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# The social life of methods: Introducing the special issue

The methodological literature in applied linguistics illuminates a wide range of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches (e. g., Brown 2014; Wei and Moyer 2008; Mackey and Marsden 2016; Phakiti and Roever 2016; Plonsky 2016; Richards et al. 2012). These publications promote an understanding of our empirical methods and of how different methods generate data, which in turn informs principled design choices and the interpretations of, and inferences from, the collected materials. In addition to offering recommendations for best practices and technical know-how, many of the texts offer insightful reflections on the ontological and epistemological assumptions that inform different formats of data collection and approaches to analysis (Hulstijn et al. 2014), spurn methodological innovation (Choi and Richards 2016), and encourage a reflexive attitude to research methods and methodology.

This Special Issue expands upon this extensive literature, but it also pursues a somewhat different project. In the context of social studies of (social) science, ethnomethodologists Greiffenhagen et al. (2011) refer to a parallel undertaking as "methodography", the empirical investigation of research methods in practice. David Silverman has described this endeavor as "entering into the 'black box' of how social phenomena are constituted in real time" (2016: 3). Getting inside the black box amounts to treating research methods as social activities in their own right, as problematic or *topic* for study rather than as a naturalized *resource* for generating or processing data (Garfinkel 1967; Zimmerman and Pollner 1971). In our case the black box is the research methods that applied linguists routinely use to produce knowledge in our field.

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For the "methodographies" of standard applied linguistic research methods in this collection, several intellectual traditions have offered conceptual and analytical resources. They include the interpretive sociology of Alfred Schütz, which sees social science as a second-order constructionist endeavor in the sense that social science theory re-presents the common sense constructions of the lifeworld as formal and abstract (re)constructions (e. g., 1954); Aaron Cicourel's influential treatment of *Methods and Measurement in Sociology* (1964), which examines research methods as forms of practical social organization; the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (Gilbert and Mulcay 1984), including ethnographic studies of science laboratories (Latour and Woolgar 1979; Knorr Cetina 1981); and studies of the natural and social sciences "at work" from the perspectives of ethnomethodology (Button 1991; Hester and Francis 2007; Housley 2003; Lynch 1993) and conversation analysis (Drew et al. 2006).

The collection has also benefitted from a recent bibliography on social studies of social science, compiled by Mair et al. (2013). In their introduction, the authors note that this literature takes three broad areas of research practice as its focus for analysis: (1) "the production of the raw materials of research, i. e. data, and the ways in which the social world is made into an object of social scientific inquiry"; (2) "analytic work, the ways in which data can be and are variously turned into findings and so are made to speak of and to social worlds"; and (3) "writing, de/inscription and representational work" (p. 5). The studies in the Special Issue fall within the first area. More particularly, they examine different methods for data generation in applied linguistics, and only methods that operate, entirely or partially, through *interaction*. For their own method of analysis, the studies adopt conversation analysis (CA) as their shared approach, in some cases in conjunction with membership categorization analysis (Fitzgerald and Housley 2015) and discursive psychology (Potter and Edwards 2012).

In order to sort out where the project locates itself in the diverse landscape of CA, we found help in Antaki's proposal (2011) to distinguish several strands within the applied branch of CA. The investigation of research methods as social practice can be situated at the intersection of foundational, institutional, and interventional applied CA. It is foundational in that CA allows us to "respecify" interactional research methods as collaborative actions that are locally accomplished by the participants through the details of their talk and other conduct. It is institutional in that interaction for research purposes is reflexively organized with a view to the research goal and therefore departs from ordinary conversation in specifiable ways. While the articles in this Special Issue primarily examine how disciplinary knowledge is produced,

they also offer interventional perspectives for collaboration and training in applied linguistic research practices and encourage a critical and reflexive stance towards investigative methods in our field.

# 1 The papers

The research methods examined in the articles aim to produce different categories of disciplinary knowledge. Three of these methods - qualitative research interviews, focus groups, and qualitative questionnaires – are routinely used to solicit participants' (presumably more or less stable) thoughts and feelings, experiences, attitudes, and opinions. Of these methods, dyadic research interviews stand out in several respects. Their use is extraordinarily frequent, whether in form of standardized survey interviews or qualitative interviews. They have attracted more methodographic attention, and sooner, than any other research method in the social sciences (e. g. Baker 1997; Briggs 1986). And they are the only standard method on which there is a burgeoning methodographic literature in applied linguistics (e. g. Kasper and Prior 2015a; Prior 2011; 2014; 2016a; 2016b; Richards 2011; Roulston 2011; Talmy 2010; Talmy and Richards 2011). In a seminal paper, Talmy (2010) distinguishes two perspectives on qualitative interviews, the interview as *research instrument* (a data generation machine) and as *social practice* in its own right (and therefore data for analysis). The distinction echoes that between interviews as a *resource*, a device that generates data about the respondent's interior and exterior world outside the interview, and the interview as *topic*, the interactional methods through which interviewer and interviewee produce their ongoing interaction together in the here-and-now of the interview setting (Rapley 2001; Seale 1988).

