

## **Filtered meaning: Appreciating linguistic skill, social position and subjectivity of interpreters in cross-language research**

**Abstract:** Arriving in a foreign country with little knowledge of local languages presents the researcher with significant linguistic challenges. Our in-country contacts may suggest potential interpreters for us to hire, but how do we know if these interpreters can fluently speak the languages of our participants? Can we, lacking fluency in local languages, understand when the social position and lived experiences of our interpreter modify the discourses we seek to analyse? Drawing from my human geography research experience in Uganda, this paper aims to share strategies to assess the linguistic skills of the interpreter and to understand his or her social position and subjectivity. Uniquely, this paper highlights differences in interpretation and links these differences to the assistants' social position and subjectivity, highlighting the need to acknowledge that meaning can be filtered by interpretation and requiring that critical reflection be broadened to encompass interpreters in cross-language research.

**Keywords:** Interpreter, social position, subjectivity, situated knowledge, linguistic skill, translation.

## **1 Introduction**

Early in my doctoral studies, I took a graduate seminar course on qualitative methods. During the course, there was discussion about how our own social position and subjectivity could influence our research because we interpret qualitative data through the lens of our own world view and because our status, gender, age and ethnicity influence how and what our participants choose to reveal to us (England, 1994; Kobayashi, 1994; Dowling, 2005). Reflexivity, defined as 'self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of self as researcher' (England, 1994: 82), was discussed as a means to manage the differences between researcher and participant and to add rigour to our qualitative research (Baxter and Eyles, 1997; Rose, 1997; Valentine, 2002). Knowing I would be working in Uganda and without the ability to learn the local tribal languages prior to starting my fieldwork, I questioned the influence that the social position and subjectivity of an interpreter might have on the validity of my research. I looked for literature on the influence of language interpretation on qualitative data collection, and at the time (2008), found very few papers dealing with the social position of the interpreter (although see Temple, 2002; Temple and Edwards, 2002; Temple and Young, 2004). Realizing that the linguistic skill, social position and subjectivity of my interpreter would influence my research, I knew I would need to develop a cross-language strategy within my research design.

Interpretation is the transfer of meaning based on vocabulary, grammar, context and culture, from one language to another (Esposito, 2001). Interpreters are fundamental to the research process when a foreign

researcher who is not fluent in the language of study participants is working in a different ethno-linguistic culture. In anthropology and other social science disciplines, the research assistant often assumes the role of interpreter and cultural guide (Schumaker, 2001), especially where accredited language interpreters are unavailable. These research assistants could broker access for the researcher, provide valuable insight into local livelihoods and customs, modify meaning to protect local interests, bias the interpretation of local culture in favour of certain research outcomes, and as a result gain social status and power within their communities (Schumaker, 2001; Chilisa, 2012; Caretta, 2014). Early ethnographers often acknowledged these assistants by including them in book prefaces, introductions, and field reminiscences, by writing about their life histories and in some cases by including them as co-authors (Sanjek, 1993). However, 'in the modern, authoritative monograph there are, in effect, no strong voices present except that of the writer' (Clifford, 1983: 136). Research assistants, interpreters, and science technicians are characteristically absent from most scientific writings (Sanjek, 1993; Schumaker, 2001) and today it is rare to explicitly see the interpreter in qualitative research (Temple, 2002). Interpreters are typically short term hires and their role is usually limited to data collection (Temple, 2002; Turner, 2010). In a recent study of forty qualitative articles documenting cross-language research in qualitative nursing studies, interpreters were generally invisible and 85% of the papers did not acknowledge interpretation as a methodological limitation of their study (Squires, 2009). Some critical studies are starting to address the issues of whether the interpreter should be *invisible* and if the dynamics of the cross-language interview merit a more rigorous treatment of the role and influence of the interpreter with respect to power, subjectivity and what the interpreter chooses to interpret (Edwards, 1998; Temple and Young, 2004; Heller et al., 2011; Turner, 2010; Caretta, 2014). However, the influence of interpreters in cross-language research remains an under studied subject.

