

Residential courses

Researching multilingualism: key concepts, methods & issues

These two 5-day residential courses were designed for post-Foundation doctoral researchers and for (early careers) post-doctoral researchers who are engaged in research on multilingualism .

They were organised as part of an advanced research training project on Researching multilingualism, multilingualism in research practice (RES 046-25-0004), funded by the ESRC under its Researcher Development Initiative (RDI), from May 2010 to April 2013.

The aim was to build a network of researchers who are concerned with the refinement, consolidation and development of approaches to the study of multilingualism in different contexts. This RDI project took forward the work initiated in the highly successful RDI project on Ethnography, language and communication (coordinated by Ben Rampton and colleagues at King's College, University of London), January 2007-December 2009.

The 5-day courses were the first of a series of advanced research training activities which were organised in collaboration with other researchers across the UK. The other activities included: 5 follow-up support days, organised as small group clinics related to the research interests of participants; one day regional workshops in England, Scotland and Wales; a 2-day workshop on transcribing bilingual discourse; 2 master classes (with Alastair Pennycook and Monica Heller) and a final conference for those involved in the teaching of research methods.

Researching multilingualism

The last two decades have seen a rapidly growing interest, internationally, in research on bilingualism and multilingualism. This is largely due to the significant linguistic, cultural and demographic changes that have been ushered in by globalisation, by transnational population flows, by the advent of new technology, by the changing political and economic landscape of Europe and the accession of new nation-states to the European Union and, in the UK, by language policy changes introduced in the wake of political devolution.

The last two decades have also seen the emergence of new strands of research on multilingualism and new lines of enquiry which have incorporated critical and post-structuralist perspectives from social theory and which have embraced new epistemologies and research methods. Different research strategies have been employed in different kinds of sociolinguistic spaces: in local neighbourhoods, across transnational diaspora, in multilingual workplaces, complementary schools/community classes, mainstream educational settings, health care centres, religious gatherings, legal settings, bureaucratic encounters and in the mass media, on the internet. Researchers have provided detailed accounts of face to face encounters in multilingual settings and in mediated, virtual interactions. They have also explored the interface between spoken and written language use and multimodality, seeking connections between local situated practices and wider social processes.

These new strands of research on multilingualism have not only deepened our understanding of the particularities of the multilingual practices emerging in specific research sites. They have also begun to provide new insights into the nature of the changes taking place within the wider communicative order. Research in multilingual settings is thus making a significant contribution to the forging of a new sociolinguistics which is better attuned to the description and analysis of the profound linguistic, cultural and societal changes taking place in the late modern era.

Multilingualism in research practice

Multilingualism is also becoming a significant dimension of research practice in some areas of social science, due to the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity of contemporary society. This is particularly evident in research that is of relevance to social and educational policy in multilingual urban contexts. Monolingual researchers increasingly find themselves seeking bilingual assistance from interpreters and translators at different points in the research process (e.g. in producing bilingual questionnaires, translating or transcribing audio-recorded interviews, conducting advisory group meetings, consulting with stakeholders or in disseminating research findings in different languages). This throws up key epistemological issues and questions relating to researcher identity and to asymmetries of power in the knowledge-building process. In Wales and Scotland, there are now legally binding requirements within the public sector regarding the use of languages other than English (e.g. in Wales, the requirement under the Welsh Language Act of 1993 to treat Welsh and English on a basis of equality).

Some social research in bilingual or multilingual settings involves collaboration between researchers speaking different languages or with different degrees of proficiency in those languages, but research timetables rarely allow opportunities for reflection on the production of knowledge in more than one language or on the nature and significance of interpretation and translation in the research process.

This RDI offered a forum for researchers across the social sciences who are working in multilingual settings, in the UK and elsewhere, to engage in dialogue about bilingual ways of working and to consider the issues arising from work in multilingual teams. It is also hoped that it served as a route into research on bilingualism and multilingualism for social scientists who speak one of the languages widely spoken in the UK. There is, at present, a rather small pool of bilingual researchers who are qualified to undertake world-class research on bilingualism or multilingualism in contemporary social life.

The 5-day residential courses at Birmingham

The 5-day courses were organised into sessions, with different themes and orienting theories. The sessions were led by different members of the MOSAIC Centre for Research on Multilingualism and by guest lecturers.

- Session 1: Researching multilingualism: why, what and how?
- Session 2: Discourses about multilingualism
- Session 3: From policy to communicative practice in multilingual schools and classrooms
- Session 4: Bilingual practitioners in monolingual institutional contexts
- Session 5: Creating multilingual spaces: complementary schools and local life worlds
- Session 6: From language policy to bilingual education practice
- Session 7: Literacy practices in bilingual and multilingual educational contexts
- Session 8: Multilingual literacy practices in local life worlds (including the internet)
- Session 9: Multilingualism in research practice

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