

Researching multilingualism multilingually: insights, reflections and future directions

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As Martin-Jones and Martin (2017:1) highlight developments in the ways that we have come to understand and conceptualise language and multilingualism over the last 15-20 years ‘have obliged us to adjust our research lenses and recast our research methodologies’. In a similar way Blommaert (2010) also notes that the multilingual turn (May 2013) ‘stretches the limits of existing frameworks for analysing and understanding multilingualism and the dynamics of language change’ (Blommaert 2010:8). As ideologies surrounding multilingualism shift and evolve so to then, must our approaches and methods. Methodologically, linguistic ethnography seeks to provide insight into how communication occurs between individuals and institutions, while situating these local actions within wider social, political and historical contexts (Creese & Blackledge 2015). It has proven to be a particularly effective tool for developing our understanding of individuals’ lived multilingual realities (Unamuno 2014) and societal multilingualism particularly in complex contexts and interactions such as schools and classrooms (Copland & Creese 2015; Creese & Blackledge 2015; Pérez-Milan 2015).

Turning the ‘reflexive gaze’ that is central to ethnography (Clifford & Marcus 1986) back onto linguistic ethnography itself, we draw on preliminary data and findings from a two-year British Academy GCRF funded-project examining translanguaging and other multilingual practices in Zambia, Botswana and Tanzania to argue that where complex multilingual interactions are the object of study, more attention must be given to how multilingualism shapes the research process. In this paper we outline the development of three principles - 1) Researching multilingually; 2) Researching collaboratively; and 3) Researching responsively - that we put forward as being essential in developing and conducting contemporary linguistic ethnography in multilingual settings (Costley & Reilly 2021). We further explore how these might be taken up and adapted by other disciplines within linguistics.