Ethical Considerations in Language Policy Research

Suresh Canagarajah, Pennsylvania State University
Phiona Stanley, UNSW Australia


Introduction
If language planning and policy (LPP) is about “deliberate efforts to influence the behavior of others with respect to the acquisition, structure, or functional allocations of their language codes” (Cooper 1989, 45), ethical considerations become very significant. Researchers have to consider the ethics relating to the why and how of influencing other people’s behavior. LPP has to navigate often tense inter-community relations and conflicting points of view about preferred language policies in a nation. The ethics of reconciling these tensions are especially important in policies relating to minority populations, who are often researched upon than researching.

However, the dominant rational or positivist tradition in LPP (see Ricento and Hornberger 1996), which assumes that policies should be based on objective assessments of the needs, processes, and outcomes of language relationships, might prevent one from addressing the ethics of LPP research. Considerations of language identity, attitudes, and allegiance are not always rational, pragmatic, or objective. They are deeply ideological. As such, language policies are difficult to predict or manage. Furthermore, community needs and attitudes may be ambivalent, the processes of implementing policy can be multifarious, and the outcomes of policy unpredictable. It is not uncommon to find ambiguities, tensions, and paradoxes in policy/practice relationship. When LPP researchers address these issues and promote alternatives, there will be a need to address ethical considerations.

Ethics is becoming important in research as well as in policy as we witness a critical turn in LPP and other domains of scholarly inquiry (see Canagarajah, 1996). While the positivistic tradition adopted the stance of objectivity, neutrality, and disinterestedness, the critical tradition engages with issues of power inequality, value differences, and subject positions as they influence the representation of knowledge, researchers and participants. Even in cases of textual analysis that many LPP researchers undertake, one has to be wary of interpreting the “absent” voices of the original authors, stakeholders, and communities addressed.
Background
That all research activity has to be sensitive to ethics was strikingly conveyed by some early studies with minority populations. From 1932 to 1972, the US Public Health Service conducted a study of the progression of untreated syphilis in Tuskegee, Alabama, among 412 African American men. This study is remembered today for its highly unethical nature. Its marginalised, minority participants were not informed they had the disease, were not told the true nature of the study, and were prevented from seeking treatment, even after penicillin became available in the late 1940s. Many others in the community were infected and many died from what, by the end of the study, was a curable condition. Another example conveyed the unethical use of power. In Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram’s experiments in the early 1960s, volunteers were placed in the role of “teacher.” They were told that their task was to teach words to a volunteer “learner,” whose incorrect answers would result in electric shocks of increasing severity. The learner, actually a co-researcher, was placed in an adjacent room. The study’s true purpose was to understand obedience to authority. Volunteer “teachers” were told to administer the shocks to which, in response, they heard shouts, screams, banging on the wall, and then silence. These responses were, in fact, pre-recorded and no electric shocks were actually administered. Although many of the volunteers questioned the experiment on hearing the apparent “learner” responses, and although most displayed a great deal of tension and stress, the vast majority continued administering the supposed electric shocks because they were told to do so by a person in authority. Again, the research was ethically highly problematic: participants were deceived as to the true nature of the study and severe emotional abuse was inflicted.

As a result of these and other ethical abuses in research, since the 1970s it has been necessary to have all academic research involving human subjects reviewed by institutional review boards or ethics committees (Gil and Bob 1999; Haggerty 2004; Blee and Currier 2011). Such boards consider detailed research proposals against core criteria of ethical research practice: i.e., informed consent, minimisation of the potential for harm, confidentiality, the implications for participants of dissemination of findings, and protection of vulnerable populations and individuals (Ryan n.d.)

But this is not to say that ethics is simply a question of filling out the necessary paperwork to satisfy an ethics review board’s checklist. A number of academics have critiqued existing ethics review processes as insufficient or otherwise unfit for purpose (Jackson 2010; Thomas and Byford 2003; Barton 2011; Blee and Currier 2011; Haggerty 2004; Whitborne et al. 2006). While it is obviously necessary to have all human-participant research be conducted ethically, and the mandate of ethics review boards is to ensure exactly that, the aim of this chapter is to convey our belief that this, alone, is not enough. Rather than “doing ethics” being about filling out a form and getting committee approval, we see “doing ethics” as an iterative, intellectual and, above all, an integral part of research. So while it is necessary to have a research project approved by a committee, it is also essential to engage with and manage ethical issues arising at all stages of research—i.e., from deciding what to study, through data gathering and its
attendant tensions and compromises, to the ethical re-presentation of the participants’ stories in texts. Increasingly, professional organizations are providing more comprehensive guidelines for their members, especially as they relate to the research in their own fields (see, for example, http://www.aaanet.org/cmtes/ethics/IRB.cfm for the guidelines by the American Anthropological Association).

