CONSTRUCTING THE PICTURE OF CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC REALITY: AN OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH METHODS IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS

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Resumen

Este texto analiza varios métodos de investigación que pueden permitir a los y las investigadoras la recogida y posterior análisis de datos lingüísticos o culturales de la vida real, esto es, se ponen de manifiesto las metodologías empleadas por la autora, tanto el cuestionario utilizado como un estudio de asociación libre o el propio enfoque narrativo. Esto le permite comentar la pertinencia y eficacia de un método concreto. No es posible ofrecer aquí una lista exhaustiva, sino que se hace una reflexión de las herramientas de trabajo y procedimientos existentes, que la autora considera opciones viables en la investigación cultural y en la lingüística aplicada, poniendo en cuarentena una gran cantidad de datos de análisis.

Palabras clave: Metodología, investigación, revisión, lingüística aplicada, estudios culturales.

Abstract

This writing will discuss selected research methods which may enable a researcher gathering and later analyzing real life language/cultural data. In detail, the methodologies that the present author has employed in her research will be presented, i.e. a questionnaire, a free association study or the narrative approach. This is so as that enables her adding some comments on the suitability and efficacy of a particular method. By the same token, this work cannot offer a complete list. Rather it should be treated as a subjective review of the available tools and procedures which the present author considers viable options in cultural and applied linguistic research, quarantining a rich pool of data to be analyzed.

Keywords: Methodology, research, review, applied linguistics, cultural studies.

Artículo

The main goal of this paper is to systematize information on research methodologies that enable investigating ever changing experience of language users in culturally conditioned milieu. At the same time, this writing will discuss selected research methods which may enable a researcher gathering and later analyzing real life language/cultural data. Also the methodologies that the present author has employed in her research will be presented, as that enables her adding some comments on the suitability and efficacy of a particular method. By the same token, this work cannot offer a complete list. Rather it should be treated as a subjective review of the available tools and procedures, which proved effective in linguistic research conducted with a view to capturing a not idealized picture of language use or cultural practices.

1. QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

Most of quantitatively oriented research pursues to capture tendencies, characteristics, or patterns that could be found across larger populations. Opponents of the quantitative orientation mention that to study individuallinguistic or culturally determined behavior with tools offered by this methodology would mostly be invalid. However, it does not mean that researchers should lay aside quantitative methods. Quite the contrary, for example contemporary studies clearly show that human behavior is individual in character but always requires socially "distributed cognition" (Wolf, Polzenhagen, 2006: 290) or "distributed representation" (Scharifian, 2003: 187) in order to be efficient and illuminating. This goes in line with cognitive sociolinguistic research results of Kristiansen (2003), which highlight the influence of social, cultural and linguistic stereotyping, including group-specific conceptualizations and underlying cultural value-systems, on interaction. To study such phenomena, randomly sampled quantitative research is the only viable alternative.

An example of quantitative research aiming at studying culturally or socially distributed trends could be a questionnaire study conducted by the present author (Szczepaniak-Kozak, 2012a). The questionnaire was conducted by a trained coder in Kiel, a German city at the Baltic Sea, in July 2010. The sample group included 52 German persons, 34 women and 18 men. Most of them were students at the age range 20-27 years. The questionnaire itself, written in the German language, included 24 statements with five item Likert scale accompanying each of them.

The aim of the study was to find out whether there are some discernable differences between cultural traits represented by older and younger Germans. That was a result of the author's pilot interview study that indicated that German society undergoes a major shift in terms of widely accepted values of formality, time orientation and even time-honored compartmentalization (work/leisure time division). The starting point of the research was that while elder German generations have been deeply analyzed in the field literature taking into account anthropological,

economical and historical perspectives (Hofstede, Trompenaars, Schmidt, Gajews-ka-De Mattos *et al.*), contemporary young Germans lack a sufficient portrayal. Hence, the present author's aim was to fill in this gap at least to some extent. In practice this was done by gauging standpoints of contemporary German students and broadly commenting on them in relation to Hofstede's typology of cultures. In detail, their responses to statements inspired by Hofstede's typology were juxta-posed with the available in Hofstede's publications German scores on the selected dimensions included in his typology.

