

Interpret ‘Voice’ from ‘Words’: Interpreting Translation Practices in the Field

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Abstract

The presence of an interpreter influences the dynamic between the researcher and the participants. This influence penetrates the multiple layers of the research process: speaking, listening, interpreting and contextual understanding. This paper seeks to move beyond a formulaic approach to research methods and to unpack how researchers respond to the interpreted interview, understood here as an encounter fully embedded in the practices and experiences of the field outside the linguistic act of translation. It draws its insights directly from recent qualitative fieldwork undertaken in Nicaragua and Bosnia-Herzegovina. In both countries, interpreters were used in a context of heightened politicisation and in fieldwork that crossed political, economic and cultural divides. Empirical and theoretical insights are obtained from this work, demonstrating that the positionality of the interpreter and the responses to this by the researcher require consideration. Indeed, it suggests that the interview encounter cannot be understood or properly analysed without reference to the presence of the interpreter and his/her mediation of ‘words’ into ‘voice’.

Introduction

There has been much research in recent years documenting the emerging importance of positionality within the research process (Haraway 1991, Smith and Katz 1993, Dossa 1997, Rose 1997, Mullings 1999, Gupta 2002, Kobayashi 2003). This research has been inherently critical in nature and has focused on how different constructions of self, including gender, race, ethnicity and socio-economic status, form multiple interpretations of positionality. However, these debates move beyond this to analyse how these multiple interpretations of positionality are realised in research encounters and how this can shape the knowledge which is produced through the research process. Positionality is defined as the “perspective shaped

by his/her unique mix of race, class, gender, nationality, sexuality and other identifiers” (Mullings, 1999: 337), but is extended in this paper to include less visible indicators of position such as political affiliations, a sense of place in power hierarchies and status as an insider or outsider. Haraway (1991) in particular has been influential in conceptualising positionality and illustrating how one’s position illustrates the power structures which produce a certain kind of knowledge. This research has focused on the importance for a researcher to recognise the role that his/her positionality plays in the knowledge which his/her research produces (McDowell 1992) and also the type of power relations differing positionalities shape (Rose 1997). McDowell (1992) argues for the importance of recognising the subjective understandings of the relationships between the researcher and the researched, and by extension therefore the subjectivities of the knowledge produced in research encounters. The discourse surrounding the role of positionality in the research process is therefore situated in a particular epistemological approach; ultimately that one’s position within the social world influences the way in which one perceives social reality. This is usually discussed in relation to the social realities of the researcher vis-à-vis the participants. However, it is imperative to extend an understanding of epistemological position, the type of knowledge it produces and the power relations it shapes, to all involved in the research process including field assistants and, crucially, interpreters.

The use of interpreters is not simply a technical tool. If “we cannot know our world outside of our ability to name it”, it follows that there are epistemological consequences of mediating that understanding through someone else (Staheli and Lawson 1995: 323). Temple stresses that interpreters are active in the process of constructing research and that “an analytic engagement with how they come to know what to do, is an important component in understanding the nature and status of the findings. When the translator and the researcher are different people the process of knowledge construction involves another layer” (1997: 614). If perceptions of social reality and constructions of meaning are referenced by an interpreter’s own understanding of concepts and issues as filtered through their own experiences, then important considerations are raised about the role of an interpreter that go beyond the act of linguistic interpretation. When these epistemological issues are recognised as crucial to the type of knowledge produced, the relationships between researchers, interpreters and the people they seek to represent gain vital significance. Therefore, interpreters cannot be viewed

as neutral either in the construction of meaning or within the power relations established in the research process (Temple and Young 2004). In this instance, it is imperative to examine the identities of the interpreter, both in their own reflexive definitions and through constitutive social relations. In such an analysis, it is vital to move beyond restrictive binaries of male/female, old/young, rich/poor, foreign/local, insider/outsider and so forth, on the basis of which identities are presented, in order to acknowledge their various combinations and complexities.

In accepting a more nuanced understanding of identity and positionality, it is possible to problematise how multiple and dynamic relational identities are expressed and realised in research encounters for the researcher, the participants and the interpreter. Interpreting is not just a technical task of a linguistic nature; it takes place in an interview context in which the interpreter is an active presence. The interpreter utilises linguistic ability to attempt to capture meaning, opinion and feelings. Therefore, it follows that the relationship between the researcher and the interpreter is a complex negotiation of meaning embedded in personal and professional positionalities. These multiple, interweaving and intersecting ways in which the various positionalities and identities are revealed, negotiated and managed in research encounters are crucial to the conduct of ethical research (Hopkins 2007). It is important that a relationship exists between the researcher and interpreter that can facilitate discussion and understanding around issues of positionality and representation. Without this, it is not possible to maintain a common ethical understanding between the researcher and the interpreter. However, the nature of this relationship will necessarily change through the research process and thus it is crucial to keep re-assessing the relationship within wider structures of power relations and the shifting research contexts.