This article is therefore concerned with how the social position and subjectivity of interpreters in cross-language research can filter the meaning of the discourse we seek to interpret as qualitative researchers. Based on my experiences as a human geographer, studying the benefits and losses accrued from conservation by communities living next to protected areas in Uganda, I document the cross-language strategy that evolved during my first field season to make explicit the variations in language proficiency and interpreted meaning between interpreters. Starting from a brief review of the literature about interpreters in qualitative research, I detail my research project and cross-language strategy. We then meet my two primary research assistants and interpreters, Peter and Mark<sup>1</sup>, and delve into whether the research was influenced by the social position or perspectives of these two gentlemen by thematically comparing their interpretations. Finally, the implication of participant meaning being influenced by interpreter social position and subjectivity is discussed.

## **2 Interpreters in the research process**

The anthropological perspective on interpretation stems from the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that implies that language is a filter through which different cultures see reality in different ways (Werner and Campbell, 1973). This requires that the interpretation not only be accurate in a literal sense, but that the meaning and cultural symbols of the language also be translated into the reality of the researcher. Although it is recognized that there is no uniquely correct interpretation of a statement into another language, the quality of the interpretation can be improved by: simplifying complex statements, ensuring clarity by avoiding syntactic and lexical ambiguity, using paraphrasing where appropriate and trying to place the

interpretation into a social and cultural context (*Ibid*). Numerous recommendations have been made to improve the mechanics of interpretation in research, such as ensuring the interpreter is familiar with the research aims and technical terms prior to starting any interviewing (Irvine, et al., 2007), explicitly acknowledging the credentials and role of the interpreter (Squires, 2009), limiting the interpretation to two languages rather than introducing added complexity with multiple languages (Kapborg and Bertero, 2002), allowing for on-going discussion about the interpretation process during fieldwork (Larkin et al., 2007), and ultimately triangulating data between participants, interpreters and data collection methods (Esposito, 2001; Temple and Edwards, 2002). Although these tactics improve interpretational accuracy, the influence of differences in social position, gender, age and education between the participant, interpreter, and researcher will still influence what is communicated, translated and understood (Temple 2002).

To retain control over the interpretation process, the method of forward-backward translation is highly recommended. This involves having the written English interview questions translated into the other language by one interpreter and then translated back into English by another interpreter, thereby highlighting discrepancies, inappropriate language usage and ambiguous interpretations of the questions (Werner and Campbell, 1973; Edwards, 1998). This method can also be used as a training and familiarization exercise for the interpreters to better appreciate the tone and intent of the research (Edwards, 1998). Although forward-backward translation has been held as the best means of ensuring a 'correct' interpretation, this approach is flawed because it assumes there is a correct meaning, that meaning is not filtered by cultural context, and that an equivalent meaning is even available within a given language (Larkin et al., 2007). Debating the meaning inherent in certain key phrases in the research topic

among numerous interpreters and researchers has been proposed as a means to agree on which meaning to use (*Ibid*), but this constrains the interpretation to an agreed lexicon, where 'possible differences in the meaning of words or concepts across languages vanish into the space between spoken otherness and written sameness' (Temple, 2002: 844).

Interpreting between languages requires there be a balance between cultural understanding and the language proficiency of the interpreter (Larkin et al., 2007). However, working through an interpreter can result in the researcher losing the ability to guide the interview or focus group and redirect the discussion where needed (Esposito, 2001). Real-time interpretation provides the best means for the researcher to retain some of this flexibility in data collection, but can introduce variations in language use relative to post-interview transcript translation (*Ibid*). The mechanics of the interview can also change with the presence of an interpreter: the interview will take at least twice as long as a mono-linguistic interview (Freed, 1988), the physical arrangement of the researcher, interviewee and interpreter becomes important, as eye contact and retaining a connection needs to continue between the researcher and interviewee, even though the interpreter and interviewee are the ones directly speaking to one another (Freed, 1988; Phelan and Parkman, 1995; Edwards, 1998), and when interviewing in a foreign country, it is also important to attend to the local social etiquette; a local interpreter can act as a cultural broker and help the researcher comply since they know what is acceptable in a given situation (Freed, 1988; Caretta, 2014).