Rather than providing an ethics checklist, as many review committees do, our aim is to equip researchers with the necessary principles with which to consider the ethics of their research from the ground up. What follows are not, therefore, rules. Instead, we suggest that all discussions of aims, research questions, data production, data analysis, writing up and the like are infused with big, important questions of ethics right from the beginning. Framed like this, we believe, ethics is rather more exciting than a series of institutional hoops to jump through. We explore these issues in three broad areas: assessing the interests motivating research; managing researcher identity; and representing the “researched.” These three issues, relevant to all research but particularly salient to research among linguistic minorities in LPP, are discussed in the hope that they will guide researchers in their practice.

**Whose interests?**
The core ethical question in all research is a simple but large one: what is the purpose of doing the study? While the honest (and practical) answer may be selfish—i.e., to get a PhD or to get published—it is hoped that researchers also have some greater benefit in mind. This may mean, ideally, benefit to the study participants themselves. As an example, while Phiona Stanley’s (2013) study of Western English-language teachers’ roles and identities in China got her a PhD and, subsequently, a book publication, it also produced benefits of different types for study participants. In the final chapter of the book, Stanley includes excerpts from interviews with the participants in which they reflect on the process of participating in the research, for example:

> The process allowed me to speak about what I had been noticing and see if it actually made sense. ... These were pretty formative times for me ... my life was changing. ... And when I talk things out I figure things out. ... So our interviews have been useful, to talk some of these things out, to figure out what I think about things and what I’m doing with my life. (Beth "interview" 18/01/2011)

(Stanley 2013, 248-249)

This participant’s benefits from participating in and reading the study include her own professional and intellectual development and the chance to talk over, figure out, and think about bigger issues than might be discussed in day-to-day conversations.

Evaluating the purpose and benefits of a research project allows for a harm-benefit analysis to be undertaken, and this is one of the philosophical cornerstones of “doing ethics.” However, some research proposals are nevertheless tricky to get through ethics committees. Alarm bells may ring for review panel members at the mention of participant children, or minorities, or people whose legal status in the country of research is uncertain. Researching
across languages and research that may re-traumatisate participants may also cause consternation. An example of such a “perfect storm” in research ethics might be researching unaccompanied minors seeking asylum as refugees. Yet Thomas and Byford (2003) write that “[r]esearch into the needs of children seeking asylum is essential to improve their care” (1400). The cost-benefit analysis in this case is such that, even though there are many potential ethical issues, there is a pressing need to understand, and improve the care of, such children. Therefore, research is justified.

This may not mean interviewing the children themselves, however, and this is a good example of where ethics intersects with research methodology. There may be more effective as well as more ethical ways to reach understandings of the children’s experiences. Interviewing may be ineffective in such a context because refugee children, particularly those who have had negative experiences of being interviewed by authorities including police, may be “bewildered and frightened” by interviewers and may be unable to articulate their needs or experiences (Thomas and Byford 2003, 1401). In addition, informed consent is problematic if participants do not fully understand the purpose of the research or if they feel coerced into participating, perhaps in the belief that doing so will improve their chances of gaining asylum. It may therefore be as effective as well as more ethical to consult refugee organisations, social workers, and/or health-care workers, rather than focusing directly on interviewing refugee children themselves. However, other methods such as member-check or brief participant observation should be adopted to ensure that the perspectives of the children themselves are not marginalized.

Furthermore, what is considered ethically appropriate by the scholarly community may not be what is preferred by the community studied. In cases where researchers have gone to the field with the assumption that maintaining the vernacular is the ethical position, they have been surprised to find the community arguing for other alternatives that are important for their social and geographical mobility. For instance, Canagarajah found that Tamil migrants in UK, USA, and Canada wanted to learn English rather than maintain their heritage language (Canagarajah 2011b).

