



Arts & Humanities
Research Council



Translation and Translanguaging

Investigating Linguistic and Cultural Transformations in Superdiverse Wards in Four UK Cities

Working Papers in
Translanguaging and Translation

Paper 12

The Ethics of Digital Ethnography in a Team Project

Caroline Tagg, Agnieszka Lyons, Rachel Hu and Frances Rock

AHRC *Translating Cultures* Large Grant: 'Translation and Translanguaging: Investigating Linguistic and Cultural Transformations in Superdiverse Wards in Four UK Cities'. (AH/L007096/1)

Please reference as:

Tagg, C., Lyons, A., Hu, R., & Rock, F. (2016). The Ethics of Digital Ethnography in a Team Project. *Working Papers in Translanguaging and Translation* (WP. 12). (<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/generic/tlang/index.aspx>)

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM



The ethics of digital ethnography in a team project*

Caroline Tagg, Agnieszka Lyons, Rachel Hu and Frances Rock

Abstract

This article discusses ethical decisions made throughout the process of collecting and analysing mobile messaging data by a team ethnographic project exploring multilingualism in superdiverse cities across the UK. Our research involves observing key participants at work as well as asking them to record themselves at home and to submit examples of their digitally-mediated interactions. The nature of our ethnographic research raises ethical issues which highlight the impossibility of divorcing ethics from project decision-making and the difficulty in prescribing one set of ethics to guide all researcher-participant relationships. We therefore take on board a re-conceptualisation of research ethics not as an external set of guidelines but as the core of research, driving decision-making at all steps of the process. In this article, we focus on our digital data and on the potential impact that digital communications technologies can have on the kinds of relationships that are possible between researchers and research participants, as well as the roles they can take on within the project. In doing so, we explore in particular the role that digitally-mediated communications play in the co-construction of social distance and closeness in research relationships. Our discussions around these issues highlight the need for an awareness not only of how our participants' media ideologies shape their use and perceptions of digital technologies, but also how our own assumptions inform our handling of the digital data. We end the paper by discussing wider implications for pursuing ethical research.

Keywords: blended ethnography, digital data, ethics, media ideologies

1. Introduction

In this article we discuss the ethical decisions made in the process of collecting and analysing mobile messaging data as part of a large team ethnographic project exploring multilingualism as a resource in superdiverse cities across the UK. In doing so, we take on board a re-conceptualisation of research ethics not as an external set of guidelines implemented before commencing a research project but as the core of research, driving decision-making at all steps of the process (Markham and Buchanan 2015). This process approach requires researchers to remain open to the possibility of 're-ethicising' throughout the project (to adopt an analogy with 're-analysing' suggested by Georgakopoulou, forthcoming) and to move from a reliance on informed consent to an acceptance that research participants need autonomy to reposition themselves in relation to the research as circumstances and perceptions shift. Our research involves observing key participants at work and asking them to record themselves at home as well as to submit examples of their digitally-mediated interactions. In the cases we explore in this paper, most of the digital data came from mobile messaging apps such as SMS, WhatsApp, WeChat and Viber, although we also collected Facebook data and recorded spoken Skype and QQ interactions. Particular ethical issues were

* This paper is currently under review for *Applied Linguistics Review*.

raised by the nature of our research, particularly our attempt to include social media data alongside other datasets, the development of close and complex relationships between key participants and the team's research fellows, and the former's involvement in data collection. These ethical issues highlight the impossibility of divorcing ethics from project decision-making and the limitations of prescribing one set of ethics to guide all researcher-participant relationships.

The article starts with an overview of ethical issues raised in the current literature on linguistic ethnography, including that conducted in online spaces, before describing the aims, methods and data of our team project. Drawing on four case studies that were carried out in London and Birmingham, the article then focuses on the potential impact that digital technologies can have on the kinds of relationships that are possible between researchers and research participants, as well as on the identities they can adopt within a research project, looking in particular at the effect that digitally-mediated communications appeared to have on the co-construction of social distance and closeness in these research relationships. On the one hand, digitally-mediated communication made relevant people and places with which our ethnographic research team had little direct contact, with implications both for how we negotiated informed consent with participants we had never met and for how we interpreted the data; on the other hand, mobile messaging apps appeared to heighten the levels of intimacy achieved by researchers and researched, as well as expanding the possibilities for communication between the research team and the wider community. We show how the ethical issues emerging from these reconfigured relationships can be met through team reflection and discussion, and by being open to how research participants perceive, value and exploit digitally-mediated interactions. We focus in particular on the need for ethical researchers to take into account not only the ways in which their participants perceive and value digital technologies, but also how researchers' own 'media ideologies' (Gershon 2010) might shape our handling of digital data and our negotiations with participants. Although we focus on digital data for the purpose of this special issue, we end the paper by discussing the wider implications for ethical research across modes.

2. Ethics in linguistic ethnography online

Linguistic ethnography is an approach to research which seeks to understand social behaviour from an emic perspective by taking into account local actors' perspectives, immediate contextual features and wider power structures, with a particular focus on how language can be used to reproduce social structures through everyday acts of identity and relational work (Copland and Creese 2015a; Creese 2010; Rampton et al 2004). Methodologically, linguistic ethnography combines ethnographic methods and principles with discourse analysis tools and with the assumption that language and interaction at a micro-level relate in complex and important ways to wider social structures. For linguistic ethnographers (and others), the concern for ethics goes beyond compliance with university ethical procedures, which generally involve the completion of forms and their review by a central ethics board. These institutional or "macroethics" (Kubanyiova 2008) have been criticised for imposing standardised regulations across diverse research contexts, challenging academic freedom, and removing ethics from the process of research (Jaspers et al 2013; Kubanyiova 2008). One

problem with macroethics is that researchers are encouraged to assume that they have addressed ethical concerns by gaining approval at the start of the research process, therefore distracting researchers from the need to respond ethically to local dilemmas and decisions that arise during research; what Kubanyiova (2008) calls “microethics” or “ethics of care”.

In a microethics approach, differences in the perceptions, expectations, values and goals of all parties must be constantly negotiated in a responsive and contextually-sensitive process (Markham and Buchanen 2015). Differences can usually be assumed in how researchers and their research participants perceive, value and enact a research project, not least because of the distinct roles they have taken on within the project, but in some cases also because of differences in education, socio-economic background, and life experiences. Shared linguistic and national backgrounds do not necessarily entail that research fellows ‘belong’ to the same community as their participants: in Copland (forthcoming), for example, a research team assumed their assistant, Joel, was a member of the rural working-class community they were investigating, when in fact he was a local city academic who found himself caught in an uncomfortable middle ground: although he was not seen by the research participants as part of their community, nor was he accorded the same level of respect by research participants as the foreign members of the team (Copland forthcoming). Such positionings should not be overlooked because, assuming that knowledge is always co-constructed between researcher and researched (Garton and Copland 2010), the researcher’s background, values and goals will impact on the research findings, as will the relationships they develop with research participants.