One of the key features of the interview that the topic/social practice perspective pulls into view is the constitutive role of the interviewer in the interview interaction and therefore the need for analysis to show how interviewer contributions (including but going beyond questions) shape interviewee responses (Kasper and Prior 2015a, 2015b; Potter and Hepburn 2012; Prior 2016b; Rapley 2001; Richards 2011; Roulston 2011). When the interview is treated as interviewer's and interviewee's joint interactional accomplishment, it also becomes possible to see how the participants build their interpersonal relationship through their contributions as they progress through the interview. Research reports and recommendations for good practices in qualitative interviewing often point to positive participant relationships, or "rapport", as a

condition for openness and self-disclosure, yet just how rapport is achieved remains largely obscure. In his paper *Matthew T. Prior* revisits rapport as a concern that the participants display at specific moments in the interview. To that end he draws on the extensive conversation-analytic literature on *affiliation*, the mutual alignment of affective stances through interactional practices (Stivers 2008), and in particular on *empathic* affiliation (Heritage 2011). In a case study drawn from a large corpus of interviews with immigrants from South-East Asia to North America, and extending his extensive previous work on emotion displays in the same materials (Prior 2011, 2016a, 2016b), Prior shows how empathic moments emerge in interaction with an asylum-seeking immigrant and describes the interactional methods through which the participants achieve empathic affiliation. The analysis locates the sequential environments where empathic displays become relevant and shows how such displays are accomplished through practices of turn formation, including repetition, upgrading, and the construction of matching stances through pro-sodic formats. Importantly, Prior not only reveals where and how empathic alignments are done but that they are *normatively* expected at particular moments in the interviewee's tellings. When empathic responses are not forth-coming, the interviewee pursues them before he continues his telling (also Kasper and Prior 2015b). The study thus respecifies rapport as participants' local interactional accomplishment and normative orientation. As such it offers a key example of the larger methodographic project to respecify stan-dard social science concepts.

In contrast to the widespread use of dyadic research interviews, *focus groups* are sparingly seen as data generating tools in applied linguistics. Participants in focus groups are recruited as stakeholders or experts, brought together to talk with each other about topics proposed by a moderator (Morgan 2012). The methodological rational is to foster the display of participants' "POBAs" – perceptions, opinions, beliefs, attitudes – (Puchta and Potter 2004) through the multiparty interaction. In applied linguistics focus groups have mostly been incorporated into larger studies of program evaluation (e. g. Kiely and Rea-Dickins 2005, and Furukawa 2010 for an exception). The paper by *Hanbyul Jung* also reports on focus groups in an evaluation context. But instead of treating the interaction as an unexamined platform for exhibits of POBAs, Jung's analytical interest is in how the participants organize the activity as multiparty interaction and how identities and category-bound expectations visi-bly become matters of their concern. The focus group participants were EFL teachers in Korea who participated in a study-abroad teacher development program in the U.S. The analysis reveals that the teachers skillfully manage the tension between acting as respondents to the moderators' questions while

also assuming responsibility for advancing the focus group agenda. The second orientation becomes visible when a participant takes the initiative to redirect the current talk from casual conversation to the institutional business of the focus group, and from talk about matters of interest to the participants to the topic raised by the moderator's question. Jung's analysis offers compelling evidence of how the social organization of focus groups generates complex identity dynamics between moderator and participants and among the participants, which in turn give raise to differentiated and multiperspectival evaluations of the professional development program that the focus groups were set up for in the first place.

In a project that explores how applied linguistic knowledge is produced through interactionally organized research methods, written questionnaires seem a misfit. There is a sizable literature examining how survey question-naires are delivered in interaction between and interviewer and respondent (e. g., Maynard et al. 2002), but item design and responses to self-administered questionnaires have not been considered from an interactional perspective. The paper by *Meike Wernicke* and *Steven Talmy* demonstrates that retheorizing questionnaires as social interaction is not only viable but offers new and expansive perspectives on questionnaires as a technology for knowledge production. An important precursor to this undertaking is Cicourel's (1964) theoretical investigation of fixed-choice questionnaires in *Methods and Measurement*. Cicourel argues that the construction, responses to, and analysis of scaled response and multiple choice questions rest on researchers' and lay persons' commonsense understandings of culture and language, and proposes that rather than treating such implicit theories as taken-for-granted resources they be put under analytic scrutiny in social research methodology and practice. Wernicke and Talmy take up and further extend Cicourel's call. From an open-ended questionnaire, designed to evaluate a professional devel-opment program for Canadian teachers of French who had participated in a sojourn in France, they selected one item ("Has participation in the program increased your confidence as a French language teacher?") and the answers it generated as a sample case. For the analysis the authors extend Talmy's (2010) distinction between research instrument and social practice from interviews to questionnaires. In several ways, the social practice perspective affords a view of the generated data as interactional accomplishments rather than autono-mous meanings that inhere in question and answers. Most critically, examin-ing the social organization of the question and answers with a conversation-analytic lens makes visible their sequential structuring as adjacency pairs (the normative ties between question as first pair part and answer as second pair part), the preference structure of the specific question format (the positive