In many cases of LPP research, it may also not be easy to decide what is good for the community studied. The community’s preference can never be easily predicted. There could be conflicting values at play in a community’s preference for languages. This is what Hornberger (1988) finds of Quechua maintenance in Puno, Peru. She finds that the country’s new bilingual education policy is successful in developing bilingualism in Spanish and Quechua (enabling indiginous children to maintain their language, become educationally successful, and develop pride in their identity). However, Quechua parents are not supportive of this project. They are influenced by the assumption that Quechua should be reserved for local domains of use (which can, therefore, be learnt at home) and Spanish for public domains (which should be learnt in schools). They misunderstand bilingual education as focusing only on the teaching of the indigenous language, rather than being committed to both dominant and minority languages. Hornberger finds that it is important to work from within
the community in promoting positive language ideologies, so that parents participate in educational changes, making their own contributions to the direction and implementation of the policy.

The interests of certain development agencies can also deviate from what might be good for the community. In some cases, LPP researchers have not been happy about being commissioned to carry out their research to directly serve the interests of policy makers. Robinson-Pant (2001), asked by a western NGO to develop a literacy policy that would help in the development of health among women in Nepal, discusses many ways in which her work does not fit the interests of external agencies. She concludes, "Designing and conducting ethnographic research in a literacy policy context is far more problematic than making use of ethnographic findings from academic research projects for informing policy" (2001, 168; emphasis in original). She finds that the policy imperatives dictate a structure of questions that strait-jacket the researcher, when the researcher prefers the flexibility to pursue emerging hypotheses during the course of the research. There is also less space for reflexive exploration, enabling researchers to critique and revise their own assumptions; the policy focus requires them to be more objective. In terms of literacy, Robinson-Pant finds that she was expected to focus more on easily quantifiable literacy events rather than the more interpretive literacy practices. In other words, the researcher was expected to look for measurable data and not the more nebulous meanings and orientations of the community. This expectation derives from the rational/positivistic tradition which treats quantification as leading to more valid findings. Finally, at the stage of project reports, the researcher has to write short/abstract texts and not extended narratives. In this case, she found that the interests of the policy group came with its own values and agenda that restricted the ability of the researcher to address the needs and preferences of the community in a meaningful way.

How do we resolve such tensions between the positions of the researchers and the researched? LPP researchers have felt motivated to engage in a conversation that is clarifying for both parties (see Jaffe 1999). For example, though language maintenance in the interest of preserving linguistic ecology is a deeply held view of many linguists, the Rabari nomads in India (Dyer and Choksi 2001) and Quechua in Peru (Hornberger 1988) are not committed to preserving their language. They prefer to move out of their marginalization by mastering the dominant codes. The research encounter can then become a conversation between different points of view. The researcher can help the community think critically about their linguistic future, rights, and statuses. Rather than remaining detached in the name of objectivity, LPP researchers can help community members interrogate conflicting viewpoints on language relationships and clarify their interests. There are many ways in which this might happen. Some scholars design their study as action research, whereby they solicit the involvement of the participants in shaping their research. The research questions and data elicitation methods are collaboratively constructed, helping both the researcher and the participants to dialogue on the questions and findings that are locally relevant. In other cases, researchers find that the very process of research encourages their participants to reflect on their planning
options and formulate new policies. For example, during interviews, participants are not simply articulating past or preconstructed beliefs, but articulating new possibilities influenced by the questions of the researcher. While the informant thus engages with the knowledge constructs of the interviewer, the latter should also be open to reconfigure his/her knowledge based on the dialogue. Triangulation of data sources would enable the researcher to critique his/her assumptions in relation to the points of view emerging in the study.

**Researcher identity**

Another important ethical question that pertains to research among linguistic minorities is researcher identity: Who are you to your respondents, and what are the effects of your identity on the research? These are questions researchers must constantly negotiate. In answering these questions, it is necessary to return to the notion of identity as intersectional (Graham et al. 2009; see also Lin, this volume). While both the researcher and the respondents may be, for example, Bangladeshi women or Sri Lankan Tamil transnationals, there may nevertheless be other important identity markers that create social and relational barriers. Is the researcher, for example, highly educated, American-resident, short-haired, and wearing what appear to be “men’s shoes” while the research participants appear more “feminine”, are poorly educated, and have rarely left their Bangladeshi villages (Sultana 2007)? Or is the interlocutor a newly arrived Tamil carwash attendant proudly speaking Canadian English while the researcher, a suburban-resident university professor, tries to engage him in Tamil about the washing of his SUV (Canagarajah 2011a)?