The following conclusions about the emerging trends among young studying Germans were drawn by the present author. The surveyed group showed the tradi-tional in German society preference for medium power distance as in most cases their reactions were in line with the expected. However, young Germans appeared to wish for more direct communication at workplace. The participating German students also were found to share individualistic tendencies of the elder German generation, which could be noticed in their absolute acceptance of speaking one's mind and employment/promotion based on one's personal, objective achievements. The gathered answers also supported the implication that the contemporary gen-eration of the studying in Germany could be labeled less masculine than the elder German generations. This is so as the young declared a very high support for gen-der equality at labor market, e.g. getting rid of the traditional division into gendered jobs, but putting women in prominent positions. The surveyed also acquiesced to less traditionally manly behavior of boys or men when it comes to expressing their feelings openly. Finally, the responses showed that German youth appeared to be more accepting when it comes to teachers' ignorance and lack of precision or punctuality. At the same time they share with their fathers and grandfathers the appreciation of written rules and procedures securing smooth work progress. That study also revealed a great acceptance of uncertainty as a normal element of life among the surveyed, which would be very untypical of Germans, who are considered to go to great lengths in order to avert the unexpected, e.g. by tight planning and sticking to schedules.

All in all, also the investigation presented above proved that the greatest chal-lenge of quantitative study is always how to break abstract notions, like competence, success, cultural trait, into measurable subcomponents and what scales to apply to convert notions into numbers. However, the great number of recognized research projects proves that when conducted expertly, e.g. following the tight principles of participant sampling and data collection, the undertaking can bring very insight-ful, reliable and valid results.

2. FREE ASSOCIATION METHOD

Before qualitative research methods are presented, some less frequently used but worth promoting tool is going to be discussed, i.e. the free association method. This method could be considered quantitative by nature but the interpretation of the data gathered with it requires mostly qualitative analysis.

Osgood and Sebeok, the pioneers in the field of psycholinguistics, were the first to apply the freeassociation method to investigate communication. Throughout the fifties to the seventies of the twentieth century research on linguistic data collected in free association tests was considerably popular. Using this method for studies of language was often justified on the grounds of the principle of contiguity. This theory assumes that phenomena that humans experience in the company of other phenomena are stored in our brain as connected. Consequently, when we think about one out of the connected phenomena, the remaining ones will most probably occur to us (Wettler, Rapp, IS 1).

Apart from the principle of contiguity, the conclusions from longitudinal studies on the norms for associative processes conducted by Nelson, McEvoy and Schreiber (2005) prove the soundness and reliability of the methodology when applied to cultural studies. The researchers namely put forward that human brain stores words not as separate units but as units linked within a constantly evolving associative network. Associations between words which are disclosed in free association tests are based on a matrix which is a store accumulated and worked out as a consequence of one's experience and learning (Nelson, McEvoy, Schreiber, 2005: 4). In other words, word relations are not inherited but acquired and learnt via enculturation.

Although the above mentioned researchers' main research goal was to study the encoding, storage and retrieval processes of human brain, indirectly they proved that free association tests can be successfully applied to cultural studies. In their paper "Association, Rhyme and Word Fragment Norms" the researchers write that at one stage of their study they discovered that the British researchers Kiss, Armstrong and Milroy conducted similar tests. When the American and British test results were compared, it appeared that there were considerable differences between these two cultures, which came as a surprise as these ethnic cultures are considered typologically close. For example, a typical association to *apple* in British tests was *tree* and *apple pie*, whereas in Florida where this tree is a rare occurrence, the fruit word invoked the colors *red* and *orange* (Nelson, McEvoy, Schreiber, 2005: 5-6).Although the researchers explained these particular disparities in the obtained results on the grounds on the geographical conditions, they also put forward that this is not so with all of them. They inclined towards saying that during the enculturation process, humans acquire values, rituals, behavioural patterns which are characteristic of one's environment and differences in one's cognition are seldom conditioned by the geographic position itself.

As the present author's main field of scientific research is intercultural communication, it will be presented why this methodology is believed to be useful for intercultural research and how this method has been taken advantage of in so oriented studies.

Szalay's (in Klopf, 1996: 127) early research with the use of free association tests can serve as a good example of the methodology. He studied culturally conditioned schemata of thinking and nonverbal communication on the basis of data

gathered from Korean, Columbian and American students. He successfully used the linguistic evidence collected in this way for supporting his hypothesis that cultural differences between the represented ethnic groups do exist.

