'In the lives of individuals and societies, language is a factor of greater importance than any other. For the study of language to remain solely the business of a handful of specialists would be a quite unacceptable state of affairs.'

Saussure

The Politics of Language Series covers the field of language and cultural theory and will publish radical and innovative texts in this area. In recent years the developments and advances in the study of language and cultural criticism have brought to the fore a new set of questions. The shift from purely formal, analytical approaches has created an interest in the role of language in the social, political and ideological realms and the series will seek to address these new problems with a clear and informed approach. The intention is to gain recognition for the central role of language in individual and public life.

RESEARCHING LANGUAGE

Issues of power and method

Deborah Cameron, Elizabeth Frazer,
Penelope Harvey, M. B. H. Rampton,
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1992

Sociolinguists have long understood how language is implicated in social inferiority, both ascribed from the outside and felt from within. It is only when those who actually experience this appropriate expert understandings and act on such understandings on their own behalf that fundamental change, either at the level of self-perception or of institutional practice, will be possible. The 'Respect, Please!' project was an attempt to make change – on a small scale, for a few people – imaginable and possible.

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CONCLUSION

In the light of the four case studies, we can begin this conclusion by briefly noting what this book has tried to do. Different kinds of involvement with informants have been outlined – 'on'; 'on and for'; 'on, for and with'. The concepts of ethical, advocate and empowering research positions have been introduced. We have discussed epistemological positions – positivism, relativism, realism – according to the potential which they offer for empowering research and we have generally opted for realism. We have emphasised the importance of the non-unified subject for the discussion of researcher–researched relations: not only are the *researched* non-unified subjects, but researchers are too, their identities partly negotiated in the field as well as brought into it. We have scrutinised particular methods (such as participant observation, covert recording and interviews), and have discussed the methodologies of specific research programmes, identifying those which do and those which do not permit empowerment (cf. Rampton on variationist sociolinguistics and the ethnography of communication, Harvey on anthropological field methods, and Frazer on developments within feminist social science). We have identified the importance of political criteria above and beyond method which influence the potential for empowerment, such as the kinds of institutional involvement which made particular projects possible. Is it now any clearer what empowering research requires?

We ended the Introduction with three programmatic statements, precepts with which one might try to guide empowering research. Their formulation was fairly bold: 'Persons are not objects and should not be treated as objects'; 'Subjects have their own agendas and research should try to address them'; 'If knowledge is worth having, it is worth sharing'. In this conclusion it is worth scrutinising these precepts more critically, drawing on the accounts offered in the case studies.

PRECEPT 1: INTERACTIVE METHODS

The assertion that 'People are not objects and should not be treated as objects' is fundamental in any effort to produce empowering research,

since it foregrounds the nature of the interaction between researcher and researched in a variety of ways. In this section we focus on methods of data collection, but the issues of interactivity are important during the formulation of research objectives as well as during writing up. We will give more emphasis to these other aspects in subsequent sections when we discuss 'subjects' agendas', 'feedback' and 'other principles'.

Interactive methods entail a dialogue between the researcher and informants which itself then becomes a large part of the data base. They can be contrasted with 'objective' methods where interference in the talk of the researched is discouraged on epistemological grounds. This positivist position seems philosophically naïve, and the case studies suggested that interaction can not only generate opportunities for informants to become more actively involved in the research process, commenting upon and consciously influencing the researcher: inter-action can also enhance its eventual findings. Indeed in Cameron's account, the process of sharing linguistic knowledge and experience generated research potential where none had been originally anticipated.

Of course, not all the case studies relied exclusively on dialogue between researcher and informants as a means of data collection. Rampton (chapter 2) used radio microphones to record the playground talk of his informants, and Harvey (chapter 3) recorded the drunken speech of her subjects clandestinely. How far are these methods consistent with criticism of the positivist view that the 'researcher effect' is a deplorable interference? And what of ethical scruples about covert methods? In response to the first question, one can say that covert recording simply produces a different kind of data, interesting for that reason but not intrinsically superior to utterances produced in researcher-informant dialogue.

