the research. Sign language interpreters receive very explicit training about simply being the voice of the deaf person. We are taught not to speak for the deaf person, rather to act only as the conduit so the voice and opinion of the deaf client can be expressed. Qualitative researchers, of course, understand the complexity of this task. A researcher's experiences and background always affect how s/he perceives and interprets information. With that in mind, I was transparent with participants about my background and my reasons for wanting to pursue research in this area.

My deaf education background and my role as a sign language interpreter place me in a unique position in the deaf community. As a person who is not Deaf, I must be careful to respect their knowledge and culture, and not adopt a "hearing people know best" attitude. While my own identity as a woman of color allows me to understand and empathize with the struggle of the Deaf community, hearing loss is not something I have experienced myself. Therefore, I will never completely understand their experiences, and should not presume I can.

Method

Qualitative Research

Because this study explored certain aspects of the experiences of deaf students in community college, qualitative techniques were appropriate. Qualitative research allows participants to explain the world around them and their view of themselves in it (Merriam, 2009). Creswell (2009) indicates the human experience is an essential aspect of phenomenology and allows for these experiences to be described by the participants. The Deaf community contains great diversity, and Deaf students have a unique perspective on their hearing loss and the culture resulting from the use of sign language (Ladd, 2003; Padden & Humphries, 1988). This investigation examined the meaning of the deaf experience at a community college from the student perspective. Using qualitative interviews allowed students to express themselves in the language they feel comfortable with and cherish and helped to ensure their responses truly reflected what they were feeling. A methodological approach that provided students with an outlet to express their viewpoints of the environment around them is in line with the goal of qualitative research (Creswell, 2009). Conducting this kind of research allowed me to understand how deaf people have made sense of their world and experience (Merriam, 2009).

Study Site and Sample

The findings from this research were part of a larger qualitative research study with institutional IRB approval on the experience of 19 d/Deaf students in community college which took place in a large, urban, southwestern community college district. Participation criteria included self-identifying as Deaf and was not limited to a particular communication modality. Interviews were conducted in American Sign Language, video recorded, and then translated into English and transcribed.

Findings

The Pilot Study

Some of the challenges associated with conducting qualitative research from a positivist perspective immediately made themselves manifest. In order to attempt to gain objectivity, I piloted the study using outside translators for data collection via Video Relay Services (VRS). VRS is a federally mandated service that allows Deaf and hard of hearing individuals to access the telephone system. When a person who is not deaf calls a deaf person's phone number, it connects to a centralized bank of interpreters. The Interpreter then connects with the Deaf consumer via a video screen and conveys the information from the person who is not deaf into sign language, and the signed conversation from the Deaf person into English. However, I quickly found this method was not as effective as I wanted. Many qualitative researchers find face to face interviews more effective than over the phone, and research with the Deaf community is no different. In fact, face to face communication is even more highly valued in the Deaf community, as it aids in being able to connect with people. Deaf people call themselves "the people of the eye" as the need for visual communication is so great. Eye contact is especially highly prized among Deaf and hard of hearing individuals, as it conveys respect and attention to the person with whom you are conversing. Face to face communication also helps the Deaf person assess your signing fluency, and thereby your connection to the Deaf community. The more fluid the signer, presumably the more s/he is involved with the

Deaf community and can be trusted. Asking questions about the Deaf experience in college (without utilizing two hallmarks of Deaf culture: visual communication and eye contact) did not yield rich interviews. Participants responded to questions briefly, without elaborating. The interviews seemed stilted. Therefore, the study methodology changed to face to face communication.

With this change to the research process, I wrestled with the idea of serving as both principal investigator and interpreter. As described above, American Sign Language interpreters receive explicit training regarding conflict of interest and neutrality in interpreting situations. I was concerned about my ability to remain neutral in the translation when I was so intimately familiar with the aims of the research. This is partially because research methods have historically come from a positivist framework, in which objectivity and truth are paramount. However, other researchers (e.g., Berman & Tyyskä, 2011; Bradby, 2002) have utilized postpositivist research methods and indicated that such familiarity is a benefit to the research process.

Challenges Related to Insider/Outsider Continuum

Another challenge to objective and positivist aspect of the data collection was the prominent role interpreters played in the participants' responses. This was of special interest for two reasons. First, I knew some of the participants interviewed. At the time, I was contracted to work with the community college district the participants attended as a sign language interpreter. For example, when asked what they would change about their community college experience, one of the participants said, "We need more interpreters, and better-quality interpreters." At the time I had served as an interpreter on that campus. My position as an interpreter might have influenced what they chose to share or how much they chose to share with me about their college experience, especially regarding the quality of the interpreters provided to them by the community college.