Canagarajah (2011a) describes the nuanced identity markers and complex status performances among heterogenous Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora communities. There are, he shows, status differences between those who migrated at different times and situational identities marked by the varieties of English spoken. These intersectionalities are layered onto employment, class, and other differences, resulting in a constellation of associated communities among which a researcher might “shuttle”, forming and performing identities rather than assuming that some shared identity labels make for shared identities. So instead of taking commonality for granted, it is necessary for researchers to consider their own positionality relative to that of their research participants along as many axes of intersectional identity as are relevant. Zubair, Martin and Victor (2010) were highly conscious of this in their research among elderly Pakistani Muslims in the UK and they describe how they adapted in the field, including dressing and behaving in culturally appropriate ways.

Positionality and relative power are ethical as well as validity issues in research because they determine the extent to which researchers can access participants’ own “truths”. Depending on who we are, or who we appear to be, we necessarily elicit different versions of participants’ truths. These are what we then work with to analyze participants’ data and re-present their narratives. Holliday (2002, 3-4), citing his own 1994 publication, gives an example of how researcher identity may affect data integrity:

> I was sitting in an Egyptian university faculty common room listening to a lecturer answering survey questions … The American interviewer was
going through the questions with her. ... Later on the lecturer “confided in me that what she had told him bore little relation to reality, but she had not wished to disappoint him by telling him that she could not answer most of his questions”. ... I do not think that the lecturer felt that she was “lying”. I feel that she was sincere in her response to what she considered a social commitment to being polite which outweighed the fact that she did not have all the information the researcher wanted. ... [S]he probably did not wish to reveal to this outsider that the official course timetable could never be maintained because lecturers spent all their time travelling by bus from the capital.

This is, perhaps, an extreme example, rendering the resultant “data” all but useless. But it illustrates a serious ethical and methodological consideration: researcher identity may influence, in unknowable ways, the data produced.

In many communities, local teachers and students who practice code mixing and switching in local classes hide this fact from outside researchers because they fear that such practices go against the monolingual and standard language assumptions of linguists, especially those from the West (see Canagarajah 2012, for examples). Similarly, the local community might pay lip service to popular teaching methods in elite learning institutions, hiding the locally evolved teaching traditions in their community, fearing that experts may look down on their pedagogies. Canagarajah (2012) reviews such tensions between the claims for communicative language teaching and the local realities of resistant traditions. Such divergence leads to skewed data and the imposition of dominant models of language and language teaching on the local community, on the assumption that these are models the community values.

To avoid such problems, researchers attempt to fit into the local community in an attempt to become insiders. Hornberger (1988, 4-11) provides a glimpse into the challenges for an LPP ethnographer in entering a culturally alien community to fit into its way of life, giving up her comfort zone, correcting her biases, and “discovering” the people’s values and thinking in the highland villages of Puno in Peru. Similarly, in a completely different setting, researchers sought to “fit in” to a community of cage fighters by:

immers[ing] ourselves in the physical, cultural, and sensorial lifeworld of our subjects by actually “getting into the ring”. During our study, we became amateur cage-fighters, secured positions as insiders in the... community [...] We experienced the various injuries that often plague combat athletes, such as broken noses, fingers, and toes; injured joints; cracked ribs; strained ligaments; and general fatigue. By subjecting ourselves to the daily trials of training we were able to become part of the fight world.

(Abramson and Modzelewski 2011, 147-148)

This was possible because of the researchers’ own biographies and the way they were able to present themselves and be received in the cage fighting community: both authors appeared similar to the individuals in our study,...This allowed us to blend in with cage-fighters with relative ease. ...[W]e had enough status in the subculture (bolstered by previous athletic and martial arts experience) to make successful authenticity claims [...]...For
example, the Judo black belt held by one of the authors is a marker of prestige ... it is enough to show that the athlete is serious about training and deserving of respect.