The choice of interpreter is where the rigors of qualitative methods can play a key role. Some researchers prefer the interpreter to hold common traits with the interviewees to facilitate the comfort of the

interviewee (Edwards, 1998), while others state that their best interpreters were the ones aligned with their own background and education (Freed, 1988). In a foreign research context it is almost impossible to meet both of these preferences, but either way, the characteristics of the interpreter and their role during the research process need to be taken into consideration (Kapborg and Bertero, 2002; Squires, 2009). Obviously, the interpreter needs to be fluent in both the language of the researcher and the interviewee. However, the position that the interpreter holds in the community, their educational background and personal biases can influence the content of the interviews and even how much of our participants' discourse is actually interpreted (Edwards, 1998; Temple and Young, 2004; Heller et al., 2011; Caretta, 2014). Differences in moderation style and social position of the focus group facilitator have also been documented to alter focus group results (McDonald, 1993; Morgan, 1997; Stewart et al., 2007). Unfortunately, interpreters have traditionally been exempt from the need to reflexively consider social position, identity and perspectives in qualitative research (Temple and Edwards, 2002). Although much of the literature on translation and interpretation has focused on the interpreter as an unbiased agent transmitting messages from participant to researcher (Freed, 1988), those using a more social constructionist approach to their research are now viewing interpreters as active producers of knowledge in the research process (Edwards, 1998; Temple, 2002; Turner, 2010).

The choice must be made between an interpreter who is a conduit of information and essentially rendered invisible to the research and an interpreter who is fully engaged in the research supporting the researcher with analysis and interpretation of results as well as the linguistic interpretation of the interviews themselves (Freed, 1988; Temple and Young, 2004; Caretta, 2014). Most of the literature recommends a

middle ground between these two positions with more modern texts electing to make the interpreter far more visible in the research process and published papers, accepting the impact of the positionality and subjectivity of the interpreter (Edwards, 1998; Temple 2002; Caretta, 2014). Moving from unacknowledged interpreters to people whose social position and experiences influence interpretation requires the researcher to ask the interpreter to reflect upon and discuss their position about the research topic and how their life experiences have drawn them to this position (Temple, 2002; Turner 2010). It also requires the researcher to reflect on how working through an interpreter can indeed filter the meanings the research is designed to understand and hence requires the development of a cross-language strategy as part of the research design.

### **3 A cross-language strategy**

#### **3.1 The research project**

Since 2008, my research has been conducted in Uganda, a multi-lingual country where language and ethnicity roughly coincide with the geographic locations of traditional tribal kingdoms. Including the two official languages of English and Kiswahili, 32 distinct languages are broadly recognized in Uganda (Mukama, 2009). A majority of my work has occurred around Kibale National Park (KNP) in western Uganda, a 795 km<sup>2</sup> protected area providing critical habitat to eastern chimpanzees, elephants, and 12 other primate species (Chapman and Lambert, 2000). With my team of Ugandan research assistants, we use focus groups, interviews, surveys, key informant crop damage logs, and physical surveys of resource extraction from the park, to understand the benefits and losses caused by the existence of the protected



area that are accrued by residents living in communities neighbouring the park. The aim of the research is to help the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) and local government to improve people-park relations and to advocate, on behalf of local residents, for equitable benefit programs and revenue sharing projects that will mitigate household losses caused by park-protected animals (MacKenzie et al., 2013). I entered this field of research because I believe in the need for habitat conservation, particularly for wild chimpanzees, and that wildlife conservation can only be achieved in the long-run if solutions are found to mitigate human-wildlife conflict next to protected habitats.

KNP is managed by UWA and although local residents are not allowed to enter the park without authorization, UWA does share 20% of gate revenues with local government to build development projects for communities adjacent to the park and permits negotiated access to certain resources inside the park. Local residents also benefit from the activities of conservation-based Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and park-based employment with tourist facilities, carbon sequestration operations, and with foreign and domestic researchers at the Makerere University Biological Field Station (MUBFS). However, the losses incurred by local residents to crop raiding and predation by park-protected animals far outweigh these benefits in most communities next to KNP (MacKenzie, 2012).

