

## **Problems of empowerment in linguistic research**

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Just over ten years ago, a small group of academics, who came from different disciplines but were all in some way concerned with the observation and analysis of language in use formed a 'Language and Subjectivity Research Group'<sup>1</sup>. We chose this label because we were interested in the construction of the subjectivities of both the researcher and the researched when they come together in what is called 'fieldwork'. Our agenda was both theoretical and political: we wanted to reflect on our own experiences as fieldworkers, and particularly on the fact that we were all working with groups of people whose position in society was subordinate to our own in terms of economic status, race or ethnicity, education and symbolic capital.

The unequal social positioning of researcher and researched is an enduring feature of normal social science.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my indebtedness to all those who were associated with the Language and Subjectivity Research Group, but especially to the four colleagues who became, along with me, its long-term core members: sociologist Elizabeth Frazer, social anthropologist Penny Harvey, linguist Ben Rampton and media scholar Kay Richardson.

People who are regarded as a 'social problem' (the poor, excluded, criminalised, 'minorities', etc.) inevitably also become a social science research problem; even if there is no explicit agenda of social control, the knowledge we make about such people contributes to the workings of disciplinary power. Yet when you are actually doing research in the 'field', you rarely feel that your informants are powerless, or that you yourself are powerful. On the contrary, you may feel the opposite is true. It was this sort of complexity we wanted to explore under the heading of language and subjectivity.

## 2. RESEARCHING LANGUAGE : ETHICS, ADVOCACY AND EMPOWERMENT

The tangible outcome of the group's work over a period of several years was a book, *Researching Language : Issues of Power and Method* (Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton and Richardson 1992). In this volume we distinguish three positions one can take up: *ethics*, which is research ON people; *advocacy*, research ON and FOR people; and *empowerment*, research ON, FOR and WITH people.

'Ethics' tends to go along with a traditional positivist model of the research enterprise. The researched are an object, and the aim is ideally to find out about that object without in any way affecting it, since observer effects are thought to vitiate the findings. However, a person is a special kind of object, one with rights that may not be violated. Hence there is a need for ethical safeguards, such as getting informants' consent to participation and getting committees to agree that what you want to do does not constitute mistreatment of the informants. The researcher is not a free agent, but the nature of her obligations to the researched is certainly not decided by the researched themselves.

If ethical researchers do not want to harm their informants, 'advocate' researchers have a positive intention to help them. Advocacy is often found among politically committed positivists, or in fieldwork situations where over time the researcher develops complex relationships with the researched, so that they themselves may approach the

researcher for help. Probably the clearest and most celebrated example of advocacy in sociolinguistics is the work of sociolinguists in the US in supporting speakers of African American vernacular English against a school system which did not meet their needs. These linguists, most famously William Labov, made their expertise available on behalf of the community, for example by testifying as expert witnesses in a lawsuit against the schools.

Writing about this case, Labov (1982) does not foreground the question of his own political commitment to racial justice, but concentrates on two other questions about the social responsibility of science. First, he says that scientists have a responsibility to correct widespread but erroneous and damaging public beliefs. The belief that Black English is a minor and careless deviation from standard English is erroneous and it is damaging: a linguist is thus obliged to go on record and say that. Second, Labov points out that researchers owe their informants a debt. Without their cooperation we could do no research. So when they ask for our cooperation it is only right to give it. If we are in a position to act as advocates, and can do so without compromising the other principle, which is to say only what is true, then we should practise advocacy. This does have the effect of altering the balance of power between researcher and researched. It does not make them equals in the enterprise, but it does give the researched some entitlement to make demands of the researcher.

'Empowerment' is the stance that I and the other members of the group were interested in trying to elaborate. This does not mean we rejected either ethics or advocacy: we assumed that both are necessary; ethics is indispensable in any kind of research, and advocacy is sometimes the most appropriate choice. For us, though, these positions are not always sufficient. Bringing together our politics, our theoretical positions and our own experiences in fieldwork, we set out to define a different kind of relationship between researcher and researched, one in which the research would be not just on and for the researched, but also *with* them.

