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Introduction to the Special Issue: Innovation in Research Methods in Applied Linguistics

^{1,*}Seongsook Choi and ²Keith Richards

¹Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh and,

²Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick

*E-mail: s.choi@ed.ac.uk

This introduction provides a rationale for the papers in this special issue, establishing a link between these and last year's special issue on the subject of defining applied linguistics, and arguing the case for greater attention to be given to methodological issues in our field. Papers in the collection are briefly introduced in the context of five developments that make the publication of a collection on this topic particularly timely: the passing of existential angst, the end of the paradigm wars, the impact agenda, online opportunities, and technological advances.

INTRODUCTION

Last year saw the publication of a special issue of *Applied Linguistics* addressing the definitional challenges that have evolved with the field and identifying possible lines of development. This special issue might be considered a pendant to the picture developed there, focusing on emerging features of the methodological landscape that represent both challenges and opportunities. Its theme is innovation but it is not concerned with what is merely novel; its sweep is broader, exploring the relationship between methodological thinking and the evolution of new approaches within the discipline. In bringing these together, the collection aims to illustrate that methodological investment is as fundamental as theory building to disciplinary development.

This might seem a redundant claim given that the definition of applied linguistics provided by the International Association of Applied Linguistics mentions methods twice in its 52 words and refers to 'developing new theoretical and methodological frameworks'. It may also seem surprising in the light of burgeoning interest in research methodology as reflected in publishers' lists, academic programmes, resource banks, and training opportunities, so we begin this introduction by pointing to evidence that this general interest may not yet be reflected in how research is represented. We then point to recent developments that make this issue timely, relating these to the papers that appear in the collection, concluding with some observations on coverage.

In his introduction to the 2015 special issue, Hellermann included an interesting comparison between topics published in the journal in the first five

Table 1: Average proportion of methodological discussion by topic

Topic	Methodology (per cent)
L2 acquisition and use	27
Discourse (text) analysis	11
Sociolinguistics ^a	10
Language pedagogy	22

^aEnglish as a Lingua Franca, World Englishes, Language and National Identity.

issues (1980–4) and those published between 2009 and 2013. This showed reductions in the number of L2 and pedagogy papers and an increase in those focusing on discourse, but the most notable change was the emergence of sociolinguistic articles, comprising 11 per cent of all papers in the later period. We have extended the period by a further year to 2014 and calculated for each topic area the average proportion of the main text dedicated to methodological discussion (given in Table 1).

This was by any account a very rough calculation and it can be no more than indicative, but the results are nevertheless striking. One would expect more space to be dedicated to methods in the quantitative research that characterizes L2 acquisition research because of the need to provide details of instruments, and the relatively low figure for discourse studies reflects the number of papers using conversation analysis with its standard method, but the low proportion for sociolinguistics is more problematic. It is precisely here that Kramsch's (2015: 462) claim in her special issue paper that '[r]esearchers who use theories from various domains may be confronted with some methodological incompatibilities' is most likely to ring true and it is in precisely this area that methodological issues are most urgently debated. The challenges represented by research interviews, for example, have attracted widespread attention in themselves (e.g. Hammersley 2003; Potter and Hepburn 2012), in terms of theorization (e.g. Talmy 2010, Mann 2011) or from the perspective of particular interactional features (e.g. Roulston 2014), but are largely treated as unproblematic in methodological discussions.

Although this special issue is not intended as an argument for changes in editorial or reviewing practices, it does seek to underline the centrality of methodological considerations and the importance of making the link between philosophical issues (e.g. epistemological considerations) and the selection of research methods that was noticeably absent in the responses from academics interviewed by Bryman (2007: 13) about their research—and it aims to do so by illustrating how methodological thinking is intimately bound up with the development of new approaches in our field. In what follows, we highlight five developments that also make this focus particularly timely, relating each of them to a paper in the collection.

THE PASSING OF EXISTENTIAL ANGST

The confidence with which differences regarding the nature and coherence of applied linguistics were aired in last year's special issue is a testament to the discipline's status, whether conceived in terms of a richly diverse constellation with no claim to interdisciplinary legitimacy (Cook 2015) or a maturing interdisciplinary presence in the academy (Grabe 2010). This confidence allows for readier acceptance of methodological innovation or appropriation than is the case where these are seen as generating a centrifugal push away from a putative 'core'. A reflection of growing confidence is to be found in the seriousness with which the history of applied linguistics is starting to be taken and Richard Smith's contribution addresses this topic. The article makes two important contributions to the collection: it draws on methods from related fields, which is a form of appropriation that can itself inform innovation, and it provides an examination of a research field that is not yet established. The article offers insights into innovation in its embryonic form.