English and Kiswahili are taught in school, but since only 24% of the adults living in the 25 communities I work with around KNP have completed primary school (MacKenzie and Hartter, 2013), most local residents only speak tribal languages. A majority of people living next to KNP affiliate with one of two dominant tribes in the region: Batoro and Bakiga. Unfortunately, the languages spoken by these tribes, Ratoro and

Rakiga, are rarely spoken outside Uganda making local language proficiency impossible for me prior to starting research around KNP in 2008. I therefore had to develop a strategy to manage and incorporate language interpretation into my research project.

### **3.2 Choosing interpreters for the project**

Arriving at MUBFS for my first field season, I knew I would need research assistants who could interpret between the two local languages and English as well as taking on the role of cultural guide to help me acclimatize to social norms and customs. Numerous long-term ecological and biological research projects led by academics from North America, Europe and Africa are conducted at MUBFS, but social research has been limited. As a result, most local research assistants speak English but are trained in ecological and biological field methods. Those who do have experience as a social research assistant are few and have been trained by social researchers in whose employ they typically remain. Lacking a source of accredited interpreters, three potential assistants were recommended to me by MUBFS administration and managers of two long-term research projects: Peter, Mark and Brian<sup>2</sup>. Initial work involved scouting the area to identify potential research communities and to get approvals from local government officials to work in the area, so I initially hired all three to assess their skills.

McGill University students and professors had raised money to start a small medical clinic near MUBFS and wanted to conduct a community needs assessment survey to inform the management plan for the clinic. Since I had no means of identifying the language proficiency of my assistants, I offered to have my three assistants translate the survey into the local languages and then the clinic nurse back-translated the survey

into English. The forward-backward translation exercise clearly illustrated that Peter and Mark were very good translators, but that Brian was not. As a result of his poor translation skills and some other performance issues, Brian's employment was terminated, and Peter and Mark were my research assistants for the remainder of the field season and as it turned out, many future field seasons.

### **3.3 Our modus operandi**

During June and July of 2008 we conducted 35 interviews and 15 focus groups. I needed to retain two interpreters because at the time, local people were apprehensive of having their voices recorded, so would not permit a recording device and as a result transcripts had to be written quickly during interviews. Having two interpreters minimized the chances of valuable participant comments being lost. Peter was the lead interpreter during individual interviews but Mark was also present, so after each interview we would return to the car and discuss the transcript notes. During this debrief, any differences in interpretation of what had been said could be discussed. This usually resulted in Mark adding some more nuanced interpretations to the transcript. We worked in a similar fashion for focus groups, with Peter as the focus group facilitator, asking questions in the local languages and then verbally interpreting what the people said while I wrote down Peter's interpretation. This also allowed me to have a more active role in the focus groups, permitting me to redirect questions, something I could not have done if the focus groups had been recorded and interpretation had only occurred after the focus group. Mark directly wrote down in English everything he heard the participants say in Ratoro or Rakiga. Pooling both sets of transcripts I gained a more nuanced understanding of the discussion that had taken place, captured more participant comments, and highlighted some differences in interpretation between Peter and Mark.

### **3.4 Learning about social position, lived experience and subjectivity**

Based on my experiences in the interviews and focus groups I realized that as a white academic, I was seen as a potential benefactor by local people, often being asked if I could help with school fees or get NGOs to come to their village to help them. I knew my social position had the potential to influence knowledge production, but that also implied that the social positions of my assistants might also influence the participant responses or the interpretation of those responses. I realized I needed to reflect not only on my own position but also on the positions of my team. In order to do this, I explained the concepts of social position and how this is viewed in social constructionist research to Peter and Mark and developed a key informant interview asking each assistant about their social location, power dynamics during interviews, and their perceptions about the research topic. The interview addressed social position through multiple attributes: age, gender, education, standard of living and whether the assistants or their families had ever experienced some of the benefits and losses caused by the existence of the park. I asked them to describe the typical power dynamics between the assistant and the participant. Since the research topic delved into the conflict between the existence of the park and the livelihoods of local residents I specifically asked if they would class their positions as pro-park or pro-local livelihoods and why. In addition, I asked them to explain what they had learned about the local people during the research, what they felt was the greatest threat to the continued conservation of KNP, and what changes in park management strategy they felt would benefit people and improve conservation behaviours in the communities adjacent to the park.

To understand the potential influence of the interpreters' social position and perceptions, I compared the two sets of written transcripts from the focus groups, one set interpreted by Peter and the other by Mark.