We proposed a number of principles for this kind of research. One is the use of interactive methods, where you

engage with the researched as opposed to merely (and perhaps indeed covertly) observing them. Another is the negotiation of jointly beneficial research agendas, where the researcher and the researched both have a say in setting the goals. These may not be the same goals. Sometimes you can arrive at goals which both parties want, sometimes it's more a question of saying 'this is what I want to do, and we'll also do what you want to do'. It is important to us that the notion of academic research does not simply disappear; we do not put our own interest in the production of knowledge aside, as some in the tradition of 'action research' might be prepared to do. On the other hand, we think that negotiation can sometimes problematise, in a useful and thought-provoking way, the conventional idea of what is a good research question.

Our third important principle is about trying to share expert knowledge with the researched, as they share local knowledge with researchers. The research project I wrote about in *Researching Language*<sup>2</sup> was done with young Afro-Caribbean people in south London, part of whose linguistic heritage was one or other of the Caribbean creoles. These young adults had gone to inner city schools where it was likely their teachers knew what a creole was, largely as a result of linguists practising advocacy in the education system, but the (ex)-pupils themselves did not know about the historical conditions of creole formation. That emerged as a problem in the ways they talked about their verbal repertoires and their attitude to parents' or other relatives' speech. I decided to tell them about creoles, and also to show them, as I would my own students, how linguists analyse the structure of creoles. I was worried they would be uninterested

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2 Four of the five authors of the book contributed a chapter discussing, in the light of the 'empowerment' framework, a piece of research they had previously done for another purpose. Mine was a project on language and racism, in which members of a south London youth club collaborated with me to produce, ultimately, a short video titled *Respect, Please!* The other projects used as case studies in *Researching Language* were an investigation of language 'crossing' among multiracial/ multilingual boys' peer groups (Rampton), a sociological study of class and the construction of femininity (Frazer) and an ethnography of bilingualism in the Peruvian Andes (Harvey).

or feel patronised, but this was not at all the case. In fact they were angry, that I knew certain facts whereas they did not. But once we negotiated that, it was clear they were glad to have the knowledge – methodological as well as factual.

Our final principle is that you would not always want to do empowering research at all (research with elites, for example, arguably does not require the researcher to go beyond the 'ethical' approach), and in any case the three principles just listed should not be regarded as a foolproof formula or a recipe for doing empowering research. What counts as 'empowering' varies with the conditions – it is a local rather than global idea and needs to be locally negotiated. None of us would claim that our own case studies represented perfect examples of the category 'empowering research', and I suspect that since we wrote the book, we have all gone on doing research that in many ways falls short of what we would like it to be. Of course, we can console ourselves that this is also true of most positivist research. There is a whole subgenre in which academics tell 'the true story of my research', the story behind the story of what they actually published; and the adjective most aptly applied to this genre is 'confessional'. What follows will be no exception.

The title I have chosen is « *Problems of empowerment* » : I want to examine some of the most salient problems raised by the whole notion of empowering research, first as these were identified and discussed by critical commentators on the book *Researching Language*, and second as I encountered them in work I did more recently than the project with the Black Londoners.

### 3. PROBLEMS OF EMPOWERMENT : 'IS IT EMPOWERING ?'

In 1993, the year after our book appeared, the journal *Language and Communication* devoted an issue to discussion of the questions we had raised. We wrote a paper outlining our approach, it was commented on by a number of colleagues in various disciplines, and we responded in a final, shorter contribution. Most of those who commented on our book were broadly sympathetic to our project, and we in turn are broadly

sympathetic to the doubts which in some cases they expressed.

The questions posed to us about our concept of 'empowering research' fell into two main categories. Some asked, 'is it empowering?'. Others asked, 'is it research?' Here I want to concentrate on the first of those questions.