The methodological and ethical principles of linguistic ethnography require close relationships between researchers and the researched, formed through the former’s long-term involvement in the research field and commitment to learning from research participants (Copland and Creese 2015b). One ethical issue documented by Bhattacharya (2007) is that close researcher-researched relationships can lead to research participants trusting the researcher to do no harm in ways which make the researcher uncomfortable and often lead to their having to make decisions that extend or contradict the consent granted by participants. Copland and Creese (2015b) describe an “ethically important moment” (Guillemin and Gillam 2004) – what Markham (2003) might call a reflexive or critical juncture – in Copland’s research when she decided not to include in her research publications discussion of an emotionally-charged training session despite having consent from the participants to do so. The incident illustrates how informed and responsive consideration of participants as human beings – that is, ethics of care (Kubanyiova 2008) – can lead to very different decisions than that required from institutional ethical procedures. In this case, although macroethical procedures suggested she could publish, Copland’s emic perspective meant that she understood the wider implications of publishing and knew that the participants may not (Copland and Creese 2015b). What is important is a reflexive approach to research – whereby researchers “question our own assumptions, feel uneasy with our ethical decisions and remain unsure about our representations” (Copland and Creese 2015b: 166). This article constitutes part of our team’s reflexive approach to researching, whereby we aim to stay uncomfortably

aware of the decisions we make at ethically important moments or critical junctures, in this case focusing on our collection and use of mobile messaging data.

Our inclusion of mobile messaging data in the project complicated the relationships between researcher and researched. Our research might be described as “blended ethnography” (Androutsopoulos 2008) in that we seek to understand internet practices as part of individuals’ everyday offline lives (rather than seeking to understand “life on the Internet”, as Androutsopoulos 2008 puts it). On the one hand, blended ethnography involves the same ethics of care as outlined above in relation to face-to-face encounters, particularly because the writers, rather than the digital texts they produce, are the primary focus (Markham and Buchanan 2015; Page et al 2014: 60). On the other hand, as shown throughout this special issue, digitally-mediated communication presents somewhat reconfigured scenarios for which there are few ethically-informed precedents. In this article, we are particularly interested in the potential impact of digital communication on closeness and distance, both in physical terms – the way that digital technologies make immediate contact possible between far-flung interactants; and socially – the fact that technologies can sometimes make people feel closer to each other and at other times more distanced (Jones and Hafner 2012, p. 7). A great deal of research has focused on the sense of co-presence and rapport that can be achieved through text messaging (e.g. Lin and Tong 2007) and other forms of computer-mediated communication including Skype (Miller and Sinanan 2014) and social network sites (Livingstone 2008). These feelings of intimacy are both reflected in and heightened by people’s language choices through these digitally-mediated channels (Tagg 2012). At the same time, another body of literature has focused on the potential distancing effects of digitally-mediated communication, which is often put down to a relative lack of social cues and a sense of anonymity (Kiesler and Sproull, 1992). The fact that interactants are physically separated and can hide behind their computer (or mobile phone) screens is seen to reduce inhibitions, with the effect of encouraging aggressive behaviour (Coleman 2012) or facilitating disclosures (Roberts et al 2000) as well as enabling an often playful adoption of new identities (Danet 2001). One way of conceptualising these seemingly contrasting effects of digital technology use is through the concept of *affordances* (Lee, 2007), which highlights the fact that technology does not determine behaviour but rather presents possibilities for change which may or may not be taken up by its users. Drawing on the notion of affordances, Jones and Hafner (2012: 2-3) explain how digital tools can ‘come to define us in some very basic ways ... to do new things, think in new ways, express new kinds of meanings, establish new kinds of relationships and *be* new kinds of people’. In this article, we focus particularly on the ‘new kinds of relationships’ that mobile messaging apps make possible – the impact of the technologies on closeness and distance between researchers and participants – and on the kinds of identities that those involved in research can adopt; that is, the kinds of researchers and research participants they can *be*. As this suggests, unlike other studies of digitally-mediated language use, we focus not only on the new possibilities for relating between our participants, but also (and crucially) between our participants and the research team.

3. Research context: project team aims, methods and data

Our project, “Translation and Translanguaging: investigating linguistic and cultural transformations in superdiverse wards in four UK cities” (or TLANG for short) is a large, four-year AHRC-funded project, led by Angela Creese (University of Birmingham).¹ The project aims to explore how multilingual people adapt, exploit and extend their diverse linguistic resources when working and living in superdiverse wards in four UK cities: Birmingham, Cardiff, Leeds and London. The project is divided into four phases: business, heritage, sports and law. For each phase, the local city teams select a key participant (KP) who works in that area (e.g. in business). For participating in the project, each KP receives £1000 in compensation for our intrusion into their lives, as well as for their active contribution as co-researchers in the project (a point we return to in the next section) and for their participation in our Participant Research Programme, which is run by a Co-I on the project, Dr Lisa Goodson (University of Birmingham). During this programme, they learn about and can feed into the research process and methods, as well as gaining an official qualification. The KP is observed at work over four months by the researchers, and extensive fieldnotes are made. They are also audio-recorded and interviewed, photos are taken around the site, and the KP is given an audio recorder to take home and record interactions between themselves, friends and families. The KP is also asked to collect and submit examples of their social media posts and digitally-mediated messages. Importantly, the digital data collection is a new element of an established methodological approach, and as such the methods used were exploratory and ethical issues hard to predict. One overall aim of the project is to feed into local policy in a way that we hope will at least indirectly benefit our participants and others in similar positions, and we have already been able to do this by, for example, presenting evidence to the Everyday Entrepreneurs Inquiry of the All Party Parliamentary Small Shops Group at the House of Commons (<https://tlangblog.wordpress.com/2015/07/27/207/>).

In this article, we focus on two city case studies (Birmingham and London) to explore the ethical issues that arose in the first two phases of the project (business and heritage), with particular reference to the digital data. In Birmingham, the KPs speak varieties of Chinese (primarily Mandarin and Cantonese) among other languages, and Rachel Hu (RH) from mainland China is the bilingual research fellow. For the business phase, RH worked with a married couple who run a butcher’s stall in the Birmingham Bullring market; and, for the heritage phase, with a librarian from Hong Kong who works at the Library of Birmingham. In London, the KPs are of Polish background, and Agnieszka Lyons (AL) was the bilingual research fellow. For the business phase, AL worked with a couple from Poland who run a Polish shop; and, for the heritage phase, with a Polish community artist and actor.

