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Researching vulnerable multilinguals: Developing an inclusive research practice

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1. Introduction

The BAAL-CUP seminar 'Researching vulnerable multilinguals: Developing an inclusive research practice' was organised by Dr. Alexandra Georgiou, University of West London and Dr. Sara Ganassin, Newcastle University. It brought together 25 academics from different fields (e.g., applied linguistics, intercultural communication, education, linguistics) who engaged in discussions about the theoretical and methodological challenges they face in their work.

The seminar organisers are members of BAAL Multilingualism Special Interest Group (SIG), which aims to develop a broad-based community of researchers in applied and sociolinguistics with expertise in multilingualism and linguistic diversity. The BAAL-CUP seminar builds on a previous event organised by the SIG in June 2021, 'Success stories of refugees in Europe: Celebrating the contributions of children and highly skilled adults'. The 2021 event aimed to promote the linguistic and cultural contributions of refugees in Europe with a focus on social, educational, and professional inclusion. After its successful completion, we thought that an in-person event that further explores issues of multilingualism and vulnerability through the lens of 'researching multilingually' would be beneficial to early career researchers, including postgraduate students and established academics from different disciplines.

2. Background and rationale to the seminar

The increasing mobility and migration, together with more recent events in Afghanistan and Ukraine, have resulted in the UK becoming more linguistically and culturally diverse. This reality requires researchers to be able to meet the linguistic, cultural, and social demands defined by the new reality and to openly and critically discuss the concept of inclusive research in depth (Blommaert & Backus, 2013; Georgiou, 2022; Pinter, 2014). That is why we consider the theme of researching vulnerable multilinguals to be of particular importance at this point for researchers in applied linguistics and other fields in social sciences.

The BAAL-CUP seminar centred on the concept of 'vulnerability' and how, as researchers in the social sciences, we can develop and promote 'best practice' when engaging with multilingual partici- pants. The seminar's theoretical focus was informed by researching multilingually theory and practice (Holmes et al., 2013, 2022). Researching multilingually includes:

the process and practice of using, or accounting for the use of, more than one language in the research process, e.g., from the initial design of the project, to engaging with

different literatures, to developing the methodology and considering all possible ethical issues, to generating and analysing the data, to issues of representation and reflexivity when writing up and publishing. (Holmes et al., 2016, p. 101)

As organisers we were especially interested in promoting best practice through the development of "researcher purposefulness", which refers to the informed and intentional research(er) thinking and decision-making that results from an awareness and thorough consideration of the possibilities for and complexities of all aspects of the research process (Holmes et al., 2016).

3. Focus of the seminar

While the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in many international and virtual opportunities that may have not been possible previously, we were convinced that a face-to-face event could have been more beneficial and impactful (i.e., networking and exchange of best practice).

The seminar had the following objectives:

- Promoting good practice in applied linguistics research with focus on work with vulnerable multilinguals (adults or children).
- Bringing together academics from different disciplines to discuss the theoretical and methodological challenges when working with issues of 'vulnerability' and 'multilingualism' in social sciences.
- Offering an opportunity to early career researchers and Ph.D. candidates to enhance existing relationships and develop future collaborations with more established members of the academic community.
- Providing guidance to participants on how to exhibit researcher sensitivity and gain an in-depth understanding of the power differences between researchers and the researched.
- Sharing up-to-date empirical research on themes related to the interplay of 'multilingualism' and 'vulnerability'.

The event followed the format of a poster session. Participants were asked to produce a poster and during that session present their work to the other participants and engage in critical discussions. Early career researchers and established academics came together and showcased their projects that illustrated issues of theoretical and methodological challenges when working with vulnerable multilinguals with an aim to promote an inclusive agenda. The posters represented the interdisciplinary nature of the event and covered research areas that included heritage language and identity, internet-based methodologies, multilingual and migrant education, special-needs education, ethnolinguistic identities, and cognitive linguistics.

The event also featured two keynote speakers with expertise on issues around language, migration and policy concerning multilingualism in the UK: Dr. Mohammed Ateek (University of Birkbeck) and Dr. Judith Reynolds (University of Manchester). Dr. Ateek's presentation 'Language analysis for determination of origin (LADO) and whether it works' explored how LADO is used as a gatekeeper by the Home Office with a focus on the perspectives of asylum seeker-participants who went through the process.

In the presentation 'Striving for inclusivity in an exclusionary environment – conducting research with refugees and asylum seekers in the UK', Dr. Reynolds reported and reflected on her own efforts to work ethically, responsibly, and reflexively with asylum seekers and refugees during her linguistic ethnographic doctoral study of communication in refugee and asylum legal advice meetings in the UK context.

After the plenary session, the audience had the opportunity to raise questions. The main themes that occurred from this Q&A were the need for moving beyond the deficit approach that sees multilingualism as a problem, the importance of navigating labels, the problem with the term 'vulnerability' when it comes to the agency that people have, and the importance of acknowledging multiplicity in one's identity.

This was the first in-person event that we organised after the COVID-19 pandemic and in addition to the opportunity to discuss critical matters that opened up new pathways in exploring issues of ethics when conducting multilingual research with vulnerable participants, researchers were able to network with scholars in their areas of expertise, enhance existing relationships and start discussions for future collaborations.

The next step is to develop an edited publication on the topics of the seminar with contributions from the seminar participants and the wider academic community.

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