For participant comments that were captured by both transcripts, I identified all interpretations that were sufficiently different to convey either a different meaning or a different emotional connotation. These differences were then analysed for thematic trends and those trends were then compared with the subjectivity interviews conducted with Peter and Mark.

#### **4 Peter and Mark**

At the time of the subjectivity interviews with the research assistants (July 2009), Peter was 27 years old. He had completed a college diploma in architectural draughtsmanship, identified his tribal affiliation as Batoro and had worked as an architectural draughtsman, teacher, purchasing officer, and social research assistant as well as volunteering his time as a football coach and speaker at a youth development association. He grew up in the local urban centre of Fort Portal, some 15 km from the park and had therefore not had to guard the family's food crops from wild animals, nor had his family benefitted from revenue sharing or NGO activities; although his employment as a research assistant greatly benefitted his family. During our interaction with participants, it was obvious that Peter was a dynamic communicator, skilled at ensuring all participants had a voice in focus groups, and his innate net-working and socializing talents helped quickly gain participants' trust and participation in the research project. Peter credits being able to attend a good secondary school with children from very good backgrounds as playing a big role in his dynamic and flexible personality. His good education and working for a foreign researcher also elevated his social position, affording him easy access to the council chairpersons.

Mark grew up in a village located right next to the park, MUBFS and a UWA outpost. At the time of the interview he was 23 years old, had completed high school and identified himself as Bakiga. His prior employment had repeatedly been with researchers studying primates inside the park and he had friendly relations with all long-term research managers, MUBFS administration and UWA rangers. His family had experienced crop raiding and livestock predation by park-protected animals but he had never been required to guard the crops or livestock as a child. He felt his family benefited from the existence of the park because of more rainfall near the park so crop yields could be higher and the family had also had NGO aid, receiving assistance to build an energy saving stove to reduce their fuel wood use. Both Mark and his brother worked as research assistants, the proceeds of which helped support the family and further their own education. Although Mark was less talkative than Peter, Mark quickly demonstrated his excellent listening skills, proved to be very perceptive about cultural nuances and actively reflected upon our research, highlighting ways of improving our process. His savings from working as a research assistant were later employed to pay for a nursing education.

Most village participants were older than my assistants, and considerably less educated. Peter, growing up in Fort Portal, had experienced a more urban standard of living when compared with our participants;

Compared to our participants I didn't necessarily have an easier life than them. I had a more urban life than them but had a fair share of my hardships too. Being raised by a single mother who has to toil for your education and she is not necessarily doing fine but sacrificing for me. For example I had to go without lunch in my primary school most of

days and sometimes had to sleep on a cup of porridge. I went to good schools in secondary but was always sent home for not clearing the fees in time and sometimes going without pocket money.

Mark on the other hand had grown up in a village much like the villages where we conducted the research study and he felt;

Some respondents had simpler/easier lives than I had whereas some others had harder lives and others were actually at the same level. I think about 50% of my respondents had the same level of living standards and about 10% were better than me in terms of living standards. The others were really worse off.

When asked if their education and life experience made it harder or easier for the interview respondent to relate to them, both answered easier, highlighting their language proficiency in Rakiga and Ratoro as the reason why the interviewee related to them well. However, working for a foreign researcher may have also raised Peter and Mark's status in the study villages, facilitating the cooperation of research participants. Since Mark was so much younger than most of the participants, he was surprised by how much he was respected and how easily people shared their opinions with him.

I was respected and they listened and told me their views. Whenever I approached a participant, they gave me a good welcome and response. (Mark)

Peter believed he shared equal power with the participant during interviews while Mark said the interviewees were more powerful. However, both reported that initially participants were scared of them;

Some were fearful on first sight thinking that I am a government official, health worker or park ranger, but the fear soon went down after I introduced myself and informed them why we had come. (Peter)

At first, before a thorough introduction they were intimidated because we were carrying out research about the park. People thought we had come to arrest them or that we wanted to send them away from their land. The informed consent introduced us and the research plan to people, highlighting we were not with the government or the UWA. After hearing this, people opened up to us and were willing to share their knowledge and opinions. (Mark)

When asked how they would prioritize conservation and community livelihoods, Peter and Mark were pro-park; both had worked for researchers before and Mark's family were very dependent upon the conservation research community since they lived next to MUBFS. However, the choice was difficult for Peter, as he debated how he would answer this question for several days. Ultimately he did choose pro-park, but he qualified his answer as saying he was actually both pro-park and pro-livelihoods because he wanted to find a middle ground where solutions could be found to support the people and conserve the park.