THE END OF THE PARADIGM WARS

While rumblings persist and some hold fast to incommensurability as far as qualitative and quantitative research is concerned, to all intents and purposes the fin de siècle paradigm wars are now a thing of the past. The launch of the Mixed Methods International Research Association in 2013 marked the coming of age of this approach, and in the following year Riazi and Candlin (2014) published an important paper highlighting its relevance for language teaching and learning research. Both were invited to contribute to this collection, but sadly Chris Candlin was too ill to take the project forward. Nevertheless, we feel he would have approved of a paper challenging current assumptions and arguing the case for 'methodology' over 'method'. The danger of the 'pragmatic' turn in mixed methods research (MMR), it seems to us, is that too narrow a focus on the research question can distract researchers from deeper theoretical issues; indeed, even those who approach pragmatism at the paradigmatic level can fall into the trap of representing it as though research design is a purely practical matter. Whether readers subscribe to the position taken up in Mehdi Riazi's paper or not, it raises issues that all MMR researchers in our field need to consider.

THE IMPACT AGENDA

The introduction of impact into the process of research assessment in the UK and the statement that it will feature even more prominently in the next national evaluation reflects a global trend, the force of which is just beginning to be appreciated. This has led a number of researchers to question traditional distinctions and assumptions about the relative status of pure and applied research (e.g. Phillips 2010) and brought disciplines such as applied linguistics

into greater prominence. This realignment of priorities raises important issues relating to the balance between academic and practical priorities, and in particular the compromises that may be required of the former in order to meet the requirements of the latter. These issues are addressed in Tim Grant and Nicci MacLeod's paper, which reveals how experimental methods can usefully contribute to a sociolinguistic investigation. In this case, 'end-user' needs and practical complexities drove methodological innovation, and as the voices of end-users emerge more prominently in negotiations on project design, these are the sorts of demands that applied linguistics will need to confront.

ONLINE OPPORTUNITIES

The rapid sedimentation of new forms of interaction within the online world has produced rich veins of data that applied linguistics researchers have energetically mined, supported by storage and processing resources that have enhanced their work. However, less attention has been paid to the transformative potential of a shared platform allowing the distributed development of analytical tools such as that offered by open-source programmes. The prospects this holds out for methodological innovation are considerable, and Seongsook Choi's paper is written from the perspective of someone who has developed such a tool. It provides insights into the practical and methodological challenges involved, setting these in the broader context of mapping interactional landscapes and proposing a radical reconceptualization of the nature of research that has theoretical resonance with fundamental shifts in the way that language itself is perceived.

TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES

The impact of technological change on research in our area has surprised even those working closely with it (Chapelle 2010) and is unlikely to diminish in the future. Such a rapidly evolving field defies the logic of the historical moment, but it is nevertheless possible to discern at least one line of development that has prompted a radical revision of both what is possible and, more provocatively, what is adequate in terms of the analysis of interaction. Multimodal analysis, for example, is one of the areas covered in the paper by Dawn Knight and Paul Seedhouse, who focus on three projects as a basis for examining the enabling potential of technology in meeting methodological challenges and identifying new parameters of possibility.

More fundamental changes, though, may be the product of less dramatic developments in what is achievable in terms of data collection and storage. Nick Thieberger's contribution shows how the shift from 'language description' to 'language documentation' has been facilitated by such changes, modest enough in themselves but together providing the technological basis for involving the speakers of endangered languages in recording and storing their own language.

A collection of this length must necessarily be selective and the papers here need to be seen in the context of a general flowering of new approaches opening up fresh methodological opportunities. With the publication of Copland and Creese (2015) for example, there is evidence that linguistic ethnography has now come of age, marking an approach that has its home distinctively in applied linguistics, while complexity theory continues to offer intriguing prospects, including Dörnyei's (2014: 80) 'concrete research template that can be applied to investigate instructed second language acquisition'. Our lens is also narrowly focused, so while multimodal analysis demands close attention, it represents only a tiny aspect of the visual dimension in research. Blommaert's (2013) exploration of the impact of superdiversity on a particular locality explored through an analysis of its multilingual signs, for example, represents a fundamental challenge to the synchronic assumptions underlying traditional approaches and makes a compelling case for the need to historicize sociolinguistic analysis. The collection also focuses on practical decision-making rather than the social processes underlying this (see e.g. Wiles *et al.* 2013), but we feel that prioritizing *application* is legitimate in the context of our discipline.

Although methodological innovation is an enduring feature of the research landscape, there are nevertheless historical moments in which a confluence of circumstance and opportunity generates a charge sufficiently powerful to produce a surge in creative output, a traceable shift in the dynamics of change. We believe that this is such a moment.

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