'Is it empowering?' is at bottom a question about whether and to what extent the research process can bring about change in the lives of the researched. Several contributors to the *Language and Communication* discussion suggested we had overestimated the potential of research to make a difference. For example, the creolist and Pacific linguist Peter Mühlhäusler felt that researchers were deluding themselves if they believed their activities had any importance at all in the 'real world' inhabited by most people. He observed that intellectuals are apt to get the significance of their work out of all proportion to its true impact, and that modesty might be the most politically justifiable stance for a researcher to take.

No doubt this evaluation reflects Mühlhäusler's own positioning as a researcher in the field, just as our own evaluation reflected our positionings. Whereas all but one of the authors of *Researching Language* wrote about fieldwork carried out in Britain, Mühlhäusler has worked on Pacific languages, in areas of the world where the local status of academic research as a technology of power is considerably less than we might take it to be in developed western societies. But while it is useful to be reminded of that important difference, there are two replies one might make to Mühlhäusler's point.

One reply is that modesty, for all that it may become us, can easily become a justification for *not* interrogating our own practice: if we think of our activities as trivial, unlikely either to help or to hurt, then we need not look beyond the routine safeguards built into the standard 'ethical' model. This seems to us a little *too* modest; it could easily be taken as a recipe for 'business as usual' which inhibits researchers from intellectual creativity as well as depoliticising academic endeavours.

The other response, noted in particular by the anthropologist Penelope Harvey in her contribution to *Researching Language* (which deals with fieldwork among peasants in the Peruvian Andes), is that third world peoples are subject to global as well as local technologies of power, which a researcher who wishes to practise empowerment (or indeed effective advocacy) must take into consideration. Sometimes the potential for empowerment (or the reverse) may be located at the point of representation, i.e. when a researcher represents her informants to an outside and usually elite audience. This point lies (both geographically and temporally) outside 'the field'; but what happens during fieldwork affects what can happen afterwards, and the relations negotiated in the field are therefore a significant issue.

Another commentator in *Language and Communication*, the social researcher Caroline Ramazanoglu, drew a distinction between what she called 'intellectual empowerment', in which people come to understand certain aspects of their condition better, and 'experiential empowerment', in which they are able to act on their understanding and actually make things different. Ramazanoglu has done research on the early sexual experiences of young women in different social groups in Britain. One reason why this sort of research has recently attracted funding is because of the concern of official institutions to prevent the spread of HIV: there is a desire to understand why so many young people, though apparently well aware of the 'safer sex' message, do not always practise safer sex. Ramazanoglu's distinction between the 'intellectual' and 'experiential' effects of knowledge reflects her own empirical and theoretical exploration of this issue. She has found it possible to achieve intellectual empowerment by using methods which in some ways resemble ours, but she argues that her informants can understand their positioning within what are frequently oppressive heterosexual markets, and still feel, and be, completely unable to change that positioning, which is as much material as it is discursive. In other words she questions the more thorough-going poststructuralist notion that there is nothing

extra-discursive, and thus no important distinction between intellectual and experiential empowerment.

The social psychologist Howard Giles goes even further than Ramazanoglu in the sense that he questions whether her concept of intellectual empowerment makes things better, or whether the outcome is actually to make them worse. Giles and his associates have worked a great deal with elderly people, and in some circumstances they have shared with their informants their analysis of how this group is belittled and discriminated against. He notes that the results do not appear to be empowering. Rather they make the informants feel distressed and sometimes self-critical.

In our response to these commentators my fellow-authors and I made several points (Cameron et al. 1993). We accepted that Caroline Ramazanoglu's distinction was a valid and useful one. None of us is a thorough-going poststructuralist or postmodernist; we do believe in the materiality of social relations and we accept that knowledge and understanding do not in and of themselves change those relations. However, we see what Ramazanoglu calls 'intellectual empowerment' as a necessary though not sufficient element in any project of what she calls 'experiential empowerment'. On Giles's point about the disempowering potential of interactive, knowledge-sharing methods, we replied that empowerment should not be reduced to what we called a 'feelgood factor'. The aim of sharing knowledge is *not* necessarily to make people feel better; though in actual fieldwork it is certainly an issue if your discussions make them feel worse. As I mentioned before, this happened to me when my Afro-Caribbean informants responded to knowledge about creoles, proffered by a white expert, with anger. But in this case there was a happier ending than Howard Giles reports. Interestingly enough, though, I was soon to engage in research that would raise all these issues once again, and that would not have such a clear and positive resolution.