The team methodology involved the writing of reflective vignettes after each phase (Goodson and Tagg, forthcoming). In their first vignettes, both research fellows (RFs) described their initial misgivings regarding how they positioned themselves in the team and in the research site. For example, AL, who at the beginning of the project described herself as having a strong European, rather than Polish, identity, found herself questioning and later reasserting

her Polish identity in light of what she perceived as the team's expectations concerning her Polish expertise and awareness:

“I felt the weight of being THE Polish speaker on the team, which meant I would be relied on as an expert on the language and culture, which I didn't necessarily think I was ...

What a change did the project make! I was now openly a Polish native speaker and appreciated for it! I also re-discovered my other foreign languages, especially Russian, which proved very useful. As the project went on, I found myself more and more proud to be Polish”

(AL, business vignette)

As well as shifts in how they identified themselves, both researchers also developed a growing relationship with their female KP (E in London and MYC in Birmingham), based not only on ethnic background but on their shared identity either as women interested in the housing market (AL) or as mothers, as RH explains in her business vignette.

“Both being working mummies and immigrants, MYC and I often chatted about our experiences of bringing up children and working in the UK. We gradually become good friends and it became much easier to explain to MYC about new things to do for the research, gaining her agreement first.”

(RH, business vignette)

As we shall see in the discussion that follows, the RFs' complex identity positionings and their close relationships with the KPs played a key role in shaping the ethical dimensions of our research.

4. The ethics of digitally-mediated distance

4.1 Collecting interactional data from afar

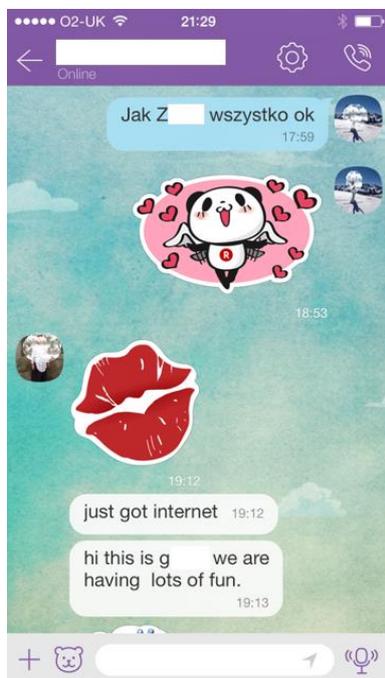
In our project, our relationships with KPs are from the start characterised by the blurring of lines between researcher and researched. The project design involves our shifting some of the burden of responsibility onto our KPs by asking them to select home recordings and digital data, to gauge the vulnerability of interlocutors and the sensitivity of their data, and to obtain informed consent from those they interact with. This applies both to the home and digital data, as we do not usually have direct access to either context. This arrangement is further complicated when KPs, understandably, do not share our ethical concerns, not only because they are distanced from the preoccupations of academia and of our research team and do not carry any personal responsibility for the ethics of the project, but because of their familiarity with their own context – they know their family and friends will not mind and, as E (the London-based Polish shop owner) pointed out, are unlikely to read our academic publications anyway. In fact, E quite reasonably considered our extended discussion of ethics during the training programme as simple ‘common sense’. In consultation with the team, the RFs

addressed this misalignment by downplaying difference and emphasising sameness between themselves and their respective KPs. For example, positioning herself as a Chinese immigrant who had similar experiences in the process of actualisation (as described in her business vignette), RH drew upon personal experiences in raising children in the UK and working with the local Chinese community. This enhanced the trust and rapport between researcher and researched, although it did not noticeably change their views on the need for consent. The level of trust between KPs and RFs in fact became another challenge for us in that their close relationship meant we did not feel able to assume that they had necessarily monitored the sensitivity of their data to the extent that we would have liked them to, an issue also detailed by Bhattacharya (2007). To our mind, KPs became increasingly comfortable with handing *back* the burden of responsibility for selecting and monitoring the data they gave us in ways that made us uncomfortable, and which led to lengthy team discussions over whether we could use certain transcriptions or digitally-mediated interactions, despite the consent we had from KPs to do so. Although macroethics dictated that we could use the data, our attention to ethics of care often decreed that we could not (Copland and Creese 2015b).

Our inclusion of digital data presented further nuances to this already complex situation. These nuances emerged in part because of the way in which social and physical distance and closeness shape, and are shaped by, digitally-mediated interactions. On the one hand, digital technology affords a physical distance between interlocutors, which we noticed particularly in relation to the translocal interactions between KPs and their families in their respective countries-of-origin. When collecting data at home in the UK, the act of recording is very prominent and immediate, and interactants are physically present to ask questions and potentially to object. They are also often immersed in the wider context in which the research is taking place, and they are more likely to be socially close to the KPs in a way that means they are familiar with their everyday lives. When the KPs record webcam interactions, their interactants are based hundreds or thousands of miles away from the project, they may sometimes find it harder to relate to the KPs' daily lives, and would more easily not notice that they were being recorded. Where written interactions (the bulk of our data) were concerned, exchanges are potentially permanent – the interactions ‘persist’, to use boyd’s (2008) term – which means that data can be collected post-hoc and participants may not be informed before the interaction takes place. The post-hoc collection of data may further reduce the perceived pressure to inform interactants. We felt that our KPs oriented differently to these digitally-mediated interactions in terms of their perceptions of our responsibility to their far-flung relatives. As KC, the Birmingham-based butcher, said of his family in China, “They wouldn’t even know about this so why bother!” (as paraphrased by RH). It was thus difficult to gain consent from the KPs’ family members and friends located outside the UK.

At the same time, the digitally-mediated interactions often appeared (to us) to be of an intimate or sensitive nature, even where this perception did not seem to be shared by our KPs. For example, the team eventually decided not to use a lengthy WhatsApp conversation in which W (the Birmingham-based librarian from Hong Kong) and her siblings discussed a family issue which seemed to the team highly sensitive, involving frank and detailed contributions from people who were unlikely to fully appreciate that we had access to such

private exchanges. In contrast, we have used a Viber exchange between E and her 10-year-old daughter which unexpectedly included a message appearing to be from E's daughter's friend, who was with her at the time (Figure 1), although the participation of this second child prompted much discussion among the team. It is not clear whether the friend dictated the message to E's daughter, wrote it herself, or whether E's daughter is rather pretending to be her friend, but either way G's participation in the project would need to be authorised by a parent or guardian. In this case, we felt we could use the message because of the apparently innocuous nature of the data, the extent of G's involvement (we collected only this one example from her), and the high level of anonymization. The exchange is valuable to us for illustrating the way in which two generations of Polish migrants in London negotiate their language resources, with E writing in Polish, her daughter and friend responding in English, and their shared use of stickers (Tagg, 2015).