Since doing research can also change the researcher's perspective (Temple, 2002), the final part of the interview delved into the impressions that the assistants would take away with them as a result of working with the communities next to the park. Both commented on how hard life was next to the park and how difficult the participants' lives were as a result of crop raiding, but even with all this hardship, local residents appreciated the existence of the park and had willingly participated in the research.

The local people would be friendly towards the park if there were no crop raiding because many of them really consider rainfall as a big benefit as a result of being next to the park, but crop raiding is the most hard pressing, negative impact. (Mark)

I have learned that life is not just as we see it from the outside. There is usually much more inside that you may never get to know unless you have been there. I am still happy about these communities, how welcoming they are, even with all the crop raiding. (Peter)

Mark and Peter said that illegal resource extraction and poaching of animals was the greatest threat to the continued existence of KNP. Peter also mentioned the rapidly growing human population next to the park, and thought that the perceptions of the local people about the park and UWA rangers needed to be improved. Given their perspectives about the park and local livelihoods I asked them what they thought should be done to both improve conservation of the park and benefit local livelihoods. Peter and Mark highlighted the need to find means of reducing crop raiding by park-protected animals and recommended

improving infrastructure for the communities near the park. Peter also wanted to see an increase in the number of resource access agreements to allow local residents to have controlled access to the park.

##### **5 Was the research influenced by interpreter social position or perspective?**

Only about 10% of the interpretations of Peter and Mark from the 15 focus groups were sufficiently different to convey different meaning or intensity of emotion. Thematic analysis of these differences did identify consistent themes that may have resulted from Peter and Mark's social positions, their differences in lived experience and perspectives about conservation and livelihoods. Mark's desire to become a nurse and his prior research assistant experience supporting projects studying primate disease transmission probably account for the more clinical verbiage when interpreting comments about disease transmission, and also indicating that Mark was potentially elaborating upon the participants' comments using terminology he had learned but was unlikely to be used by the focus group participants, expecting that a foreign researcher would be familiar with these terms.

**Mark:** Vectors like mosquitoes and tsetse flies that bite people and make them sick are here.  
**Peter:** Tsetse flies are infecting people and animals.

**Mark:** Malaria has become serious because of mosquitoes in the forest.      **Peter:** More malaria due to spending nights outside guarding.

**Mark:** We lack clean drinking water and that results in diseases.      **Peter:** We lack access to clean water.

Conversely, on other topics, Mark's interpretations were more anecdotal reflecting the way people do speak in the area, while Peter's interpretations sounded more like an explanation of the issue in more educated terms. Was this a reflection of Peter's experience in teaching that led him to embellish the actual words of the participants in order to highlight the point being made or did he feel that the meaning of anecdotal phrases might not be understood by a foreign researcher, thus prioritizing cultural interpretation over literal accuracy? When asked about this difference<sup>3</sup>, Peter explained that;

Yeah it's true that I used paraphrasing where possible to try and ensure understanding for both the researcher and respondents. This was necessary because in some cases direct translation of certain questions and answers may sound vague. So it's important to paraphrase the question or answers for both the researcher and respondent to understand what each meant.

Peter's interpretations also specifically speak to the need to modify management processes and to the mechanism of reciprocity between benefits and conservation behaviours. Since Peter knew this was the

mechanism I was researching, could he have embellished the actual words of the participants to align what he was hearing with the research topic, especially since this would put the people living next to the park in a good light and support the provision of future benefits from UWA as a valid mechanism for improved conservation, thus supporting his preference for policies that were pro-park and pro-people?

**Mark:** Park fund management policy should start from LC1 [Village] to LC5 [District], ascending order not from LC5 [District] to LC1 [Village], descending order. The 20% that comes back is very small. It is like when you are very hungry and you come across a person with a pan full of cooked bananas and they just give you one piece. Will you really be happy?