#### 4. VERBAL HYGIENE FOR WOMEN

My most recent book is called *Verbal Hygiene* (Cameron 1995), and it deals with normative linguistic practices that are motivated by value judgements on the efficiency, aesthetics, morality or politics of using language in a particular way. One of my aims was to problematise linguists' neglect of the discourse of value; as a matter of professional principle we define it as a kind of category mistake to say that this way of speaking is better than that. As a consequence sociolinguistics is rarely of any interest or use to society at large. A second aim was to point out that there is more to the normative regulation of language-use than the things we usually include under the heading of prescriptivism, meaning the promotion of elite language varieties. To make that point, I chose to investigate a number of verbal hygiene practices that are meant to be radical and anti-elitist, including campaigns to reform sexist and racist language, and forms of communication training that are intended to empower subordinate groups, particularly women. It is this last case, communication training for women, that raises the 'problems of empowerment' of my title.

The type of communication training I mainly studied is called 'assertiveness training', often abbreviated to 'AT'. The idea behind it is that women are socialised to be unassertive: part of feminine subjectivity and self-presentation involves learning to communicate in a powerless, indirect way which means women frequently do not get what we want in interactions. In AT you are told that everyone has the right and the responsibility to express themselves clearly, directly and honestly. You are given examples of women expressing themselves in ways that are said to be obscure, indirect and manipulative. Then you are taught to substitute a series of linguistic techniques for clear, direct and honest communication.

The fieldwork part of my research on AT involved interviewing 16 women who had undergone training, as many women do as part of their education, professional development or in some cases political involvement with feminism. (AT is typically thought of as a feminist practice, though as we will see, this is not historically the case at all.)

I interviewed women, either singly or sometimes in groups of two or three, to elicit facts about what training they had done, in what circumstances and why, as well as their perceptions of AT, their recall of the linguistic techniques and whether they ever used these techniques after the training was finished.

Before I relate this to the question of empowering research and its problems, I should introduce two crucial facts about AT, facts which I already knew when I went out to interview informants. One is about its history. Far from being a feminist invention, it was developed at the end of the 1940s by US behavioural psychologists, and what they wanted to use it for was the resocialization of psychiatric patients whose communication skills were allegedly very poor. Some of these patients were depressed and withdrawn. Others had been institutionalized for deviant behavior: for example alcoholism, drug abuse or sexual offences, including homosexuality, which at the time was defined as a disease. In these cases assertiveness training was thought to be helpful because the offence was thought to stem from being weak, unable to resist peer pressure or to form proper, healthy relationships with the opposite sex. So AT is historically a disciplinary technology with a very clear agenda in terms of social control (Rakos 1990). This is at odds with the current perception of it as a technology of empowerment aimed at ameliorating the social position of women.

The second crucial point about AT is that linguistically, or more exactly sociolinguistically, it is of very dubious value. The techniques it teaches are extremely difficult and risky to apply in face to face interaction because they are based on a suspension or inversion of the normal rules of politeness, in the sense Brown and Levinson (1987) use that term. For example, you are told you should perform all speech acts on the record and without mitigation. The more face threatening the act, the more forcefully AT insists it is confusing and manipulative to perform it indirectly or with hedging. Thus according to AT the best way to refuse a request, offer or invitation is to say no without any further elaboration. Every analyst of conversation knows that this is a highly aggravated way to do it, and is virtually never done. AT also

invites you to break the Gricean maxim of quantity by repeating yourself as many times as it takes to get the result you want. And it proscribes any talk about the addressee's behaviour or feelings in favour of what it calls 'I – me' language; which is another case of flouting important politeness principles. Conversely it encourages major self-disclosure, regardless of context.