This paper illuminates the importance of considering the positionality of interpreters in the research process. It does this by positing a distinction between 'words' and 'voice'. This is because the words which are spoken and translated in an interview do not necessarily fully represent the meanings attached to them by all of the actors present. We therefore differentiate voice from words to better understand the contradictions, multiplicities and agencies associated with the narratives of our participants; narratives which are communicated with more than just words, but also with emotion, body language and silence,

for example. The concept of voice illuminates why some narratives are privileged over others and captures the contestation behind why this is so. Indeed, the translation process, mediated by different positionalities, determines which voices are heard and thus which voices are subsequently analysed. These dynamics will be addressed through an engagement with the following questions.

Firstly, what impact does an interpreter's positionality have on his/her understanding of both the participant and the researcher and thus the 'voices' which are articulated in the interview? Secondly, how do we as researchers accommodate and respond to the presence of an interpreter and his/her positionality through the interview process? Thirdly, how are questions of ethics negotiated with an interpreter who represents the voices of both the participant and the researcher? These questions will be analysed in relation to our experiences of using interpreters in recent fieldwork. Whilst we draw from similar experiences, we undertook fieldwork in very different places which shaped our abilities to respond to the presence of an interpreter. This research was carried out in Nicaragua during September 2007–June 2008 (Ficklin) and Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) during May–August 2007 and March–May 2008 (Jones). We both used interpreters in contexts of heightened politicisation where participants displayed polarised and sensitive identities and political affiliations. As such, we both observed and experienced similar research realities in which the identity and the positionality of the interpreter not only influenced the negotiation of meaning, but also provided an overtly recognisable political identity which the participants could feel affiliation with, or detachment from. The following brief descriptions of the two field sites, and of our positionalities as researchers, serve to provide a background to the relevance of the aspects of interpreter positionality which will be discussed in the subsequent sections.

The Field Sites

Nicaragua

Following the end of the civil war in 1990, the Nicaraguan populous rejected the authoritarian Marxist regime of the Sandinista party and embraced a supposed new age of economic development and improved relations with United States of America (U.S.)

institutions under neoliberal governance structures. This was largely initiated through International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans and accompanying conditions of trade liberalisation and structural adjustment programmes (Lane 2000). As elsewhere in Latin America, the aim of structural adjustment was to stabilise the economy by increasing agricultural exports and raising foreign exchange to enable countries to keep up with debt service payments, and by cutting public spending and promoting privatisation and export-led growth (Reed 1992). In the ensuing two decades, Nicaragua has developed into an increasingly unequal society in terms of economic development, social opportunities and political representation. In 2006, in the wake of growing discontent with the increasing inequalities of the distribution of benefits and costs appropriated to the neoliberal regime, the Sandinista party was once again elected. The sixteen years after the Sandinistas were ousted did little to unite the extremely polarised and often emotional reactions they incited in the general population. Consequently, there is an emerging negotiation of identity within Nicaragua. The civil war was pivotal in determining local political positionalities and polarised general public opinion and political identities; however these sentiments are now resurfacing with the re-elected Sandinista regime but in a new context of neoliberal governance.

Lisa Ficklin in Nicaragua

I am a white British woman, in my twenties, conducting research for my PhD which examines the political ecology of environmental crisis. As such, my positionality vis-à-vis my participants is one of a young, highly educated and privileged European, although I was often initially thought of as an American due to colonial histories. Less visible aspects of my positionality include my liberal political orientation and my motivations for conducting this research, both of which relate to the political and socio-economic context of Nicaragua. This research is motivated, in addition to other professional aspirations, by a sense of injustice. Having studied international development and lived and worked in developing countries, I have a fascination with issues of social and environmental justice, both of which pertain to contemporary and historical Nicaragua. This interest in injustice is personal as well as professional, both elements of which are captured in my positionality generally, and specifically in relation to my Nicaraguan participants.