E: How are things Z everything ok [*transl. from Polish*]

E: [visual]

Z: [visual]

Z: just got internet

G: hi this is g___ we are having lots of fun.

Figure 1: 'we are having lots of fun' (London digital data, Viber, heritage phase)

On other occasions, WhatsApp exchanges between E and her contacts involved accounts or implications of content that could be potentially embarrassing for E's communicative partner, such as when a customer, perhaps jokingly, asks E to source some Viagra for him (which E declines somewhat indignantly). Since in written forms of digital discourse contextual information such as an inconspicuous tone of voice are unavailable, meaning must be carried primarily by the text (Georgakopoulou 1997) and so transactions conducted by WhatsApp tend to be more explicit than transactions we observed in the shop. Moreover, it appeared that our KPs (like other people) considered their digitally-mediated interactions to be 'semi-ephemeral' – that is, although potentially permanent, they are generally not cherished and kept but rather are deleted or forgotten. These perceptions contrasted with our ideas about the

nature of the data, perhaps because we were aware that, once submitted to the project, the messages would be saved, processed, and possibly redistributed, which makes them both permanent and potentially more visible – an issue we return to later in the article.

As well as highlighting the important role of microethics – the need for a team to work with their RFs to respond sensitively and in contextually-relevant ways to these emerging issues – our experience of collecting mobile messaging data also highlighted to us the importance of understanding, and taking into account, our participants’ *perceptions* of digitally-mediated interactions. That is, although participants often used their mobile phones to discuss what appeared to us at least to be highly intimate and potentially sensitive topics, the KPs seemed to distance themselves and their interlocutors from deep involvement with or investment in the messages produced, treating them as semi-ephemeral and unproblematic. Other research points to people’s similarly complex orientations towards the public and private (e.g. Mackenzie forthcoming), focusing on the observation that people often use public sites as though they are private (see for example the Twitter joke trial, Kesley and Bennett 2013)² and arguing that the public sharing of posts does not necessarily mean that they should be “publicised”; that is, brought to the attention of those for whom they were not intended (Marwick and boyd 2014). Our experiences suggest that, to ensure we treat participants’ digitally-mediated interactions in an ethical fashion, researchers need to be sensitive to the particular ways in which these relatively new forms of communication are positioned, valued and used by the people they are researching.

4.2 Interpreting digitally-mediated interactional data

A related ethically-important moment occurred at the point of data analysis, in relation to the context in which the online data was interpreted and thus the way that participants’ voices were represented (Markham 2004). The distancing effect that we felt in relation to our KPs’ digitally-mediated interactions was not only an issue in translocal interactions – when participants were hundreds or thousands of miles apart – but was always an issue for us, because of the way we went about our blended ethnography. In our project, we immerse ourselves in people’s offline lives in order to gain an emic perspective on our participants’ stories and to justify our role in representing them to others. However, given the nature of social media and other factors, we are not present in the contexts generated by KPs’ digitally-mediated exchanges. Online interactions have been described as inevitably involving a “doubling of place” (Moore 2004) in the sense that digital interactions bring together people physically located in two (or more) places which has the effect of making relevant more than one context (Jones 2004; Lyons 2014). Our participants used digital technologies to talk to people in other contexts who we were not able to meet, including those in the same city (such as the butchers’ WeChat messages to local Chinese restaurants) as well as family and friends in other countries (China and Poland in the respective case studies). Furthermore, as mentioned previously, there were fewer paralinguistic features available in the digital transcripts – missing are the tone of voice, gestures and facial expressions that helped us interpret the face-to-face interactions that occurred while observing the KPs in their workplaces. Instead, we found a range of emoticons, emojis, and stickers which are likely to carry in-group meanings and associations (see Figure 1, for example). Technological factors

such as message-length restrictions also mean writers depend on shared knowledge to keep their messages short, and the abbreviated, unelaborated nature of many digital messages means that they can often be difficult to interpret. We could often make sense of KPs' online activities only in relation to the offline data – that is, through what we observed them doing at work and at home, and what they told us in interview. Using the offline data in this way can both enhance and limit our interpretations of what is going on in the digital data, but either way it draws attention to the need to consider the context of interpretation carefully.

In terms of how the team responded to the digital data, we explored two options. In some cases, we decided not to use posts that were hard to interpret without further understanding of the context behind them. In other cases, we held team discussions in order to share different understandings of the data. Recognising the importance of discursive practices in construing meaning in disembodied digital interactions (Markham 2004), we drew upon our cultural, educational and research experiences in an attempt to interpret the data in a way that we felt accurately and ethically (re)presented the participants' intentions and experiences.

5. Ethics and researcher-researched relationships: performing closeness in social media

In the London heritage data collection site, the concerns were different from those described in Section 4. Like the other KPs, M – a Polish community artist and actor – was eager to provide good data for analysis and there was a common interest between her and the RF (AL) in language and in cultural references from childhood and adolescence in Poland. Unlike the others, however, M appeared to take on board the team's ethical concerns and to understand the importance that we placed on actions such as gaining informed consent. We felt this arose in part because of her work, which not only involved issues of consent but also made her sensitive to the performative aspects of her involvement in the project – we often felt that she was 'performing' the role of KP. At times, she explained the details about the project again while a recording was already taking place, or after consent had been given in case any of her interactants required more information. In this sense, she seemed to go out of her way to address our concerns and in so doing embraced her role as KP; in many ways, she enacted exactly the kind of participant that our research design assumed.

However, critical junctures emerged around the relationship that developed between M and AL. We find in our research that digital communication not only proves a fascinating source of data, but also a useful means by which the researchers and the researched can keep in touch. Both AL and RH use messaging apps on their mobile phones to make arrangements with their KPs, and to organise other details regarding data collection. On one level, this can be seen simply as an instrumental use of technology – of 'microcoordination', in Ling and Yttri's (2002) terms – but on another level it serves to extend or transform the potential ways in which the KPs and RFs can relate to each other and the roles they can take on within the parameters of the project.

In this section, we focus on one striking illustration of the potential for digitally-mediated communication to make possible particular kinds of relationships and identity performances.