When we assume that acquisition and learning are the processes which influence one's store of word associations, we can very easily explain why associative tests can be applied to studies of culture, culture awareness, and culturally determined communication. Because culture is the complex whole which humans acquire due to the processes of socialization with their family members and then with other people met at school, workplace and other spheres of human activities, the acquired system of meanings and practices will be stored in the matrix, which can be at least partially revealed in word associations. Naturally this can happen only when the word stimuli are appropriately selected.

Free association tests also constitute a means of discovering stereotypes that are common among a particular communication community and which are culturally conditioned. Furthermore, such tests may reveal associations conditioned by sociocultural differences between people or groups. They can help the researcher understand how communication settings, including advertising or other mass media content, or popular culture may influence one's worldviews, diminish one's capability to think critically or to oppose deeply rooted stereotypes.

Free association tests are very easy to conduct and offer a rich pool of data to analyse. However, they have not been very popular among linguistic scholars as interpretation of the gathered data is very challenging. Furthermore, researchers may face difficulties with creating lists of stimuli that could evoke linguistic data relevant to a particular phenomenon studied. It should also be mentioned that because researchers use different word lists, comparing the research results becomes arduous. Some remedy for that could be using some commonly known lists of stimuli, e.g. one compiled already in 1910 by Kent and Rosanoff. Since then it has been used to gather associations from not only English speaking people. It has been translated into many languages and used with speakers of other languages as well.

As Postman and Keppel (1970) proved, associations to the stimuli listed in Kent and Rosanoff's list are substantially common among adult users of particular languages, which enables comparing test results from different countries, regions or ethnic groups. In fact, Postman and Keppel's (1970) work collects examples of so oriented research conducted by linguists working with non-English data as well, among them data from the Polish language. In more modern times similar studies were conducted by Korshuk (2005), Kurcz (1976), Łobacz i Mikołajczak-Matyja (2002), Szczepaniak-Kozak (2007).

3. QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGIES IN CULTURAL AND INTERCULTURAL STUDIES

Research that can be considered qualitative in nature has been conducted for more than a century, initially in social sciences and anthropology, for example works

of Boas or Malinowski. Its continuators were researchers representing the school of British contextualism, i.e. Firth, Halliday. Also American ethnography started by Hymes sparked off an increased interest in analyzing language and text in the context of culture and regarding communicative patterns as a part of cultural knowledge and behavior. However, the first text that tried to define 'qualitative methodology' was the seminal work of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, published in 1967, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Dörnyei, 2007: 36).

Researchers doing qualitative study often conduct interviews in order to "obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena (Kvale, 1996: 5-6; after Dörnyei, 2007: 134). Much attention in this research is paid to objectivity, and an unbiased, neutral formulation of questions, so that to obtain uncontaminated, unadulterated facts and details (Holstein, Gubrium, 1995: 8).

Interviews differ in their format (e.g. one or more sessions with the same interviewee) and structure (structured, semi-structured and unstructured/ethnographic interviews). For some researchers this division seemsvery orthodox or superficial. Instead, for example, Holstein and Gubrium (1995: 8) oppose treating respondents as passive agents and consider interviews "interpretatively active, implicating meaning-making practices on both interviewers and respondents." In this view, all interview data are unavoidably collaborative, reality-constructing, meaning-making occasions, whether recognized or not. In a similar vein, Fontana and Frey (2005: 696; after Dörnyei, 2007: 141) see interviewing as something more than a series of questions and answers. They recommend assuming an empathetic stance, allowing the interviewee to express his or her judgments, opinions or even approval as this may result in obtaining honest, and frequently also co-constructed meanings.

This would be actually the interpretation this particular paper assumes. The present author is namely convinced that indeed humans are not repositories of facts or information. Instead most of what is learnt or experienced is stored wrapped with subjective interpretation, record of emotions which accompany a particular event and some afterthoughts, reconsiderations also gathered in interactions with others. To gain insight into the totality of this phenomenon, a more empathetic approach is necessary when interviewing. This can be achieved for example by incorporating elements of the narrative approach, presented in the following section.

4. THE NARRATIVE APPROACH AS A RESEARCH METHOD

The narrative approach, sometimes also called life story or narrative interview,is a useful method for documenting to oneself and to others, not only facts and happenings that may be significant for the phenomena studied but also their sense and meaning.