Bosnia-Herzegovina

As part of the disintegration of the Former Yugoslavia, BiH experienced war from 1992–1995. High levels of inter-communal violence left approximately 200,000 dead (Fagan 2005: 233) and 2.3 million displaced, as either refugees or internally displaced persons, out of a population of just under 4.4 million (Vandiver 2001: 168). The country now has a political settlement based on division of territory and political power among the three main ethnic groups: Bosniaks who are Muslims; Bosnian-Serbs who are Orthodox Christian; and Bosnian-Croats who are Catholic. This settlement is presided over by an international supervision arrangement where a non-Bosnian High Representative has the power to pass laws and remove democratically elected politicians. Despite the hybrid identities of the majority of Bosnians both prior to and after the war (Vetlesen 2005: 156–157), ethnic group affiliation is highly politicised and has been made more so through the experience of violence and the public discourse surrounding the war and post-war settlement. Like Nicaragua, the fieldwork discussed in this paper relating to BiH was carried out in a transition context where identities are politicised and living standards low for most people.

Briony Jones in Bosnia-Herzegovina

I too am a white British woman in my twenties conducting doctoral research. Concerned with the relationship between people in my field site, as citizens and ‘reconciled ethnicities’, my research has been motivated by a normative concern with peace and justice and with how people live together in different types of communities after violence, displacement and ethnic cleansing. This focus incorporates relational identities such as ‘victim’, ‘perpetrator’, ‘Bosniak’ or ‘local’. My positionality in this politically sensitive context was as an outsider from a country associated with both lack of action during the 1992–5 war and post-1995 high levels of intervention and control. I was often seen to speak for, and from, the international community and my position of relative privilege meant some participants did not feel I was able to understand their experiences and situations. Participants and residents of the town in which I was living were also alert to any political opinions that I expressed and how they reflected my views of war guilt or victimhood. I had to be ever aware of being seen to be neutral whilst at the same time my education and political persuasion meant that I felt personally and professionally strongly about events and opinions my participants expressed.

The Importance of Positionality: Articulating Voice in the Interview

Temple has identified the problematic way in which much translation work assumes an homogeneity amongst the local population, whereby local researchers or indeed translators are treated as if they are able to access meanings for other members of the community. In this way, there is often an assumption of a direct relationship between languages, values, meanings and identities (Temple 2008: 357–358). Thus, researchers who use local interpreters often do not take into account, or make clear, the relevance of the interpreter's position in the local context for the process of interpretation of meaning. In fact, interpreters are an additional presence in the interview and are socially, culturally and historically conditioned beings. They bring into the interview their own assumptions, prejudices, and experiences, which may affect the way in which they translate, interpret and represent the voices of both the researcher and the participants. In addition, just as constructions of self or real-life identities are multiple and in flux, so too are field-identities and researcher positionalities (Srivastava 2006). From such a perspective, it is simplistic to assume that the creation or mediation of field identity is a one-time occurrence during fieldwork. Thus, Srivastava (2006) argues that field identities are multiple and continually mediated constructs in response to the anticipated or experienced perceptions of how participants receive, accept, or reject the researcher's positionalities vis-à-vis their own over the course of the research period or during single field events.

In the BiH case, the interpreter was a young, well-educated male who had studied and now teaches English. He was also a Bosniak, and well-connected in the town where the fieldwork was taking place. In this way, he was able to shape the interview encounter by being confident in commenting on the analysis, and also helping to provide contacts and access to certain participants. He was also in a position of mediating between the author, as a foreigner associated for many with the international supervision of BiH, and the participants, from a variety of gender, age, occupation, and ethnic groups. These negotiations were complex and informed by his positionality.

In post-war BiH there are now three languages of Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian, where previously these had been referred to as one language of Serbo-Croat. In the interviews the interpreter had to be sensitive to the subtle differences between these languages in ways which I (Jones) could not understand as a non-fluent speaker of the local languages. Sporadically, participants would correct the interpreter's use of certain vocabulary or how it was translated for me; for example, whether he used 'Serbian' or 'Orthodox' to describe Bosnian-Serbs. For some participants, these identities were synonymous, whereas for others national identity was separate from religious practice. On one occasion, a participant corrected the interpreter when he used 'Serbian' to describe Bosnian-Serbs and the participants wanted him also to use the adjective 'Orthodox'. For the interpreter, religion and nationality were separate issues and this informed his treatment of identity in this context. His position as a Bosniak was not only of linguistic significance, but it affected what participants felt comfortable saying and the way in which they would express opinions. After one interview, my interpreter told me that he thought a non-Bosniak participant had been euphemistic when wanting to discuss certain topics related to ethnicity and war guilt because of the ethnicity of the interpreter. In these ways, the interpreter's politicised identity as Bosniak/Muslim affected which words were spoken and how they were interpreted. In addition, the association of identity labels in this context with linguistic and cultural practices made the spoken words of labels significant as they resonated with projects of ethnic dominance and contestations over political power-sharing between the three main ethnic groups. Corrections over which words the interpreter chose for identity labelling, and implications of unspoken words, hint at ethnic or cultural 'voices' which participants wanted to express or felt were not being expressed through words.