It came when, in her usual fashion, AL contacted M through WhatsApp to discuss possible observation times. AL's message led to a conversation (on WhatsApp and in Polish) about M's participation in the project and the particular character of their relationship.³ M began by saying that she was not keen on the researchers observing her meeting with her agent. As if justifying putting a boundary on the team's access to her professional life, she then explained that she had been stressed that week as she was not able to focus on what was important and that it was understandable that having to share her life with the RF and the research team would affect her. Writing in WhatsApp, she commented on the nature of her relationship with AL:

“On the one hand it's a *deal*, on the other, we're starting to become friends, we meet often – but as a *researcher* and KP or as friends? I rarely meet my friends – and when we sit in my office, we chat like friends and I feel I should be focusing on work etc.”

“You know, the ‘normal’ life of every KP lol”

She goes on to talk about her attitude to taking part in the research (Figure 2):

“I want to give you good data for the project +I have to rely on my instinct in the case of some people”

“That's all – but that's obvious – isn't it?”

“Because on the one hand it's very *flattering* that I'm being researched – I don't consider my life to be particularly interesting - ”

“And on the other, I don't want to get fixated on the fact that someone is interested in me – it's only research that has a defined time frame – then life will go on only without an “audience” –

“The fact that I'm trying to formulate my thoughts here in the form of txts – becomes a research material...”

“On the one hand maybe yes and maybe not and maybe I don't know”

She finishes her sequence of texts with a short “Ok – good night”, probably as a way of finishing the conversation without asking for AL's reaction.

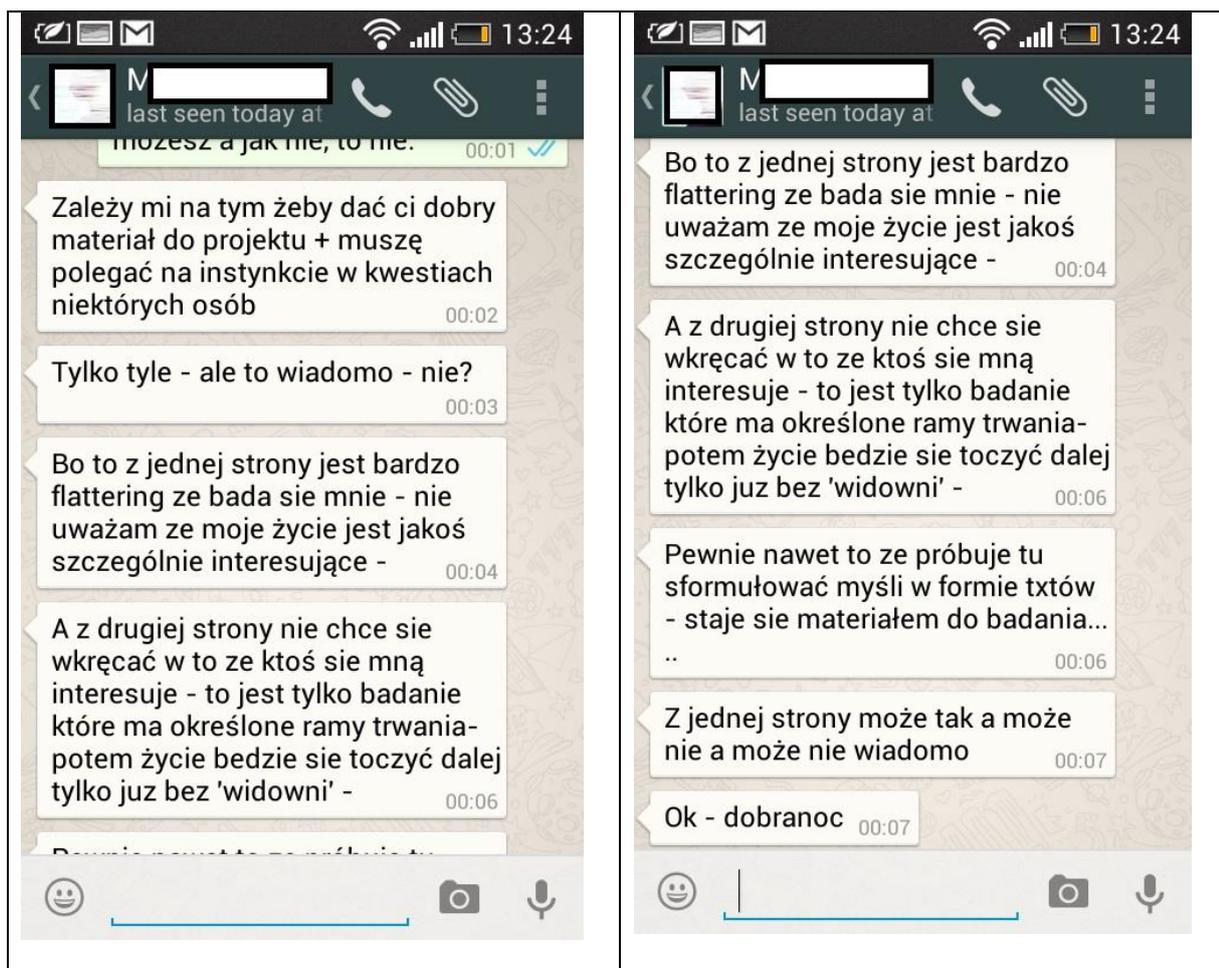


Figure 2: ‘Life will go on without an audience’ (London digital data, WhatsApp, heritage phase) (translated in text)

There are different ways to interpret this series of messages from M. On the one hand, as mentioned earlier, the nature of digital messaging through apps like WhatsApp means that conversations conducted in this way have the potential to become intimate, seemingly as safe as they would be if conducted in the familiar corners of one’s room and ‘faceless’ (Harrison and Gilmore 2012). Communication between M and AL via WhatsApp seemed to offer something for them that face-to-face communication did not. Being of roughly the same age and sharing a similar attitude to digital communication means that the KP and the researcher found this form of communication acceptable for discussing a range of issues, including conducting deep(er) and (more) serious conversations. As a result, issues that would not normally be discussed by researchers and their participants might become part of digital media conversations. Reaching deeper into her thoughts, M indicates that she is defining herself in relation to her involvement in the project when she says “I don’t want to get fixated on the fact that someone is interested in me” – a subject she never raised in face-to-face conversations or email exchanges. At the time, AL felt that through the use of WhatsApp she had moved into the KP’s network of friends, albeit temporarily: examples of her late-night WhatsApp exchanges with friends include similarly profound conversations concerning her private life. Methodologically speaking, in the context of the London heritage data collection,

mobile messaging conversations might be seen as similar to interview data, only less formal or structured, with no pressures of face-to-face contact, visible audio recorders or video cameras: a kind of unforced self-reflexivity. Interpreting the interaction in this way, we might ask questions about the ethics of how to leave participants after such an intense involvement (a question with which we indeed concerned ourselves), and wonder about the role of mobile messaging in contributing to the intimacy and potential dependency between participant and researcher.