(Abramson and Modzelewski 2011, 149)

Though these are well-meaning efforts, we also have to ask at one point does “fitting in” become condescending, deceptive, or even coercive? We have to ethically negotiate the tensions between “going native” and being transparent about our interests and identities.

The insider/outsider dilemma doesn’t have to be paralyzing. In fact, those positions are rarely dichotomous. Our relative positionality provides us avenues for insider understanding as well as scholarly detachment. For example, in the research among diaspora Tamils cited above, Canagarajah is an insider in many ways as he is himself a Tamil migrant. However, besides this ethnic identity, his class status (as an educated professional) makes him an outsider to the community members in unskilled labor. His Christianity also sometimes sets him apart from the majority Hindus in his community. These diverse subject positions can be a resource for research. While Canagarajah has enough insider cultural savvy to pose meaningful questions and interpret the answers insightfully, his outsider status provides him an analytical detachment and estrangement that can help interpret the data from fresh points of view. Rather than treating insider status as the only valid stand point (as typical of some traditional versions of ethnography), researchers should acknowledge their diverse subject positions and negotiate them for deeper analytical insight.

Representation of Knowledge
There are myriad specific concerns when researchers work across languages and cultures, collecting data in original languages and presenting in a different language, for instance, or comparing data across different-language cohorts. One’s primary language and discourses also shape the way the researched community is understood and represented in the report. It has also been found that beyond fieldwork, as someone writes about one’s research in scholarly media, the dominant conventions relating to publishing shape the identity, views, and positions of the community researched. In this section, we discuss ethical issues raised by representation of what is studied.

Often disciplinary discourses and social ideologies influence us to represent communities in specific ways. A particular area in which the ethics relating to representation affects LPP is in the area of corpus planning. What constitutes the language of the community? It is now well known that all languages are ideological constructs (Kroskrity 2000). While this is true of English and other powerful languages, the definition of minority languages is often done in terms of linguists, colonial rulers, development agencies, and missionaries who visit the community. For example, the definition of 11 languages as “official” in South Africa is based on language labels constructed by powerful outsiders according to their own assumptions (Makoni 2002). The local people understand many of these as related languages. In this case, language policies have been based on a one-sided representation of the corpus.
Diverse values also enter into the stage of publishing one’s research. We must realize that writing/reporting research findings is no insignificant appendage to the research process. It is the written document that embodies, reflects, and often constitutes the whole research activity for the scholarly community. Since the reams of field notes, audio tapes, transcripts and statistical printouts are never conveniently available to the scholarly community, and the lengthy research process across many sites is rarely accessible for readers, it is understandable that the report is treated as proxy for the study. It is of some concern, therefore, that the genre conventions of research reporting can shape the reported data. Ethnographers George Marcus and Michael Fischer (1986) confess that “given the sort of heightened critical self-consciousness with which fieldwork is undertaken and conducted, the usual dissonance between what is known from fieldwork and what is constrained to report according to genre conventions can grow intolerable” (37). Natural scientists have also come to a position of acknowledging that genre conventions can have a predictive function and actively shape the research process. Peter Dear (1991) has noted the “ways in which literary forms can direct the cognitive content of science through constraining problem-choice or through requiring … particular kinds of theoretical and experimental formulation” (5). This insight is enabled by the radical awareness of contemporary scholars that “science is indeed fundamentally rhetorical, drenched as it is in language” (Selzer 1993, 13). The genres of academic writing are thus much more integral to research practice than we have traditionally assumed. If the written document holds such importance, it is necessary to understand the values it embodies and the ways in which it would mediate the research process.

Let us consider therefore the shaping of research knowledge by the values behind reporting conventions. The need for coherence in the report--achieved by the closure, the tight structure, and seamless writing--can hide the false starts, wrong moves, misleading tracks, and interpretive gambles that usually characterize the research process. There is a similar suppression of the gaps, contradictions, and conflicts in the data for the sake of textual coherence. The report thus gets considerably removed from the existential conditions of research. The genre conventions of objectivity and detachment can also function to suppress the mediation of various levels of discourses in the research process--such as, the values of the researcher, the values of the research methodology, the values of the discipline, and the values of the academic community concerned. In LPP research in specific, we must recall the example above from Robinson-Pant (2011) on how the expectation of quantitative and impersonal presentation in the project reports for the NGO’s suppressed the voices of the community. The dominant genres of policy reports in LPP are shaped by the rational/positivistic tradition and favour structured listing of policies and factors in the place of extended narratives and reflexive introspection.