As an educated and successful member of the local society, the interpreter was sometimes dismissive of participants who complained about their living situations and lack of employment. This illustrates the importance of not homogenising 'the local' and assuming that a 'local' interpreter is somehow more knowledgeable and/or neutral. In some cases, the participants spoke quickly and the translator had to summarise in order to keep up. His own opinions about the validity of what they were saying meant he sometimes made choices about reducing detail when the subjects were 'irrelevant', such as when a participant spoke for 'too long' about his/her problems with unemployment. This reduction of the words spoken

marginalised the voices of those who had been oppressed and their experiences of inequality, in favour of the voice of the interpreter expressed through the presence of truncated narratives. Although some participants felt able to correct the interpreter, others may have been less confident either in terms of expressing themselves, or in their understanding of English. The interview situation may also be intimidating and participants may feel less able to correct the interpreter who holds the power to mediate between them and the researcher. The interpreter also responded to me in ways which were telling regarding the dynamic between us. He often assumed a lack of context knowledge on my behalf and in the interviews would add information or explain aspects which I may have chosen to leave out in order to prompt different kinds of responses.

As a well-known and liked person in the local community, the presence of this particular interpreter often prompted responses during interviews which were directed at him: for example, family friends describing events he would know. I was told by people who knew him that they had consented to do the interview as a favour to him. In this sense, he was an active presence in the interviews, and the dialogue would sometimes stray into a three-way conversation. In more familiar situations with participants he knew, he would also revert to a less formal introduction and explain the research background and purpose without deferring to me as was the case in other situations. This affected the atmosphere of the interview as well as which subjects were raised, especially given the qualitative methodology in which interview questions were not strictly structured. He also, as a man, seemed to be more protective of me, as a woman. In one interview, the interpreter stopped translating because he felt the flirtatious tone of the conversation that the participant had initiated was inappropriate. Instead of allowing me to hear what was being said and respond to it, he chose to limit the interpretation to prevent embarrassment for any party. Due to gender norms in BiH, male participants would often pass comment on my assumed (non) marital status and appearance. The presence of a male, educated, Bosniak interpreter thus had an influence on the words spoken and unspoken in the interview. These spoken words would, for example, reveal or hide voices of oppression, national identity and cultural practice, for example. Therefore, understanding how the interpreter influences the relationship between voice and words is to understand the data itself.

In the Nicaragua case, the interpreter was a Nicaraguan male in his thirties. Due to the recent political history of Nicaragua, his identity vis-à-vis the research participants was both important to ascertain yet practically impossible to define. At seven years old, his family fled the civil war in Nicaragua and illegally entered the United States on foot. Once there, his family received refugee status and he remained there for eighteen years negotiating relationships in mainstream U.S. culture and in Mexican communities in San Diego. He returned to Nicaragua, without his family, following a deportation order in 2004, and has been working as an interpreter since 2007. This history challenged traditional insider/outsider binaries. Despite being Nicaraguan, he had spent most of his life in the United States, a source of admiration for some participants and resentment for others who had endured the war in Nicaragua. He had socialised predominantly with Mexicans and consequently his accent and language formation in Spanish were quite different from the participants', something which was usually commented upon. However, there were also obvious indicators of his 'insider' status. He had a regional name, spoke openly of his childhood memories and greeted fellow Nicaraguans in a colloquial manner. His field identities were multiple and constantly mediated throughout the fieldwork process depending on how he perceived himself, and was perceived by others, as an insider or an outsider. These negotiations of identity, and thus positionality, of the translator in relation to the participants were illustrated in multiple ways, select examples of which will now be described.

As mentioned previously, due to recent history, political identity in Nicaragua is highly polarised, divisive and conflicting. This was especially so in the village of Quebradita Yakalwas which was a prominent battleground during the 1980s. The participants shared their experiences of harassment and the demands placed upon them to provide food, shelter and recruits to combatants. These encounters were often violent, producing sensitive and acute memories which shaped political alliances. As the Sandinista party has been re-elected, many of these memories and alliances have re-surfaced with practical consequences if exposed. The position of the interpreter in this context was significantly blurred. As someone who had received refugee status and support in the U.S., it was often assumed that, in addition to having been privileged to have escaped such incidents, he was pro-U.S. foreign policy towards Nicaragua and therefore against the re-emergence of the Sandinista regime. However, as assumptions about my (Ficklin's) nationality were proved incorrect - usually I