It is possible that some of their answers regarding their experiences with interpreters were not as forthcoming because they knew I served in that capacity as well. Interpreters serve a unique role in the Deaf community as simultaneous insiders and outsiders (Obasi, 2014). This is because while they have intimate knowledge and frequent contact with Deaf and hard of hearing individuals, they have never been Deaf and therefore cannot fully understand the lived experiences of this minority group.

Another challenge in conducting this research was the translation process itself. In addition to concerns regarding translation accuracy and translation bias, the very act of translating into English served as an act of privilege, especially because English is the preferred language of the majority culture (Anderson et al., 2018; Cormier, 2018). My background helped me understand the power imbalance and sociopolitical issues. During the coding process I struggled because while ASL is as linguistically complex as any spoken language, it has no written form. Translating it into written English rendered the ASL "invisible" for publishing mainstream research. This in itself is problematic on some level because within the Deaf community individuals have experienced denial of the language, oppression and social control in an effort to encourage Deaf individuals to utilize spoken language instead (Temple & Young, 2004). Since my goal with the research was to shine a spotlight on the Deaf experience, I struggled with the idea that I was erasing the language that is so cherished within and representative of their culture.

Chosen Resolutions to Challenges

One way to mitigate the challenges presented with this type of research were member checks. This is partly because populations with exceptionalities, including Deaf individuals, have a long history of being researched *on* rather than being an active part of the research process. In addition, ASL interpreters hold a position of power since they so often serve as the intermediary between the Deaf world and those who are not Deaf. Since the Deaf community is collectivist in nature, the participation from those in the culture is a critical aspect. I contacted two Deaf Interpreters, native or near native ASL language users who are Deaf themselves and who have received specialized training in both ASL and the interpreting process. These individuals reviewed a portion of the videos and subsequent transcripts to ensure accuracy of the findings. While it may seem that doing so might jeopardize the anonymity of the participants, it is important to understand that these Deaf Language Experts are bound to a code of ethics that prohibit the sharing of participants' identities.

Discussion

Sign language interpreters are not automatically perceived as members of Deaf culture. Therefore, interpreters who are researchers should be mindful of their own biases and positionality when conducting research. Because they are members of the majority hearing culture, interpreters effectively serve as the gateway for many of Deaf people's interactions with the world at large. As the translator for this research project, I became the voice of the Deaf participant. I then extrapolated meaning from the interviews by "interpreting" the data as the principal investigator of the research project. Holding such a position requires a thorough examination of my power and position in society in general and specifically within the Deaf community. As an interpreter, I need to actively analyze how my background and experiences will influence my interpretation. Additionally, understanding my privilege is an important aspect of serving within the Deaf community and accurately conveying the message presented by the Deaf students and their instructor. The process of conducting this research caused me to examine my place of privilege in ways I had not done previously. The categories in which I choose to identify myself typically indicate that I occupy a minoritized position in society. However, vis-à-vis individuals in the Deaf community I occupy a place of privilege since I am not Deaf and serve as the communication access point between those with knowledge of American Sign Language and those without that knowledge.

Implications

The findings from this research study have implications for cross language researchers in general, and research with Deaf participants in general. First, interpreters in general and ASL interpreters in particular are trained to analyze themselves and the interpreting situation to ensure neutrality and effective communication. This analysis and self-reflection are important for bilingual researchers of other languages as well. An individual who knows two languages is not always skilled at interpreting between the two. Conversing and interpreting are separate skill sets and ability with the former does not guarantee skill with the latter. Cross-language researchers should be critically reflective of both their language and translation skills as ASL interpreters are taught to be.

As mentioned previously, the involvement of the Deaf community remains a critical aspect in research with the community. The mantra "nothing about us without us" resonates deeply with Deaf community members. According to individuals within the Deaf community involving Deaf participants not only strengthens the validity of the research findings, doing so

serves as a sign of respect to members (Anderson et al., 2018). In research with Deaf participants in particular, investigators need to be especially culturally sensitive, reflexive, and critical of their positionality (Temple & Young, 2004). Bilingual researchers are typically members of the culture in which they conduct the research (e.g., Temple, 2002; Shklarov, 2007). That is not usually true in research conducted with Deaf participants. Because of this, interpreters are sometimes viewed as outsiders since they have a different lens and set of experiences than Deaf people. Interpreters may unintentionally commit social faux pas or otherwise behave in a culturally inappropriate manner. This can affect the rapport with participants and influence what information they choose to share with the investigator. This further underscores the need for participation from members of the culture in the research process. The field of cross language research provides the groundwork to examine implications for the unique positioning of ASL-English bilingual individuals. This study outlined some of the challenges and solutions encountered during qualitative research with Deaf and hard of hearing individuals. Further research might examine the process from the perspective of Deaf participants. Gaining the Deaf community's insight on the interpreter's role in the research process could enhance research projects with the population for many future generations.

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