The second question requires a more complex response, and in formulating this, it is essential first to recognise that this ethical problem is not one that can be confined to the practical level of research method. It inheres in the research relationship itself, rather than in any particular method that a researcher might choose, and it has to be seen as part of the problem of representation. However the data is collected and however negotiated the agendas may have been, when the researcher produces representations of the research for an outside audience, control of the data and its meanings shift very much towards the researcher. She may very well wish to infer implicit meanings in the utterances of informants, even though at the time, the original speaker felt fully conscious of what they were saying and why. Research inevitably involves the recontextualisation of utterances and so even the most deliberate discourses are likely to be reinterpreted. So the line between what is overt and what is covert is much more difficult to draw than the objection to clandestine recording implies. Of course that only

complicates the issue: it does not resolve it. We will address questions of representation in a later section.

PRECEPT 2: SUBJECTS' AGENDAS

In formulating the second of our precepts, 'Subjects have their own agendas and research should try to address them', we were concerned (as others have been) to bridge the gap between the preoccupations of informants and those of the researcher. The concerns of researchers are often, and with good reason, quite esoteric. But this need not reduce informants merely to servicing the research.

How was space created for informant agendas in the case studies? From the outset in Cameron's work in Charterhouse (chapter 5), the subject group played a leading role in setting the agenda, and this led to the making of a video, both a process and a product which had value for the group independent of their relationship with the researcher. Neither Rampton (chapter 2), nor Harvey (chapter 3) took their informants' agendas on board in the same way. In Harvey's case this is certainly related to the open-ended nature of her agenda. However, one might also try to explain the difference by claiming that, in contrast to Cameron, both Harvey and Rampton were working towards Ph.D. degrees and were therefore under some pressure to prioritise strictly academic requirements. But then, so too was Frazer: she resolved this by deliberately developing within her project two intersecting but neverthe-less distinguishable tracks, one which concentrated on the requirements of a Ph.D. and the other which gave primacy to interests of her subjects. In this way, alongside her own partially independent investigative objectives, she created space within fieldwork for the production of a photo-story, in which traditions in youth work were more influential than traditions in sociology.

With hindsight we would want to suggest that it is not always possible to accommodate informant agendas. The idea itself seems to presuppose that any group of respondents will participate in research already 'knowing itself' in an explicit way and having its own pre-formulated agenda. Nor will such agendas necessarily emerge during the course of the research, and those that do may reflect heterogeneous interests among the group rather than indicating a clear consensus. But if the respondents cannot be fully articulate about their wishes in this respect, we do not want to recommend that the researcher should attempt to formulate their agenda for them (as opposed to facilitating their own attempts to formulate it).

There may also be structural reasons why a researcher is not competent to address the agendas of informants. Category membership is important here, and more particularly the similarities and differences

between the social positioning of the researcher and of the researched. Where researcher and researched share some aspect of their social identity, as in chapter 4 where Frazer and her subjects could relate to one another as females in English society, then in a political sense they could be said to share an agenda – especially since gender identity for Frazer was the foreground of her research, not just part of some shared common ground. But elsewhere the researcher can be 'outside' one, some or all of the categories which she has identified as salient for the research, and the experience of a supposedly 'shared' political context can differ according to position and biography (different ethnic groups for instance have radically different experiences of their citizenship).

Lastly, there are likely to be cases where informants do have an agenda, but reject the possibility of help from the researcher. Informants may very clearly percieve what their own interests are, while considering also that the researcher who is sincerely concerned about those interests is nevertheless powerless to address them in appropriate ways. A researcher who is in some ways seen as a child, as Harvey was in Ocongate, cannot be expected to help solve adult problems. Children don't empower adults.

PRECEPT 3: FEEDBACK

Our third precept concerned the sharing of knowledge: 'If knowledge is worth having, it is worth sharing.' This is relevant to the findings of the research itself and to sharing academic knowledge more generally – for example, Cameron's point in chapter 5 that she was much better informed about the history of creoles than the subjects themselves. As Cameron also found, though, any social relation in which an expert tells a group about itself is interactionally hazardous. The assymetry involved may require sensitive handling. The role of expert, or teacher, neutralises the hazard to some extent, but no researcher concerned about the power relations between researcher and researched can rely on role alone to manage the difficulty.