was assumed to be American - assumptions about his identity were also questioned. This significantly affected what participants felt comfortable saying in his presence as he provided a locally recognisable political identity, which, although largely invisible, concerned and intimidated some participants. As such, his physical presence alone affected the voices which were articulated, depending on whether or not a participant could identify with him in some way. I often got the impression that participants would have responded differently, at least more openly, without the threat of exposing themselves to a 'local', the political status of whom was undisclosed. This was confirmed when after interviews I would speak in Spanish to the participants. I had explained to them that I was able to speak some Spanish but felt more comfortable with an interpreter. In the subsequent discussions they would recount stories of the war during which their own positionalities would be revealed, sometimes in contradiction to what they had disclosed in the interview moment. At these times, the participant and I would be alone without the presence of the interpreter, an encounter which was different in its nature, and in the way voice was articulated, due to his absence. My ability to speak and understand Spanish proved to be very insightful in understanding the interpreter's positionality vis-à-vis the participants. This will be analysed in more detail in the following section.

As in the BiH case, the interpreter here was also sometimes dismissive towards the participants. I perceived this to be a result of distance, fostered by his absence during the war as well as his education in the United States. The participants were, as mentioned previously, predominantly 'campesinos', subsistence farmers or migratory workers. In contrast, the interpreter was educated, urban and wealthy. Dismissal of the participants or frustration at their answers would be displayed through various physical gestures such as sighing or rolling his eyes, and in the tone of his voice. Sometimes it would be more explicit and the interpreter would say that the participants would not understand a question or what he thought was expected by a question before he had actually asked it. Frequently, the participants would speak very quickly and without pausing, in which case the interpreter would have to summarise their meanings in his own language and interpretations, filtered through his own understanding of their meaning. This was also the case in BiH, where the interpreter would

choose to cut certain elements of the interview he deemed to be less relevant to the questions being asked.

Accommodating Positionality: Researcher, Participants and the Person In-between

In the discussion above, the two cases of BiH and Nicaragua illuminated some of the significant ways in which the positionality of an interpreter affects his/her understanding of the researcher and participant, as well as how it might impact on the ‘voices’ being articulated. However, the researcher is also not a neutral influence, and in turn responds to the presence of the interpreter and the issues illustrated above. Researchers engage with the positionality of an interpreter at various stages of the research process: through selecting the interpreter, adaptation in the moment of interview and through reflection in the writing up process.

In Nicaragua a key issue was that of language, particularly given my (Ficklin’s) own ability to speak Spanish which gave me a further insight into the content and process of the interview. This meant that in the interview itself, I was able to understand the vast majority of what was being said by both the interpreter and the participants. This provided an opportunity for me to respond to the interpreter ‘in action’ and gave privileged insight into how the interpreter captured meaning and voice between the researcher and participants. During fieldwork, a frequent concern of mine was the way in which the framing and language of questions in English was ‘lost’ in its translation into Spanish. Aside from linguistic issues of available vocabulary in each language, this was also a result of the ways in which the interpreter mediated the use of language according to his own framework of understanding social and cultural realities, that is to say, positionalities. In one interview, there was a discussion of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and the interpreter asked for clarification of what this was from me. I explained what it was in terms of the complexities of multinational policies being negotiated in Central America, but the interpreter translated it to the participant as an issue of U.S. control over trade in the region. This change in meaning had enormous implications to how a participant would respond to CAFTA as a

concept and a reality and would significantly influence the types of trade relationships and policy initiatives they would choose to support or oppose.

In this case, I responded by discussing with the interpreter the importance of the language chosen by both researcher and participant and how best to be sensitive towards this given the political context. However, whilst the interpreter said he understood these issues and would address them in future interviews, I continued to be frustrated due to what I perceived to be ‘inaccurate’ interpretation. I felt that my questions as a researcher were being re-formulated because of the personal views and position of the interpreter, and due to the heightened politicisation in Nicaragua this resulted in certain voices of the participants being privileged and others marginalised. In some instances, I asked the interpreter to rephrase a question although this could only be done if there was an appropriate pause in the interview and if it was possible without causing embarrassment for the interpreter in front of the participants. I realised that correcting the interpreter in the interview moment could cause embarrassment and awkwardness, as well as displaying certain power hierarchies. In these instances, I couldn’t respond in the interview moment and could only therefore reflect on such implications in the analysis stages of research.