On the other hand, however, we might also wonder about the performative nature of digitally-mediated interactions, which often appear to facilitate linguistic stylisation and heightened identity performance (Mair 2013). Early research into the internet focused on what was seen as its inherent playfulness (Danet 2001) encouraged in part by physical separation and relative anonymity which, as mentioned earlier, was assumed to provide users with the freedom to try out new identities. More recent research has also pointed to the ludic nature of online messaging and social network sites (Deumert 2014), even where users are recognised as building on offline identity work rather than playing with new personae. For various reasons, it seems that digital interactions may encourage linguistic reflexivity or meta-awareness (Deumert 2014b); firstly, because they involve written texts which can be planned, edited and revised; and, secondly, because users knowingly exploit graphic resources (punctuation, emojis, images) and text-centred cues such as translanguaging to fulfil the identity and interpersonal work carried out in spoken conversations through other modes – gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice (Georgakopoulou 1997). Seen in this light, we might wonder about M's performance as an instance of knowing stylisation as she reaches out to AL and expresses the contradictions of being both KP and friend.

However we interpret the WhatsApp messages, they illustrate the potential of digital technologies not only to transform everyday interactions between friends but also to alter what roles researchers and research participants can take on within a research project and how they relate to each other, apparently heightening intimacy and yet creating the space for more stylised presentations of self.

6. The ethics of using social media to reach wider communities

So far in this article we have focused on mobile messaging apps and on ways in which researchers can negotiate relationships with research participants as they seek to collect data. Also of relevance to an understanding of the potential for digital technologies to reconfigure new ways of being and relating within a research project is their role in making visible online the ongoing process of research, through social media such as Twitter, websites and blogs. Publishing on the internet meets the ethical requirements of open access, sharing and transparency on a broader scale, but it can also be exploited to alter the information flow between researcher and researched if research teams can recognise and harness the potential.

The possibly unique reach of online texts lies in particular affordances of the internet which, according to boyd (2008), include *persistence* (as we have already seen, digital posts can exist indefinitely, even if they often do not and are not treated as such), *replicability* (online

messages are easily copied, adapted, and pasted into a new context), *searchability* (they can be found through keywords and hyperlinks, for example) and thus potential *scalability* (they can spread and become very visible). In other words, there is a great deal of potential for the recontextualisation or entextualisation of online texts (Leppänen et al 2014). As a result it is difficult to predict the possible future trajectories of a post and thus its potential readership. As an example of the unpredictability of internet posts, early on in the project, RH wrote a post for the team's blog (Figure 3). In it, she discussed the interviews she had carried out with a number of stall owners who worked alongside KC and MYC in the Bull Ring indoor market.

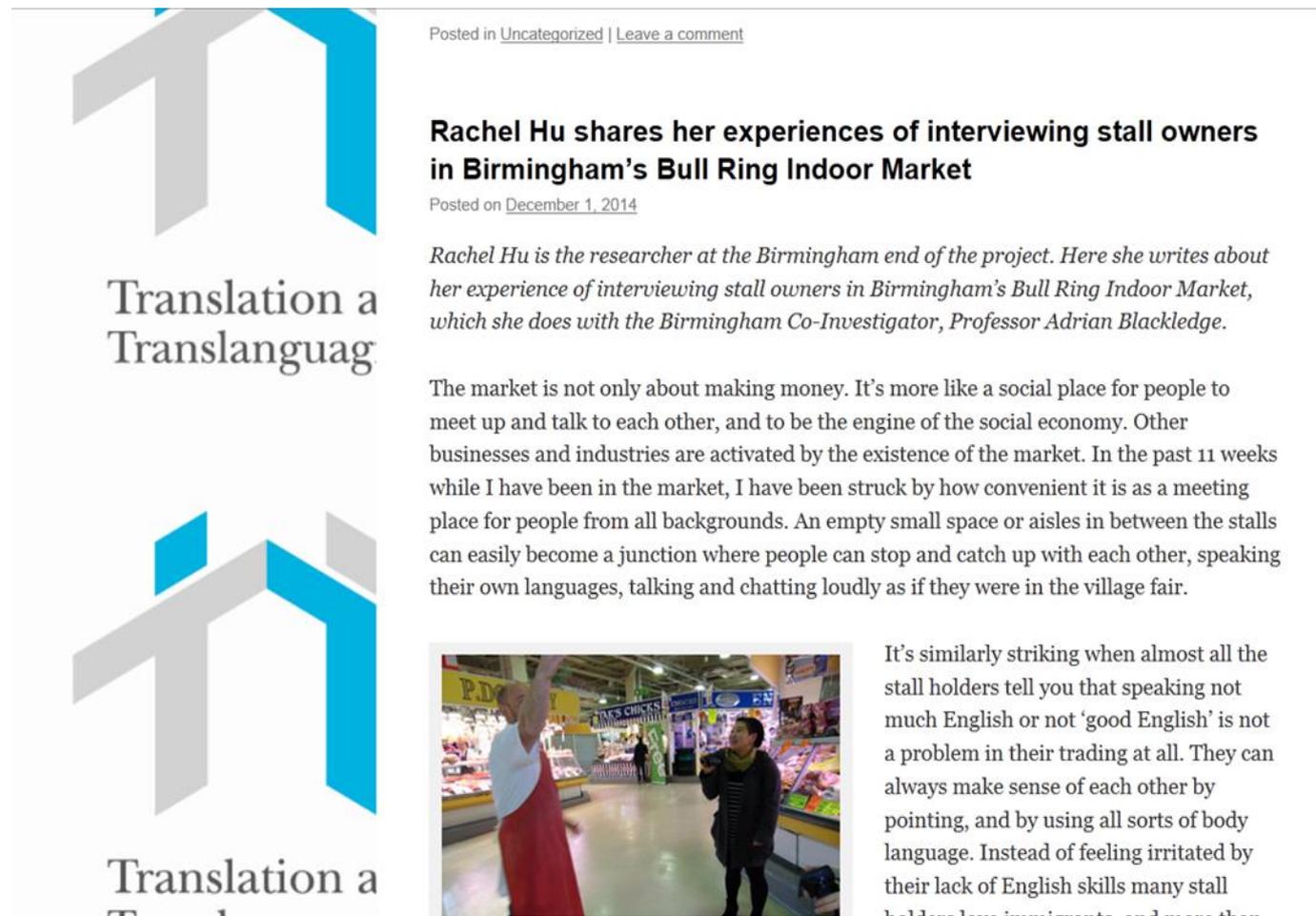


Figure 3: Blogpost by RH (<https://tlangblog.wordpress.com/2014/12/01/rachel-hu-shares-her-experiences-of-interviewing-stall-owners-in-birminghams-bull-ring-indoor-market/>)

RH was at the time spending two days a week observing and recording the butchers in the market. Her relationship with the market-stall holders was important to RH, both for her own sense of well-being and her ability to carry out her research. This is evidenced in her business vignette, which also highlights the market's growing acceptance of, and interest in, the team and their research.