The process of feedback can be more or less formalised. The most formal way of meeting the feedback requirement is to convene meetings for the specific purpose of conveying information to the researched (though perhaps with other explicit purposes too). Some institutions – for instance, schools and youth clubs – incorporate expectations that this will be done. Rampton (chapter 2) includes the clearest example of this kind of formal feedback. Harvey (chapter 3) has the most informal approach. Formal feedback is perhaps the most 'honest' because of its greater explicitness. But informal feedback i.e. taking advantage of *ad hoc* opportunities in the field by answering informant questions as they arise, has its advantages too. Given the fluid and more open-ended

nature of anthropological participant observation methods, it is not surprising that 'feedback' in these conditions is much more informal and much harder to separate from the collection and analysis of the data.

Not all knowledge is sharable – the researcher's concerns are often quite esoteric. Yet this does not mean that 'empowering' researchers should limit their aims to the pursuit of knowledge which is sharable. This raises questions about the demarcation of research from teaching or community action and about the independent value of research. We will return to these shortly.

One additional kind of knowledge which can usefully be shared is knowledge about the procedures of research – the procedures through which academic knowledge is constructed. This is clearly a valuable enterprise where it can be employed, not because it will turn informants into researchers, but because it will help in the demystification of academic knowledge. Chapter 4, more than any of the others, points in this direction.

OTHER PRINCIPLES

We are conscious, now, of some omissions in our initial account. Two matters in particular deserve further comment. One is the question of representation and its control. The other concerns the broader context in which research is applied – for instance, policy-making.

The power to represent is an important one. During the process of writing up, the social identities of researcher and researched lose part of the fluidity they had during fieldwork, and move towards much greater fixity. One reason for advocating interactive methods lies in the opportunities they provide for participants actively to redefine themselves. Is this negated at the moment of textual representation, when it is the researcher who inevitably takes up a dominating role in selecting and mediating the talk of her subjects?

Feedback can have a role to play here. Rampton (chapter 2), consciously sought 'informed consent' for his representations. For him, the movement to monologic, textual representation for an academic readership was routed through further dialogue with his informants about his findings.

We also have to recognise that empowerment within the micro-context of the research process may entail different considerations from empowerment at the macro-level. To represent informants effectively within the academic frame, so as to influence future research and policy, the voice of the researcher is conventionally privileged. But even where researchers do seek to exert influence 'on behalf of' research subjects and the groups they belong to, researcher-advocacy is not the only option. Potentially useful research findings could be made available to

subjects in a form which they themselves can understand – then any advocacy can be instigated by them.

We should now turn more directly to the relation between research and policy, or, more broadly, to the question of the institutional context of research. Although this is an important area, we have had little to say about it. Our own projects have been small-scale and individual. Larger-scale research would have been much more likely to raise a number of fundamental questions about control, funding and application.

Larger-scale research requires greater resources. It is often research commissioned by institutions who are the paymasters of the project. Where there are agendas to be set, those paymasters may feel they have some right to an influence here. Indeed they may have commissioned research with their own interests specifically in mind. Of course, research sponsorship is not intrinsically malign – a researcher who feels compromised in accepting Ministry of Defence money may not feel so if the money comes from the National Health Service.

Some research involves field relations which considerably complicate attempts to be fully open about research agendas. This is especially true with 'triangular' field relations (i.e. those involving researchers, professionals and 'clients', e.g. researchers, youth workers, youth group members; researchers, health workers, patients; researchers, teachers, pupils, and so on). Triangular field relations can be difficult for would-be empowering research, for the desire to empower the client group can involve tensions between researchers and professionals where the latter become conscious that their professional conduct is under critical scrutiny. In other cases, research can be in the public eye not just when it is published, but also when it is in process. Researchers who feel the pressure of this spotlight are often forced to devote a lot of attention to conclusions formulated in advance by people with little sympathy or understanding of the work.