Generally, this research orientation can be defined as "a spoken or written text giving an account of a series of events occurring over time and integrated into a plot" (Gersten, Søderberg, 2010: 247). Most narratives would fit into the continuum

between a story told by a person without any interruptions on the side of the interviewer and an exchange of questions and responses constructing the account of the occurring events. As Bochner (1994: 29) suggests, storytelling enables researchers "analyzing processes of reality construction" (Lyndolf, 1995: 172).

We could trace back the narrative approach to studying communication to ideas of Garfinkel (1967), i.e. the originator of the ethnomethodological approach to studying societies, especially to his explanation of how people make sense of and bring order to their social world through the documentary method. Garfinkel was very distrustful of quantitative research methods, recommending paying a special attention to analyzing people's accounts. He was concerned with the subjective nature of human experience, including communication with language defined as a tool for interpreting and clarifying social interactions. Continuators of Garfinkel's theory, e.g. Zimmerman, Poller and Wieder, were concerned with how members of society see, describe, and explain social or cultural behavior. All in all, ethnomethodological research contributed greatly to understanding what methods common people employ to make sense of the surrounding world, and socio-cultural interactions.

The narrative approach has its roots also in ethnographic life histories, in use already in the early years of the last century, e.g. the early classic of Polish and American sociology by Thomas and Znaniecki's (1927) *The Polish peasant in Europe and America*. In the late 20th it could be observed that the narrative approach was successfully used by historians, psychologists, psychiatrics, anthropologists, sociologists and business studies scholars to gain insight into an individual experience of a person with a frequent accompanying end goal "to transform negative stories of their troubles into stories pointing to alternative possibilities of interpretation and action" (Gersten, Søderberg, 2010: 249). Finally, the contemporary revival of this empirical technique within communication and linguistic studies can be traced back to the concepts of creative interviewing by Douglas (1985) and of active interviewing put forward by Holstein and Gubrium (1995).

The narrative approach is based on the idea of a person telling her entire life story or a story about some selected period or event, together with the feelings and interpretations attached to it. Also the life narrative approach is based on the concept that the events and emotions narrated must be understood from the perspective of the person who accounts it. The act itself may also be a "motivation and opportunity of self-recognition" (Klein, 2007: 75). Life story or narrative as an act of sharing one's experience with others involves "mental activities such as intro- and retrospection,[…] provoking balances of the past and the present, educating, developing unusual modes of thinking, and overcoming fears and shyness to relate life-stories about oneself" (Klein, *ibidem*). Hence, for the narrator it may serve educational, cognitive and even sometimes therapeutic purposes. The act of narration on frequent occasions also constitutes an opportunity to understand one's cultural identity in the process of self- or co-construction. As aptly captured by Gersten and Søderberg,

aspects to focus on would include attempts at pinpointing the narrator's own identity constructions and shifts in these as well as his/her images of other cultures. Here, narratological analysis is able to throw some light on cultural identifications, alliances, and oppositions in the stories told by expatriates. (2010: 250)

To the hearer-researcher the narrative approach enables gaining insight into a very individual experience and its interpretation, and also understanding paths to constructing personal meaning and sense. This gives rise to obtaining an individual culture profile, a very demanded perspective in current research where the person and not nation is the target.

Narrative is also a valuable research method as it enables capturing individual differences in cognition and interpretation. That is, although speakers may draw on the same conventions, they will use them variably to project different social identities, even within the same general social role, as they struggle to change what is normally expected from a social identity, or challenge their social identity over time. Moreover, individuals are not necessarily consistent across time or contexts; the same speakers may namely project themselves differently on different occasions and in different situations. This is so as social identities are dynamic, and individuals belong to many different groupings in society. Therefore, they have multiple identities or *subjectivities* which vary across situations and time as they enact a variety of roles (Weedon, 1987). People build multiple, compatible social identities that may be blended or even blurred. The same applies to cross-cultural contact as "there are no simple social or linguistic formulae that spit out how to compose suitable identities for the occasion" (Ochs, 1993: 298). This means there are no golden means which we can apply when in contact with persons representing a different socio-cultural profile. A routine that proved successful in some occasions may disappoint us in other.