“I had a strong sense of being an intruder on our first day there [in the market] ... As time goes by I have noticed the stares and watching from the nearby stalls are becoming gentle and friendly. The stall-owners have started to greet me when I walked past their stalls and some have asked what we were writing down. The feeling of being accepted as part of the market is great as it enables me to concentrate more on my observations.”

(RH, business vignette)

When RH entered the market a few days after posting her blogpost, she was puzzled to find herself receiving odd looks from the market-stall owners, who seemed to be talking about her as she passed. Confused, she did not find out until later that day that her post had been found by the person who ran the market’s Facebook page (it was *searchable* through the keywords “Bull ring market”) who then posted it on the Facebook page (it was *replicable*). As such, it had then been accessed and read by the market-stall holders themselves – whilst not reaching great *scale*, it had been made visible to those it concerned in a way that RH had not foreseen. Once she knew what had happened, RH was able to discuss the post with them and the incident opened up new possibilities for her relationship with the market-stall owners, and for their involvement with, and access to, the research she was carrying out. She was also able to share the incident with other members of the team, thus enabling further discussion around our use of the internet to publicise our work. The incident raises wider ethical issues regarding the extent to which researchers should focus attention on using the internet to expand the role of participants in a research project and their relationship with the research findings. Should such exposure be seen as potentially stifling any observations that a researcher thinks might be negatively perceived, or as extending the role for research participants alongside researchers in co-constructing meaning?

7. Conclusion

In this article, we explored the implications of digitally-mediated interactions for the roles that different actors can take on within a research project and the ways in which they can relate to each other. We looked particularly at how feelings of closeness and distance between researchers and researched are mediated and reconfigured by digital technologies, and at the ethical issues involved in negotiating consent with far-flung interactants, in interpreting contexts in which we are not present, and in managing the heightened intimacy achieved through mobile messaging by researchers and researched, as well as the potential for the internet to extend the ways in which research participants can relate to a team and their research. At the start of this paper, we cited Georgakopoulou’s (forthcoming) suggestion that researchers need to ‘re-ethicise’ data during a project as they might ‘re-analyse’ it. Our experience of collecting and analysing digital data showed that we needed to re-ethicise in response to our growing awareness of how our KPs perceive and value digitally-mediated interactions, or what we might call their ‘media ideologies’ (Gershon 2010): the set of beliefs that shape, and reflect, their use of digital technologies. As Gershon (2010, p. 284) reminds us, media ideologies are ‘multiple, locatable, partial, positioned and contested’. We have discussed, for example, how it appeared to us that our KPs could use digitally-mediated

interactions to discuss personal or sensitive content and yet seem to treat them (we thought) so lightly; and how digital technologies seemed to simultaneously enhance intimacy and facilitate stylised knowing performances. Of similar relevance, however, is the need to recognise our own media ideologies and how this shapes both our research and our relationships with KPs. Our own perceptions and values were apparent in our discomfort at researching ‘virtual’ data when we were not immersed in ‘a context’; in our response to feeling positioned as a friend through a KP’s particular use of WhatsApp; in our developing awareness of the role of social media in disseminating research; and perhaps, more generally, the way in which we have singled out here for consideration our KPs’ use of digital technologies as something new and unpredictable. The re-ethicising of data may need to be based not only on emerging emic insights gleaned about participants’ orientations towards social media, but on self-reflexivity; an awareness of our own assumptions and ideas about the role and nature of digital technologies.

Although we have focused on our digital data for the purposes of this article, there are implications of the ethically-important moments described above for the conduct of socially-situated research more generally, which inevitably raises ethical challenges that cannot be foreseen at the outset of the research project or even at the outset of a data-collection phase. The messy reality of social research across a range of modes and modalities highlights the limitations of pre-planned ethics approval. This in turn highlights the ways in which this project has responded to emergent ethical issues or critical junctures, in addition to having iterative conversations with ethics committees: firstly, through deep reflexivity within the research team, for example through the writing of vignettes (Goodson and Tagg, forthcoming) as well as through both planned and ad-hoc discussions around emergent ethical issues; and, secondly, through prolonged and difficult conversations with research participants in order to move into deeper understandings of the meaning and significance of ethics on both sides. This process not only helped to work on the matters under discussion but also provided points of reference for future ethical questions. Although these are critical junctures which can only be addressed by the research team, researchers can build awareness and support others by writing openly about such moments. Finally, this paper has highlighted the need to accompany all of this with support for team members when confronting unexpected ethical challenges. Our experiences suggest that reflexivity needs to be accompanied by an awareness of the potential emotional burden of relationship-building within an ethnographic project (Copland and Creese 2015b), as well as the provision of team support for those engaged in managing the complex research relationships that span field visits, private face-to-face interactions, and social media.

Given this paper’s concern with the ethical conduct of research, it might seem strange that we have presented what we cast as (and what potentially are) problematic data, from an ethical point of view. By presenting such data we are taking a position on the data themselves, in close consultation with the participants concerned, and also on the need for an ethical debate in the context of a rapidly evolving linguistic ethnography which, through changing forms of participation for both researchers and the researched, requires that we urgently address ethical issues by exposing our own practices.

Footnotes

¹ AHRC *Translation and Translanguaging: Investigating Linguistic and Cultural Transformations in Superdiverse Wards in Four UK Cities*. (AH/L007096/1). Angela Creese (PI). With CIs Mike Baynham, Adrian Blackledge, Frances Rock, Lisa Goodson, Li Wei, James Simpson, Caroline Tagg, Zhu Hua.

² A man joked on Twitter that he would blow up an airport if his flight was cancelled, resulting in a two-year trial when the police were alerted.

³ Please note that M. has given us permission to treat this conversation as data and to use it in this article.