polarity question prefers an affirmative answer), and orientation to recipient design (research context and participants) through the question and answer formulations. Although the questionnaire data are produced in an asynchronous and written mode, they are grounded in the same principles and organizations as question-answer sequences in spoken interaction – the family resemblance with research interviews is particularly apparent. One valuable lesson for questionnaire design and analysis is that (just as in the case of research interviews) the question format needs to be given close attention because it shapes respondents' answers in various ways, and it does so unavoidably. The focal question in the study embodies a cluster of common-sense understandings of language teachers' "confidence" and its enhancement through in-country sojourn, and invokes the nexus between the teachers' professional identities and their status as L1 and L2 speakers of French. As the authors' analysis reveals in detail, the teachers' answers operate on these formulated and implied understandings in various ways – as they would, of necessity, on any alternative question formulation. Put differently, system constraints between question and answer obviate the "unbiased" question as an attainable design feature. Instead, respecifying questions and answers in qualitative questionnaires as interactional accomplishments opens a promising methodographic research agenda and offers direct benefits for research methodology and practice.

In classifications of research methods, interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires are often grouped together as "self-report" formats. The reportable objects, as noted above, are seen to reside in participants' experiential and epistemic territory and to be available for description, commentary, and assessment. The type of self-report investigated in *Ryan Deschambault's* paper has a rather different epistemic status by design. Verbal protocols were developed in cognitive psychology as a method of accessing subjects' ongoing thought processes during task performance and adopted in second language research to produce data on cognitive processes in language use and learning. In his paper *Ryan Deschambault* discusses how three contrasting perspectives on cognition and language – information processing, sociocultural theory, and discursive psychology/conversation analysis – approach concurrent thinking aloud as radically different activities in terms of what it is, where it is, and what researchers can learn from it. He also shows how the ontological and epistemological theoretizations are methodologically consequential for data generation, representation, and analysis. To this end Deschambault examines one key issue from the methodological debate in the dominant information processing tradition, the "reactivity problem". "Reactivity" refers to how the thinking aloud itself and various extraneous factors may influence the ongoing thought processes

and hence pose a threat to validity. Among these factors, the interaction between researcher and participant – something strictly to be avoided according to information-processing protocol – is a commonly cited source of reactivity. For his investigation of how the reactivity problem fares when it is construed from different theoretical vantage points, Deschambault selects two sites of "de facto reactivity" that had been identified in the literature, the task directions delivered to participants prior to the think-aloud and experimenter conduct during the activity. His analytical strategy is to examine how each topic is addressed in two published studies on think-aloud with a focus on learner strategies, one taking an information-processing angle and the other a socio-cultural theory perspective, then re-analyze the same reported material from the opposite lens as well as from a combined discursive-psychological and conver-sation-analytical view point. The multi-perspectival analysis has several impor-tant outcomes. On the one hand it shows that the verbal reports are relentlessly grounded in interaction. Their "de facto reactivity" is impervious to elimination by theoretical perspectives that privilege intrapsychological explanation. On the other hand, as expressly interactional approaches, discursive psychology and conversation analysis offer the conceptual and analytical resources to make the interactional production of cognitive displays and accounts visible through their standard representational practices of data transcription and analytical attention to the details of interactional conduct. They also reveal how the participants reflexively produce the verbal reports as particular kinds of research activity and so demonstrate that descriptions of and inferences to thought processes are inescapably local and situated matters. While Deschambault urges researchers of all theoretical persuasions to further consider epistemological, methodologi-cal and representational issues in verbal report studies, he also proposes that the view of think-alouds as "actively managed products" has value for research-ers working in other investigative traditions.