Such abstraction and detachment have profound implications for the representation of the knower/researcher in the report. In some genres, the researcher is absent from the report, looming behind the text as an omniscient, transcendental, all knowing God-figure. This convention hides the manner in
which the subjectivity of the researcher—with his/her complex values, ideologies, and experiences—shapes the research activity and findings. In the case of LPP, a researcher’s own language ideologies and language politics might be particularly salient issues to attend to. In turn, how the research activity shapes the researcher’s subjectivity is not explored—though we know from personal experience and anecdotal evidence that research activity can sometimes profoundly affect the researchers’ sense of the world and themselves. Furthermore, the shifting/conflicting interests of the researcher—i.e., professional, personal, ideological—in carrying out the study are not acknowledged. Realizing the significant place of the “personal” in the construction of knowledge (see Rich 1989, for the politics of location), recent feminist scholarship has called for a complex reflexivity from the researcher to interrogate how he/she influences and is influenced by the research process (Harding 1991). However, such concerns do not enjoy adequate space in the traditional report genre.

The scope for adequately representing the voices of one’s subjects are similarly limited. Since the subjects exist in the report only through the voice of the researcher, there is a tendency for their complexity to be suppressed and their identity to be generalized (or essentialized) to fit the dominant assumptions and theoretical constructs of the researcher and the disciplinary community. The power relationships between the researcher and the subjects also get concealed in the objective report. If any production of knowledge demanding codification, systematization and categorization involves a measure of control and colonization (as poststructuralists argue), studying and analyzing powerless groups like minority groups or students becomes highly political. Giving voice and agency to minority communities becomes a challenge in academic research reporting. However, there is an urgency in giving voice to minority communities in LPP research, as their aspirations are often ignored or suppressed by the dominant policies and discourses constructed by the more powerful communities.

There are vigorous attempts at constructing new genres of research reporting in order to draw subjects into the representation of their community knowledge in more collaborative ways. Researchers are also moving away from the traditional scientific/objective genres to adopt autoethnography, narrative, and other creative formats to represent the research experiences with all its complexity (see Canagarajah 1996, for a review of emergent genres of writing).

**Conclusion**
The purpose of this chapter has been to raise and explore the types of questions that we hope researchers ask themselves about the ethics of their work, and model some of the negotiations undertaken by experienced researchers in looking for answers, or, at least, ways of resolving the dilemmas.

The articles cited in this chapter provide substantial descriptions of how the researchers managed ethical issues, including the risk/benefit analyses described in the first section of this chapter, the knotty negotiations of positionality that we discussed in the second part, and ways of representing the
knowledge of and about minority communities in the third. We have provided examples from a wide range of studies in the hope that interested readers might investigate further, through these papers and beyond, as we believe that one of the best ways of becoming good at research, and good at research ethics in particular, is by reading and evaluating existing research with these questions and discussions in mind. Note, however, that many of the publications cited in this chapter come from fields outside LPP. This partly reflects the long dominance of the rational/positivistic tradition that treated LPP as an objective enterprise. There is now a realization that such rational policies for post-colonial communities, for example, have failed to resolve the concerns of diverse language groups there. The unabated ethnic conflicts in many of these countries point to the failure in finding fair and satisfactory policies for multilingual communities. The developed communities in the Western hemisphere are also facing a crisis in dealing with diverse language groups within their national borders after experiences such as migration and transnational relations. Such experiences point to the need for more negotiated, ethical, and ideologically-informed methods for studying LPP questions. Hopefully, we will develop a better corpus of LPP studies that exemplify the treatment of ethics by researchers and policy makers.

However, as we believe that “doing ethics” is an integral part of doing research, we feel that one of the most important ways of learning about this area is to do it. This means having the discussions that arise from one’s particular research and keeping a personal journal of all the inevitable tensions and compromises that arise in the name of methodology, methods, and ethics. The problems and discussions raised in this paper are aimed at beginning this conversation. It is our hope that researchers will be inspired to carry on that conversation among themselves and with their subjects.
References