References

- Androutsopoulos, Jannis. 2008. Potentials and limitations of discourse-centred online ethnography. *Language@Internet* 9.
- Bhattacharya, Kakali. 2007. Consenting to the consent form: What are the fixed and fluid understandings between the researcher and researched? *Qualitative Inquiry* 13(8), 1095-1115.
- boyd, danah. (2008) *Taken out of context: American teen sociality in networked publics*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of California, Berkeley.
- Coleman, E. Gabriella. 2012. Phreaks, hackers and trolls. In Mandiberg, M. (ed.) *The Social Media Reader*. New York: New York University Press, pp. 99-119.
- Copland, Fiona. Forthcoming. Reflecting on the ethics of researching communication in superdiverse contexts. In Creese, A. (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of Language and Superdiversity*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Copland, Fiona & Angela Creese, with Frances Rock and Sara Shaw. 2015a. *Collecting, Analysing and Presenting Data: Linguistic ethnography*. London: Sage.
- Copland, Fiona & Angela Creese. 2015b. Ethical issues in linguistic ethnography: Balancing the micro and the macro. In De Costa, P. I. (ed.) *Ethics in applied linguistics research: Language researcher narratives*, 138-154. New York: Routledge.
- Creese, Angela. 2010. Linguistic Ethnography. In E. Litosseliti, (ed.) *Research Methods in Linguistics*, 138-154. London: Continuum.
- Danet, Brenda. 2001. *Cyberpl@y: communicating online*. Oxford: Berg.
- Garton, Sue & Fiona Copland. 2010. 'I like this interview: I get cakes and cats!' The effects of prior relationships on interview talk. *Qualitative Research* 10(5), 533-551.
- Gershon, Ilona. 2010. Media ideologies: an introduction. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 20(2), 283-293.
- Georgakopoulou, Alexandra. 1997. Self-presentation and interactional alignments in e-mail discourse: the style and code-switches of Greek messages. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 7, 141-164.
- Georgakopoulou, Alexandra. Forthcoming. 'Whose context collapse?': ethical clashes in the study of language and social media in context'. Special Issue on the 'Ethics of online research methods in applied linguistics', *Applied Linguistics Review*.
- Goodson, Lisa & Caroline Tagg. Forthcoming. Working in large diverse teams to explore superdiversity. In Creese, A. (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of Language and Superdiversity*. Abingdon: Routledge.

- Guillemin, Marilys & Lynn Gillam. 2004. Ethics, reflexivity, and “ethically important moments” in research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 10(2), 261-280.
- Harrison, Marissa A & Angela L. Gillmore. 2012. U txt WHEN? College students’ social contexts of text messaging. *The Social Science Journal* 49, 513-518.
- Jones, Rodney. 2009. Cyberspace and physical space: attention structures in computer mediated communication. In Jaworski, A. and C. Thurlow (eds) *Semiotic Landscapes: language, image, space*, 151-167. London: Continuum.
- Jones, Rodney and Christoph A. Hafner (2012) *Understanding Digital Literacies: a practical introduction*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Kelsey, Darren & Lucy Bennett. 2014. Discipline and resistance on social media: discourse, power and context in the Paul Chambers ‘Twitter joke trial’. *Discourse, Context and Media* 3, 37-45.
- Kiesler, Sara & Lee Sproull (1992) ‘Group decision making and communication technology’ *Organisational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes* 52: 96-123.
- Kubanyiova, Maggie. 2008. Rethinking research ethics in contemporary applied linguistics: the tension between macroethical and microethical perspectives in situated research. *Modern Language Journal*, 92/4: 503 -18
- Lee, Carmen. (2007) ‘Affordances and text-making practices in online instant messaging’ *Written Communication* 24: 223–249.
- Leppänen, S., S. Kytölä, H. Jousmaki, S. Peuronen and E. Westinen (2014) ‘Entextualisation and resemiotization as resources for identification in social media’ in Seargeant, P. and C. Tagg (eds) *The Language of Social Media: identity and community online*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 112-136.
- Ling, R. and B. Yttri (2002) ‘Hyper-coordination via mobile phones in Norway’ in Katz, J. and M. Aakhus (eds) *Perpetual Contact: mobile communication, private talk, public performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 139-169.
- Livingstone, Sonia. 2008. Taking risky opportunities in youthful content creation: teenagers’ use of social networking sites for intimacy, privacy and self-expression. *New Media & Society* 10(3): 393–411.
- Lyons, Agnieszka. 2014. *Self-presentation and self-positioning in text-messages: embedded multimodality, deixis, and reference frame*. Unpublished PhD thesis, School of Languages, Linguistics & Film, Queen Mary University of London.
- Mackenzie, Jai. Forthcoming. Identifying informational norms in Mumsnet talk: a reflexive-linguistic approach to internet research ethics. Special Issue on the ‘Ethics of online research methods in applied linguistics’, *Applied Linguistics Review*.

- Markham, Annette N. 2003. Critical junctures and ethical choices in Internet ethnography. In Thorseth, M. (ed.) *Applied Ethics in Internet Research*. Trondheim, Norway: NTNU University Press.
- Markham, Annette N. 2004. Representation in online ethnographies: a matter of context sensitivity. In Chen, S., J. Hall and M. Johns (eds.) *Online Social Research: Theory, methods and ethics*, 131-145. New York: Peter Lang publishers.
- Markham, Annette N. & Elizabeth Buchanan. 2015. Ethical considerations in digital research contexts. In Wright, James (ed.). *Encyclopedia for Social & Behavioral Sciences*. Elsevier Press, pp. 606-613.
- Marwick, Alice & danah boyd. 2014. Networked privacy: how teenagers negotiate context in social media. *New Media & Society* 16(7), 1051-1067.
- Miller, Daniel and Jolynna Sinanan (2014) *Webcam*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Moore, Shaun. 2004. The doubling of place: electronic media, time-space arrangements and social relationships. In Couldry, Nick & Anna McCarthy (eds.) *MediaSpace: Place, Scale and Culture in a Media Age*, 21-36. London: Routledge.
- Page, Ruth, David Barton, Johann W. Unger & Michelle Zappavigna. 2014. *Researching Language and Social Media: a student guide*. London: Routledge.
- Rampton, Ben, Karen Tusting, Janet Maybin, Richard Barwell, Angela Creese & Vally Lytra. 2004. *Linguistic Ethnography in the UK: A Discussion Paper*. Accessed 27-11-2015 from http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fss/organisations/lingethn/documents/discussion_paper_jan_05.pdf.
- Roberts, Lynne, Smith L. & Clare Pollock. 2000. 'U r a lot bolder on the net': shyness and internet use. In W.R. Crozier (ed.) *Shyness: development, consolidation and change*. London: Routledge, pp. 121-138.
- Tagg, C. (2015) 'Language, business and superdiversity: a report on social media across case studies' Working Paper 6, Translation and Translanguaging Project (TLANG). Available: <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/generic/tlang/working-papers/index.aspx>