There is also the question of the after-life of research products and the relation of the researcher and researched to that after-life. This has three aspects – local, academic and public. There is a 'local' after-life, of products such as the videotape and the photo-magazine (see chapters 4 and 5), within the community where the products were instigated. It is desirable that academic research should generate such products, and desirable too that they should remain within the control of the researched. There is an academic after-life, of the scholarly articles and books, in so far as they have effects upon the current debates within particular fields of study. And there is after-life in the broader public sphere, where public knowledge and attitudes are shaped, and where policy is formed. Here the researcher can follow the researched into relative powerlessness – losing control of where and how the ideas are disseminated. Obviously, researchers need to think about the potential

public uptake of their work, and before committing themselves to a programme of research which might reinforce popular (or scholarly) prejudices and misapprehensions.

THE VALUE OF RESEARCH

In this section we want to account for why it is that we are not arguing for the abandonment of 'research'. Some of our arguments have pointed in that direction. Yet each case study shows we have all presented our activities in terms of their contribution to *research*. The value of research, as an activity distinct from education, and distinct from community action, should be emphasised.

On the one hand, we want to be as clear as we can about what it is we reject in certain traditional notions of what research is, and how this relates to our endorsement of realist over positivist epistemology. On the other hand, we should (if we can) put something in the place of the rejected notions, for we do not want to leave ourselves open to the misinterpretation that we are working with a conception of research so loose as to be vacuous, one in which anything is research that we choose to describe so.

It is important that research continues to be a distinct activity for political reasons. That is, it is politically important to protect a space for the pursuit of knowledge as a valued human enterprise – even if we cannot, in pushing this claim, fall back on the simplistic and misguided argument that the pursuit of knowledge is valuable in so far as it is 'disinterested'. It is also important that the criteria by which research is to be identified should be explicit, for if they are not, then we are dealing with a kind of knowledge which only insiders can really understand, and even their understanding is only tacit.

It is possible to define research in terms of the fairly obvious institutional criteria which it has to satisfy. These are the criteria which Cameron has discussed above (chapter 5): a piece of work is research if it gets a Ph.D., gets published in academic journals, is part of a body of knowledge judged to be authoritative, is valued by accredited academics. There is room for scepticism about the value of some of the work that historically has satisfied these criteria. But that scepticism lacks bite in the absence of an alternative set of criteria that relates to what research *should* be like, to *deserve* accreditation within institutional frameworks.

What, then, do we need to say on the more positive side? Here the danger is that our characterisation will be a wholly idealistic one, indifferent to the practical limitations which prevent all actual projects from achieving perfection. But perhaps it is a good thing to begin by setting out the goals a researcher might be trying to reach.

One goal will be that of originality. By this we mean the desire to generate or elaborate alternative perspectives, to look at old questions in new ways (and not just produce new data). Another goal will be that of sustained thought and thorough analysis, using procedures that one at least tries to be accountable about. It is also a requirement of good research that it respond to the existing literature on the topic, and engage with the most sophisticated existing formulations – these will not necessarily be the most recent. And finally it is probably a characteristic of good research that it will involve a great deal of care and time if the foregoing requirements are to be met.

In the light of this, we must acknowledge that the requirements of research *qua* research, and not youth work or teaching, will set limits upon the extent to which a project can be planned and run collaboratively, and thus become empowering. There can be quite distinct temporal phases in any research project and questions of empowerment cannot be foregrounded equally at every phase: the 'findings' frequently emerge only after a period of solitary analysis, away from the field and interaction with the informants. The requirements we have outlined are all clearly responsibilities which fall upon the researcher, not upon the *researched*. It would be unrealistic, not to say perverse, to ask the researched to think about the most sophisticated existing formulations of some issue in sociological/linguistic research. Similarly, once a project is committed to engaging with the agenda of the researched (which need not be a research agenda) this may problematise aspects of what the researcher wants to do, or put pressure upon them. We recognise that this is a potential point of tension for empowering research, and that in any particular project there will be compromises. Yet the compromises need not invalidate the research: despite the difficulties, empowering objectives are worth pursuing. In this volume we have tried to explore both the problems and the possibilities.

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