In the case of BiH, a key issue was that of ethnicity. Given the discussion above about the politicised and sensitive nature of ethnic identities in this context, I (Jones) was required to in some way respond to the Bosniak identity of the interpreter, or at least take it into account. On one occasion, I arranged an interview with someone I knew to be a nationalist non-Bosniak participant at a time which was inconvenient to the interpreter. In this way, it was possible to employ as a one-off an interpreter of a different ethnicity. On another occasion, I told the interpreter that I believed the participants to hold nationalist views. The interpreter then offered to translate the questions so the interview could be undertaken without him, and at a later date to translate the responses based on a recording. In the case of BiH, I and the interpreter had managed to develop a positive professional relationship. This meant we were able to spend time outside of the interview discussing both the process of interpretation (for example, why certain words or phrases were chosen), and the relevance of the local context (for example, whether participants reacted to the interpreter as a Bosniak). In doing so, it was possible for the interpreter to deal openly with some questions of positionality and the

attendant issues. It was through such a process that the interpreter was able to offer to translate pre-prepared questions and to absent himself from the interview encounter.

These were day-to-day but also sensitive issues of fieldwork which, whilst different in nature, both required innovative responses *in situ*. Interestingly, in both cases, we found that the best way to respond to such questions of interpreter positionality was through communication and, where possible, sought opportunities to discuss questions of language and interpretation with the interpreter. In the case of BiH, I (Jones) undertook repeat interviews of key participants, and asked as many questions as possible of the interpreter and any gatekeeper about the interview so as to add depth to the context in which the interview could be understood. In the case of Nicaragua, I (Ficklin) was able to play a more active role in terms of understanding ‘problems’ with interpretation and discussing them with the interpreter as I spoke the local language at a higher level. Despite similar responses from us, the outcomes were different, and it was not always possible in either case to ensure that the outcome of the response was as intended. With this in mind, it was therefore important to continue responding to such issues in the process of writing up. Analysis of interview transcripts needs to acknowledge that with the use of an interpreter, whose positionality affects the process and content of interviews, the words of the participants have not been re-created through quotes. Rather, the transcripts and the later quotes which appear in academic output are a representation of interpretation. As a researcher, it is therefore vital to understand that the basis of analysis is not always steady ground, and where possible to triangulate with other data obtained through repeat interviews, participant observation and document analysis. In this way, the impact of the interpreter on the research process can not only be made visible, but can also enrich the analysis process.

Positioning Representation: Interpretation and the Negotiation of Ethics in Research Practice

Given the discussion above, one must accept that the presence of the interpreter is an active and relevant presence, and that the interpreter him/herself has a positionality which affects

the process and content of the interview. Accordingly, the relationship between the researcher and interpreter is vital and, when respectful and amenable, the implications of positionality can be explored and observed through dialogue. Therefore, it is no longer adequate to only consider the dynamic between the researcher and participant. It is necessary to take into account the presence of the interpreter and its effects, namely in terms of the voices which are articulated through the interview process. In problematising the role of an interpreter in the research process, it is essential to explore its ethical implications for the negotiation both between the interpreter and the participants and between the interpreter and the researcher. This will be addressed here by focusing on negotiations around the ethnicity of the interpreter and the participants in BiH, and of gender relations between the interpreter and the researcher in Nicaragua.

In the case of BiH where, as previously mentioned, ethnic group affiliation is highly politicised, I (Jones) felt that it would be unethical to cause discomfort to either interpreter or participant by creating an interview situation in which the content was distressing to one or other party, and/or where one or other of the parties felt unable to express what they wanted to. The interpreter was a local Bosniak male which meant that some participants may have felt uncomfortable discussing sensitive ethnic issues in his presence, or conversely may challenge the comfort of the interpreter himself. As discussed above, it was because of this that I decided on rare occasions to use a different interpreter, and on other occasions to speak openly about my concerns with the interpreter. This created opportunities for the interpreter to express any discomfort and indicate if he felt that his ethnicity in relation to the participant had affected what the participant was prepared to say. However, the choice of whether or not to use this interpreter for some interviews challenged the responsibility that I felt as an employer. Given the generally high unemployment and low living standards in BiH, as a foreign researcher I was able to provide a valuable extra wage for the interpreter. This meant that I felt less able to cancel interviews or decrease the working time if the interpreter had been expecting it and even relying on it. Because of this, ethical concerns of comfort in the interview and providing employment were potentially competing, and I had to make decisions on a case-by-case basis.

