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The Skewed Voices and Lost Meaning: The Reflections of Multilingual Issues in the Cross-cultural Context

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to discuss the correlative effects of multilingualism, as it is associated within a cross-cultural context. Strategies that were used to assure language accuracy and reliability of the study will also be discussed.

As globalization becomes increasingly a product of our discourse, the need to discuss the increasing impact it has on cross-cultural and multilingual issues becomes more prevalent among researchers. Either engaging research participants of different cultural and linguistic background in studies, or making collaboration with researchers of different nationalities, many indicated doing research in a cross-cultural context is a complex and challenging process. This is most evident in cases in which the perceived social status and cultural values of the researcher(s) and the research participants intersect to shape the power dynamics of the research project (Merriam, Ntseane, Lee, Kee, Johnson-Bailey & Muhamad, 2000).

Multilingual Issues in the Cross-cultural Context

The issue, which often emerges within cross-cultural research, is the phenomenon of multilingualism, whereby researchers find that more than one language is spoken and/or written throughout the research process. The employment of multiple languages in the research process directly affects how researchers make sense out of the research participants' words, as well as how they present their lived experiences. It further raises the question about the reliability of what was found or how it was presented. For instance, one might ask: *When multiple languages are used in the process of knowledge production and dissemination, in what ways the experience and meaning of the research participants could be best captured and presented?* I will share briefly some of my reflections on my own research as well as others.

Decision-making and Strategies in Multilingual Research Context

The aforementioned question was elucidated in a study I conducted to explore the impact of Chinese cultural values on shaping the process of meaning-making. This study elaborated on how the multilingual phenomenon affected every stage of the research process (Lee, 1999). I found that in order to deal with multilingual phenomenon in the cross-cultural context, as a researcher, I had to constantly choose the "right" language throughout the data collection and analysis phases. First, in order to make sure that the research participants of this study had been significantly affected by Chinese culture, I purposefully selected individuals who had lived in Chinese culture for at least twenty-five years prior to moving or immigrating to the U. S. Since

the purpose of this study was to understand the meaning-making process from the standpoint of the research participants, it was extremely important for me to give the research participants an opportunity to express themselves fully and freely. Therefore, the choice of which language an individual chose to use during the interview phase was decided by the participants and not the researcher.

All participants in this study chose to speak Chinese, with the exception of using a few phrases and sentences which were mixed with English and/or Taiwanese dialect. The interview guide was initially developed in English and was translated into Chinese by the researcher and verified by a Taiwanese Chinese, who specialized in Chinese, English and Taiwanese dialect. This assistant had also completed a doctoral degree in Comparative Literature.

My dilemma, as a researcher, was then to determine which language ought to be used for transcription and data analysis, and to ascertain to what extent the translation effects the correct and proper presentation of the meaning made by the research participants. All the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed in Chinese. The first two interviews were translated into English. Since I am bilingual, it was decided, after talking to a research expert in this area, that I did not have to translate their words verbatim from Chinese to English. Thus, the majority of the texts from the transcripts remained in Chinese. However, they were analyzed in English by the researcher. Only the quotes, which were selected to appear in the findings, were translated into English. The translated quotes were again verified by the aforementioned professional to determine if the English translated quote matched the original Chinese data. The translated quotes and the findings were sent to the research participants for feedback. This process contributed to the final construction of narrative themes.

In addition to my own research, other researchers who conduct studies on the multilingual factors that effect the research process also seem to make similar language decisions throughout the research process (Wolf, 1996). In most cases, the language reliability of the studies depended on the bilingual abilities of the researchers, and/ or an outside professional translator to assure the accuracy of the language, especially the quotes used in the study. As a qualitative researcher who thought that I had made the best language decision given the available time and resource, I still found myself asking questions like: *Despite these adopted strategies, is there anything else that a researcher can do to increase the language reliability of study? Should we heavily depend on the bilingual ability of the researcher to analyze and present the data? To what extent translation is needed to assure the meaning of the participants was correctly and properly represented?*

The most significant issue associated with research conducted with multilingual individuals is that the differences between the languages affect the researchers' ability to fully convey the participants' voices. It is a common understanding among those collecting data on same language individuals that some of the meanings made by the research participants might get lost in the data collection, transcription and analysis phase. Yet, many believe that the overall meaning remains intact. However, when the researchers use different languages for data collection, transcribing and analysis, it is more difficult to maintain the same level of reliability since the language itself is the direct medium that structures, represents, and gives meaning to one's thoughts and experience. *So, what if there are no matching words available in another language to correctly*

convey the meaning made by the participants? How could one present accent and dialect in another language if those are relevant elements? Is it possible that the reliability is deeply embedded in the language and affected by translation, therefore, the slightly loss of the meaning could only be accepted if other strategies are reasonably applied?

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