Self-disclosure is however the only case where AT valorises a discourse feature that is preferentially associated with women speakers. Much of what it recommends could be described as a very extreme form of the discourse strategies that are associated with men. There is in fact a body of evaluation research suggesting that ordinary people do not evaluate assertive behaviour positively, and that the least positive judgements are made, precisely, on *women* behaving assertively: because in effect they are acting 'out of role', against the normative expectations regarding proper femininity (see Gervasio and Crawford 1989).

Taken together, these points had suggested to me that assertiveness training was a very strange candidate for a feminist technology of empowerment. Feminists do not on the whole believe that women *en masse* are suffering from some kind of mental health problem; they take issue, too, with any suggestion that men's behaviour is automatically preferable to women's, or that women should have to act like men to succeed. In addition, I felt that assertiveness training had elements of what Howard Giles had raised questions about in the context of his own work with elderly people. AT is offered, by experts, as a means of empowering a subordinated group of people, but the actual effect may well be to make them feel worse; not only does it draw attention to the power relations they are caught up in without giving them means to change those relations, in the case of AT, which is centred entirely on modifying the behaviour of the individual, there is a strong undercurrent of blaming the subordinate for her own subordination.

## 5. EMPOWERMENT AGENDA : A CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Bearing all this in mind, what I wanted to do in my research with women who had engaged in AT was not only to elicit their perceptions but to problematise those perceptions by offering certain kinds of information and analysis – for example, information about the history of the practice and analysis of the linguistic underpinnings of it. This desire for *critical* engagement with the researched marks an important difference between our concept of empowering research and some other forms of research, like action research, that also claim to subvert traditional power relations by putting the researched at the centre. We do not regard the researcher as simply a conduit for public dissemination of what the researched think or say. We see the relationship negotiated during fieldwork as a dialectical one in which both parties may be called upon to modify the views to which they were initially committed. This dialectic in fact occurred during my research with the Afro-Caribbean speakers : I took on many of their insights, and they also took on important elements of my way of seeing. On certain key points, I now recognise, they deferred to my expertise and ranked it above their own or their parents'.

Not so in this case. Most of my interviewees resisted my interpretation of assertiveness training and were reluctant to problematise it in theory, though they did offer minor criticisms of the way it was done in practice. In taking the position they did, informants had the support of a different expert discourse, assertiveness training itself, which is linked to clinical and psychotherapeutic institutions. Clearly these did not rank 'lower' in informants' minds than the expertise of a linguist. Nor was I positioned as superordinate to the researched in other ways. Most interviewees were, like me, white professional women. I came to the rather paradoxical conclusion that the training *had* empowered them – not in the sense that they actually overcame institutional sexism, but insofar as they felt as if they had made some important change in their own lives. It did this, however, by confirming things they already believed and wanted to believe, rather than by offering an alternative, critical analysis.

When I wrote up this work, which I did with all due attention to the views of my informants as well as my own views, I chose to publish it not only in academic fora – as a chapter of *Verbal Hygiene* (Cameron 1995) and as an article in the scholarly journal *Applied Linguistics* (Cameron 1994) – but also in a feminist publication read by non-academics, *Trouble & Strife*. As a result of the T&S piece I was invited to debate with women, feminists, working in the community in Glasgow as assertiveness trainers. They were a critical audience, and their complaint was exactly the one made by Howard Giles : that by questioning whether assertiveness training was really a technology of empowerment, I was actually *disempowering* those for whom it represented one of the few opportunities they had for empowerment.

My response was more or less the one my colleagues and I had made to Howard Giles (see above) : empowerment is not the same as ‘feeling good’, and we (in this case, feminists) should not rest content with what are arguably illusory forms of power. It was (and is) my view that assertiveness training falls into the category of illusory empowerment, and that in some cases – though I concede, not all – it is adopted by institutions quite cynically to promote the illusion that something is being done about gender inequality. In many institutional contexts the effect of AT is to distract attention from more important reasons why women are not equal; reasons which have nothing to do with language and communication. But it is hard to deal with those other factors if everyone thinks that the problem is women's ways of speaking, the solution is training, and the provision of training is a sufficient measure to ensure equal opportunity. Both my original informants and the practitioners I met later listened courteously to this argument, but in most cases they ultimately rejected it; and I think that raises some interesting issues.