In the Nicaragua case, the interview process illustrated the differences in cultural interpretations of ethical behaviour as understood by me (Ficklin) and my interpreter. Societal gender norms are such that a white European professional woman employing an older Nicaraguan man was always noted and often commented upon by the participants. More polite enquiries questioned our marital status; it was usually assumed we were married to each other, and participants asked whether we had met each other's families. More direct enquiries addressed whether I had marital problems resulting from leaving behind my husband to do this research with a Nicaraguan man, taunts at the masculinity of the interpreter and questions about the level of my influence due to their interpretations of my power status in employing an older man. This is particularly relevant when exploring certain ethical issues which arose during the fieldwork process. There were two instances during separate interviews which resulted in an overt confrontation between me and my interpreter. The first instance was after an interview with a male campesino and his brothers. The participant congratulated the interpreter on "having the foresight to work with a pretty white girl" (Interview with a resident of Quebradita Yakalwas, 21st April 2008). Within my understanding of gender-relations in Nicaraguan culture, I was prepared for the interpreter to not explicitly correct the participant on our employer-employee relationship but was shocked when instead he joined in and encouraged a conversation between the men which objectified me sexually. This provided a significant ethical dilemma. Within my own ethical framework, I found this unacceptable but was aware of the cultural acceptance of talking about women in this way. After the interview, I raised this with the interpreter. He was very apologetic. Having lived in the U.S., he understood the ethical framing of the incident and claimed that it was something he had done automatically and not a calculated act to engage with the participants in a particular way. We discussed our ethical expectations at length, with a particular focus on his position being one of representation, both of my voice and identity, but also of my code of ethics.

A couple of days later, we were interviewing at a different household. The heads of this household were a teenage married couple, although only the wife and her sister were present. Once again, following the interview everyone was talking informally when the interpreter made inappropriate sexual comments to both women. During this instance, I actively intervened, apologised to the women and requested that the interpreter wait outside the house.

The immediate response to this was bemusement. When I offered the women an opportunity to formally complain they told me that there was nothing to complain about, that this is how men are, what they were used to dealing with daily. This was inherently a conflict of positionalities. Our positional understandings of a cultural reality created competing ethical frameworks. Upon much reflection, I decided that I could not work with this particular interpreter. I felt that our relationship was no longer functional as attempts to explain the ethical importance of interview encounters were not comprehended. This was not a judgment of cultural differences but a conflict of ethical representation and illustrates the significance of trust and a good professional relationship between the researcher and the interpreter which was largely achieved in the case of BiH and unfortunately not in the case of Nicaragua.

We both faced dilemmas in some form regarding ethics. In the case of BiH, responsibility as an employer meant other ethical considerations such as whether or not to use a different interpreter were rendered much more complex. In the case of Nicaragua, I (Ficklin) found myself negotiating the dynamic between my own ethical framework and that of those in the fieldwork setting. A good relationship allows space for researchers to establish a dialogue with the interpreter about the ethical framing of the research and to address any ethical issues which may arise. This can be achieved through discussion both before and after an interview, especially in the case of an interview requiring sensitivity. It can also be achieved during an interview when it is felt that the interpreter is not capturing what is being said or if the researcher feels that the questions are not being represented accurately. Interactions with an interpreter during an interview require tact and sensitivity so as not to undermine the interpreter or confuse the participants. This was a particularly sensitive issue in the case of BiH, as the interpreter was likely to know the participants in either a personal or professional sphere and thus an act of undermining may have been especially embarrassing for him. Various ethical issues arose in the research in BiH and Nicaragua for which the relationship with the interpreter was crucially significant in the determination of the outcome.

Discussion

In both cases, we were conducting fieldwork in places outside of our own cultural context with the assistance of interpreters. This created a dual dynamic of the positionality of the researcher and, in addition, of the interpreter in the local spaces in which fieldwork was being undertaken. These dynamics affected the interview moment by shaping its content, the process of interpretation and the ensuing analysis. From the exploration offered here of some key issues raised by the positionality of the interpreter, response of the researcher, and ethical considerations, it is possible for us to outline insights which can contribute towards good practice in using interpreters in fieldwork.

The research we were undertaking was essentially qualitative, which meant that sensitivity towards positionalities was crucial. This went beyond the choice of less structured interviewing techniques to understanding how positionality was present in all its forms in the interview. It was found that the act of interpretation was mediated by the positionality of the interpreter in relation to the participant, in terms of factors such as ethnicity, gender and education. Thus, the frameworks of understanding held by the interpreter, informed as they are by his/her background and personal convictions, affected how meaning was interpreted and what aspects of words became 'voice'. Moreover, our responses to these issues were a negotiation between our own positionality, professional and personal integrity, and ethical responsibilities towards ourselves, the participants and the interpreter. With this in mind, certain insights emerge from the empirical discussions. These insights are not an exhaustive list of the ways in which researchers need to think about and understand the ramifications of using an interpreter when conducting fieldwork. They relate specifically to qualitative research experiences where longer and more unstructured interviews are a primary method. In such interview encounters, positionalities are explored, and the participants often speak at length about the events and opinions which are most relevant to them in relation to the central questions of the researcher. Accordingly, there is more room for the interpreter to mediate words into voice, and to actively mobilise his/her own frameworks of understanding. However, these insights can also be useful more broadly to any researchers seeking to undertake fieldwork with interpreters.