    In research on cognition and learning, observational data generated by psycholinguistic experiments are the royal road to knowledge generation. Their massive and longstanding presence surpasses verbal report by a wide margin. Yet while there is at least a small body of methodographic research on verbal protocols, other categories of psycholinguistic experiments appear to have remained under the radar. One organizational property of psycholinguistic experiments that is known from the methodological literature and research practice, and that is present in observational and self-report experiments alike, is that their activity structure differs markedly from activities in participants' lifeworld and therefore requires specific instruction (Deschambault, this issue). *Kyoko Kobayashi Hillman, Steven J. Ross* and *Gabriele Kasper* examine how pre-experimental instruction prepares participants to take part in a reaction time

experiment designed to measure L2 speakers' implicit knowledge of English grammar. Building on ethnomethodological and conversation-analytic work on instruction delivery and understanding displays in a range of instruction contexts, the authors show in a single-case study how the participants jointly work through the instruction until they achieve adequate epistemic alignment, a condition for the research participant to commence the experiment. The analysis reveals how the overall architecture of the instruction (an explanation phase and subsequent practice phase, each addressing the two experimental tasks) embodies its institutional goal and how written onscreen directives and prompts become resources for the interactional instruction delivery. While the software-generated written instructions address themselves to a generalized experimental participant, the research participant displays through formulations and requests for clarification and confirmation how *he* understands the instructions, both the online version and their explanation by the experimenter. These epistemic displays offer a critical diagnostic to the experimenter since they show the participant's grasp of the instruction at particular moments and enable the experimenter to recipient design his subsequent explanations and corrections accordingly. One significant outcome of the analysis is that it reveals the initial steep gap between the experimenter's expert knowledge of chronometric method and the participant's struggle to make sense of its unfamiliar logic, and how both participants recruit their shared interactional methods to eventually achieve adequate epistemic alignment for the practical purpose of the experiment. As the first empirical look into the black box of pre-experimental instruction the paper by Kobayashi Hillman et al. strongly invites further research on this important topic.

The issue of task instructions and their relationship with the activity they prepare for is the topic of the final paper in the collection. In a study on roleplays conducted in a language assessment context, *Gabriele Kasper* and *Soo Jung Youn* observe that the roleplay setup embodies the requirements for authenticity and standardization, and examine how the roleplay participants recruit the descriptions and directives from the setup at various moments in their interaction. In contrast to research that treats roleplay as a resource for producing data, this study sets aside the concern of how roleplay corresponds to real-life interaction, or how effective it is in differentiating L2 speakers at different proficiency levels. Instead it connects with earlier ethnomethodological investigations and recent conversation-analytic research on roleplay in various second language settings to examine how the roleplay participants mobilize their generic and setting-specific interactional competences and knowledge as members of an academic community to produce a routine academic activity (a student requesting a letter of recommendation from a professor). All participants dyads

recruit sequence organization and membership categorization to build the open-ing of their encounter as a recognizable academic consultation and in this way "talk the institution into being". The analysis of the request sequences shows how the participants display their normative expectations about student's and professor's category-bound rights and obligations in regard to the letter request and its contingencies. For example, whether or not the "student" takes the initiative to inform the "professor" about the due date, and the order in which they bring up the due date relative to other requirements for the letter engender very different action trajectories and stance displays. These differences clearly indicate that alternative courses of actions have sequential and moral implica-tions for the participants in the simulation. In this regard the analysis strongly supports an earlier study by Huth (2010), which countered the widespread belief in applied linguistics and beyond that roleplay are "inconsequential" and there-fore "inauthentic". In addition to pointing up the consequentiality of their own interaction for the roleplay participants, the study sheds light on how the setup surfaced in the roleplay interaction. Some of the setup details were treated as constitutive of the setting and activity by all participants, others were mobilized by some participants, and yet other setup specifications never made it into the talk. Beyond raising further methodographic questions about the relation of roleplay as a blueprint for interaction and how participants operate on that blueprint in their ongoing social activity, the findings also identify critical design issues for roleplay as an instrument for language assessment and other applications in applied linguistics.

We noted earlier that the Special Issue focuses on data generation, the first domain of research practices that Mair et al. (2013) identify as objects for methodographic investigation. Each of the studies offers an inside view of how the participants produce a standard research format as a collaborative local achievement and reveals the cultural, institutional, and interactional compe-tences mobilized in the course of the activity. While much further empirical study of technologies for generating qualitative and quantitative data is needed, a comprehensive research program on the social practices of knowledge produc-tion in applied linguistics will encompass all stages of the research process, including data analysis and the representation of data and analytical outcomes. How do applied linguists develop research instruments as practical tasks? How do they transform "raw" data into codes and rubrics? How do they manage issues of codeability and quantifyability? How do they make decisions about representing data for different purposes? These and other questions urge us to reflexively turn our own disciplinary competences on applied linguistics research methods in search of their endogenous orders as social activities. As the studies in this collection show, approaching research technologies in action

as the participants' coordinated work not only helps practitioners understand their epistemic engines. Methodographic findings also offer resources for revising established research protocols and developing innovative alternatives. Editors and authors hope that readers will take the Special Issue as an invitation to join this emerging research program.

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