One issue is about power and authority as conditions of exchange between researcher and researched. As I noted at the beginning of this discussion, one of the reasons the Language and Subjectivity Group originally started to meet was to explore the problems and contradictions of working, as so many social researchers do, with people who are

positioned as different from us and who in most ways are less privileged. Now I know that working with people who are more 'like' the researcher raises a different but equally thorny set of problems. Talking to women about assertiveness training, I was less inclined to defer to their local knowledge than I was when talking to Black people about racism and language. And by the same token, they were far more likely to challenge my credentials and my views than the Afro-Caribbean group, on certain subjects anyway. Can it be that – paradoxically – 'empowering research' in the sense we defined it is easier to do when the position of researcher and researched is very unequal, and when the researcher implicitly retains a good deal of control?

A related question is, who decides what is empowering? Is it patronising, oppressive even, to assume that the researcher in some sense knows best about this? For in the end, that is what the women who debated with me thought: that I was saying I knew better than other women that AT was not good for them. That does sound patronising; and I cannot say that their interpretation of my position was unwarranted.

Reflecting on this, I found myself wondering if Caroline Ramazanoglu's distinction between intellectual empowerment and experiential empowerment needs to be revisited: is there always a difference between feeling and really being empowered? The Afro-Caribbean young people I had worked with before *Researching Language* had clearly differentiated between having an analysis of racism and having the power effectively to resist its manifestations in their own lives; analysis was a necessary but not a sufficient condition for resistance. Informants in the AT study, however, accepted the therapeutic assumptions of AT itself in seeing the two things – analysing a form of oppression and having the power to resist it – as in some crucial sense the *same* thing. To change your understanding of something is, in this discourse, actually to change it. The problem I have with that postulate is compounded by my belief that in this case the actual analysis (i.e., inequality results from lack of assertiveness) is mistaken; which raises the question of what constitutes 'intellectual empowerment'. Can one distinguish between

better and worse understandings of a given situation? Who decides which is which? These kinds of questions take us into deep theoretical and epistemological waters, and they underline the difficulties of the position taken up in *Researching Language*, which proposes a realist rather than a relativist view of social and power relations.

Finally, I do not think I can count the AT research as empowering research. I stuck to the principles, but in the end I was too much at odds with the agenda of the researched. Significantly, too, my expertise (as a linguist) was in direct competition with another kind of professional expertise (that of 'therapy' as discourse and practice). One might say that my informants in the AT study were unwilling to grant me the *authority* to 'empower' them, particularly as this would have entailed challenging a kind of authority whose claims they were far more willing to recognise. If that is a fair summary, then it is also very revealing about the 'normal' conditions of empowering research; it cannot be undertaken successfully without the researcher's having a certain authority (or in other words, without a degree of inequality between researcher and researched).

Do the conclusions I have just drawn vitiate the whole project of 'empowerment' in research? I think that (fortunately) the answer is no: rather, we are taken back to a point we tried to emphasise in *Researching Language*, namely that there is no single formula for producing 'empowering research'. In the field we are precisely dealing with (inter)subjectivities, with questions about people's identities, roles and relationships (including our own), and the complexity of the issues thus raised can hardly be overstated. They will never be exactly the same issues twice.

The AT project 'failed' as an example of empowering research because I had not thought all the relevant complexities through; but its 'failure' had the merit of drawing my attention to questions I had not previously foregrounded, such as the conditions on which a researcher can exercise intellectual authority in the field. The framework set out in *Researching Language* has turned out (as, to be fair, we always believed it would) to be a provisional and partial one; much more will be learned as we and others

attempt to apply its principles to research in different contexts with differently-positioned groups of people. It remains the case, however, that linguistic fieldworkers have much to gain by engaging in more reflection and discussion about the research process : wherever that discussion may lead.

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