If one accepts that the positionality of the interpreter is key in the ways discussed above, there is potential to develop a sense of ‘good practice’ when using interpreters. At the least, it is possible to outline certain questions which need to be addressed. A concern with positionality is also a concern with context, rendering an adequate understanding of the fieldwork site crucial. It is not enough to prepare research questions and methods; researchers also need to spend time prior to, and in, the field seeking to develop a nuanced understanding of the heterogeneity there. It is through the problematisation of the lack of homogeneity of ‘the local’, that an appreciation of the positionality of an interpreter and the dynamic which is present in the interview encounter between interpreter and participant can be achieved. This dynamic may centre on certain social divisions such as gender, ethnicity and education that play out in the local context in particular ways. In turn, the researcher can then develop a vital understanding of whose and what ‘voices’ the interpreter articulates and represents at different times. These voices are multiple and possibly conflicting, emerging from a local space which is heterogenous and may be politically divided.

Drawing on this, researchers need to spend time meeting a variety of potential interpreters, and when making decisions over who to work with, must consider more than their language skills. It might be the case, as in BiH, that the identity of the interpreter leads to the silencing of certain voices when participants feel uncomfortable. Or, as in the case of Nicaragua, the interpreter may manifest certain behaviours which do not fit with the researcher’s own ethical framework. Researchers need to understand that the behaviour of the interpreter also deserves ethical consideration, as his/her presence in the interview has ramifications for the experience of the interview encounter for all present. Communication needs to be fostered to ensure that the interpreter understands the boundaries of a given research project and its acceptable modes of behaviour. The only way to deal with such sensitive issues is to make sure that a professional working relationship is established with time allotted for discussions prior to, and after, interviews, and a method of payment which is suitable to, and understood by, both parties. The experiences in BiH and Nicaragua point to communication as key.

Finally, the researcher must acknowledge the presence of the interpreter and the effect this has on the interview encounter and the interpretive processes in and after the fieldwork. Given that the actions of the interpreter affect the articulation and/or silencing of ‘voice’,

triangulation becomes more important as the researcher seeks to illuminate the interview encounter from as many angles as possible. When writing up, the issues associated with using an interpreter which we have discussed here need to be made explicit so that the interview encounter can be explored in a more nuanced way as a mediated representation of certain 'voices', rather than an exact replication of the words which were spoken. In this way, the words spoken can be seen as only one part of the communication of positionalities and it is voice which suggests meaning and experience beyond which words are chosen for expression. It is not enough to stop at words: researchers must ask questions about what was spoken, what was unspoken and how this makes 'voices' visible or invisible.

Returning to the central concern with positionality as raised in the introduction and woven throughout the discussion of the empirical cases, this paper has highlighted that expanding a concern with positionality to the interpreter allows the researcher to critically reflect on the interview encounter and the production of data. It raises the question of power in terms of the acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of the fieldwork context. Interpreters and participants are often both 'local' and yet they do not necessarily attach the same meaning to events and opinions. It is possible that one or other of them may hold opinions which are privileged in that given context and influence the interpretation of meaning in the interview. The 'loss' of voices through which words are chosen or left unspoken cannot be entirely recovered, but through processes of triangulation and open communication with the interpreter it is possible for the researcher to explore the reasons why certain words were used and how they reflect some voices and not others. This illuminates the fieldwork context further as appreciating how local actors relate to each other can be seen as data in itself. Inequalities and divisions, as well as collaborations and co-operations, will be produced in the negotiation of positions and voices in the interview encounter.

What this paper has shown is that the positionality of the interpreter and the responses to this by the researcher are worthy of consideration. Indeed, it suggests that the interview encounter cannot be understood or properly analysed without reference to the presence and position of the interpreters. If this is thoroughly engaged with, through considerations such as the ones proposed here, the fieldwork material and corresponding analysis will be richer and indeed

able to say more about the research – interpreter – researched relationship, the production of data and the specific context in which fieldwork is conducted.

Acknowledgements

We would firstly like to thank both the School of Environment and Development, University of Manchester, and the Economic and Social Research Council for funding the fieldwork on which this paper is based.

We also wish to acknowledge the support and intellectual input of our doctoral supervisors Dr. Sam Hickey, Dr. Sara MacKian, Prof. Noel Castree and Prof. Rosaleen Duffy, and the contributions to earlier drafts of this paper made by Dr. Lorraine Moore, Mrs. Alison Smith, and the editors of this special collection.

Finally we would like to thank the interpreters and participants quoted here for their time and willingness to share their experiences and thoughts with us.

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