Life stories as a qualitative research method recognize the importance of the issues mentioned above and constitute an alternative research approach which has the following attributes:

individualistic - encouraging respondents to develop topics in ways relevant to their own experience (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 17) and taking into account not only typical sociocultural categories like social status, family role, gender or profession but allowing a truly personal, idiosyncratic reality to be captured (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 30-32);

interpretative - meaning allowing alternative or so far unconscious considerations to be brought into play (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 17);

language and meaning based – the story teller's aim is to improvise using resources languages makes available, after being prompted by the interviewer's questions or comments; this way the respondent actively composes meaning by way of situated, assisted inquiry;

subject-defined categories - parameters of analysis of those first-person accounts are designed in a close relation to the person telling the story;

holistic - not excluding, and as Holstein and Gubrium (1995: 17) put forward, "providing an environment conducive to the production of the range and complexity of meanings" plus enabling accounting the experience in its totality of details;

emergent - narratives show meanings not as a fully completed construal but a repository in an ongoing reflexive process of formulation. Life story is not there to be discovered, it is to be created in the interactional context of the session.

An example of a narrative approach study could be an investigation conducted by the present author (Szczepaniak-Kozak, 2012b) in which she examined the course of expatriate experience of two Dutch studentsliving and studying in Italy. For the purpose of the study she conducted narrative sessions with the students to gain a deep description and analysis of the daily foreign culture experience that the two students from the Netherlands led for the period of three months in an Italian city located in Umbria, central Italy. The major intention of the author was to test whether the narrative approach may be relevant to investigate the students' intercultural experience. Naturally, the study also had some descriptive goal of portraying their experience of living in a foreign country and studying at the Italian academia, i.e. to obtain biographical account.

Throughout the whole process the students were naturally encouraged to talk about their foreign culture experience in order for the researcher to understand their motivations, meanings and beliefs, which would be in this sense an ethnographic activity. However, opportunities were also provided for them to discuss the events, activities and behaviors they experienced in order for themselves to be able to understand these in a different light, construct a new interpretation, accept or reject their previous meaning, become better prepared to coming events. Overall, the aim was also for them to "co-construct the meanings of their experiences for themselves", the so oriented research called narrative co-construction (Bochner, 1994: 35). Hence, they could understand themselves and their experience abroad better and in consequence perform in an improved manner.

The narrative approach, in conjunction with some other research techniques applied (e.g. questionnaire), enabled a deep probe into the individual intercultural experience of its participants. That can't have been achieved with the use of any other method. Mostly the study concentrated on portraying the students' adaptation processes, especially in relation to culture learning, academic/study shock and daily functioning.

Both of the respondents reported numerous inconveniencies they experienced during their stay, especially in the first two weeks of their placement. Due to their problems related to finding accommodation and enrolling at the university, their adaptation did not start with the typical honeymoon phase, but still the conducted data analysis confirms that sociocultural adaptation problems are greatest during the early stages of transition and that they decrease significantly over time.

At the same time, the research enabled the present author not only to understand the students but also it appeared a very eye-opening experience for the participants themselves. Thanks to their involvement they were given a prod to autoanalyze

the events, conversations and situations they found themselves in. They were also tutored some metalanguage to talk about it. The narrative approached also served as a very effective tool for detecting individual differences in the students' self-recognition process. For example, the narrative session enabled one of the students to learn more about her performance in critical incidents. All in all, the undertaken study proved that the narrative approach can be used to provide a considerable insight into the expatriate students' cultural encounters, their process of culture learning and cultural intelligence development.

5. Concluding remarks

Naturally it is not possible to discuss in such a short writing all methods or techniques which can be used to study cultural or linguistic phenomena. Instead the present writing oscillated around the focal point which could be boiled down to a statement that research in cultural or applied linguistic studies can profit considerably from the orientations discussed above, i.e. a questionnaire, a free association study or the narrative approach. The first orientation is most valid for studying general tendencies, and its reliability can always be questioned on the grounds of the omnipresent doubt of its sampling procedures. A representative sampling may also pose a challenge in the free association study, but its true difficulty lies in the qualitative analysis after. Finally, the narrative approach may be criticized for its narrow range of applicability and reliability, however its true virtue lies in the ability of the deep probe into an individual's experience and interpretation process. Despite these weaknesses, all of them were proven and tested by the present author as viable options in cultural and applied linguistic research, quarantining a rich pool of data to be analyzed.

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