**Mark:** Park money is handled by untrustworthy poor people who first have to fill their pockets before they serve the people.

**Peter:** When things are decided top down they don't work out. Therefore they should start from the grass roots to ensure the right things happen. We have bitterness towards the LC5 [District], LC3 [Sub-County] and LC1 [Village] chairmen. We don't want them to get the money. The money should come straight to us so we can manage it.

**Peter:** People who decide don't live next to the park and don't know the reality here. District chooses projects other than those proposed by this village.

**Mark:** We should be good stakeholders. If the park gives money for a project, let us raise our hands and support it because the park itself cannot come and provide local labour.

**Peter:** We should act communally. UWA provide the trench and we should work together to maintain it and work together with UWA. It is our duty to protect the park if UWA gives us the money for a trench.

Over the course of that first field season, during the drive back from focus groups and interviews, conversation often turned to the need to find solutions that improved local people's livelihoods while conserving the park. We all thought that using UWA's shared revenues to build crop raiding defences was a good solution. However, Peter became more and more adamant, as the season progressed, that increased legal access to park resources should be negotiated for communities neighbouring the park. Peter's preference for pro-people park management also came through when focus group discussion turned to UWA enforcement and potential corruption. Peter's interpretations emphasized how violent punishment could be if the villagers failed to follow the rules and included participant statements about bribing UWA rangers to get out of trouble. However, the differences in Mark and Peter's interpretations may also have been influenced by Mark's background, having grown up next to a UWA ranger outpost, having UWA rangers as friends and having both his and his brother's employment strongly linked to following the park rules when working inside the park for other researchers. Mark emphasized the rules and generalized punishment for breaking the rules, while skirting the issue of UWA ranger corruption.

**Mark:** The park punishes wrong doers and this helps us learn.

**Peter:** When arrested in the park we are canned seriously. This helps us learn.

**Mark:** When we clear and burn our plot and the fire crosses to the park we are arrested. We have even sustained corporal punishment.

**Peter:** When digging and burning the garden, if the fire goes across to the park we are arrested. The arrest involves caning. The arrest is quite bad.

**Mark:** We are not allowed to access some resources like thatching grass, poles, hoe handles and firewood. If we do we are always arrested. We are not allowed to pick medicinal herbs. When cows cross to the park we are arrested.

**Peter:** If we enter the park we are arrested by the rangers and they squeeze money from us and take our firewood too. Even if we cut a tree they fine us. If we go to the park for medicinal plants or if the cows go into the park the rangers catch and squeeze some money out of us.

Comparing the two sets of transcripts from the focus groups gave me confidence that most of the interpretations were consistent since only 10% of the comments indicated difference. However, being able to verify that there were indeed differences, and that these differences were not random, but followed specific themes that could be linked to the interpreters' social positions and subjectivities, confirmed the

importance of interviewing my research assistants and the need to critically reflecting upon the influence this might have on how the focus group transcripts could and should be analysed.

## **6 Implications of filtered meaning**

These differences in interpretation clearly illustrate that the interpreter's lived experience, perceptions about foreign researchers, and research topic subjectivity may indeed filter the meaning of participants' words, thus supporting the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that language is a filter through which different cultures see reality in different ways (Werner and Campbell, 1973). In this case, comparing the two transcripts allowed these differences to be identified, but in reality, researchers rarely have the luxury of having two interpreters. If working with only one interpreter, the differences demonstrated in this paper call into question the validity and rigour of qualitative research in cross-language studies (Esposito, 2001). If the researcher is analysing discourse that is filtered, then the knowledge created is situated by the interpreter's subjectivity as well as that of the researcher (Caretta, 2014). To demonstrate that the research retains validity, even through these multiple filters, the researcher needs to be particularly vigilant, reflexive, and transparent about methodology (Bailey, White and Pain, 1999). Explicitly acknowledging the existence, role, qualifications and subjectivity of the interpreter in publications clarifies the researcher's methodology and minimizes assumptions made by the reader, as well as demonstrating that the researcher is aware of the potential limitations introduced by working through an interpreter in cross-language studies (Squires, 2009). In addition, other means to improve rigour in the qualitative research process can be employed such as triangulation of data sources, collection methods, and in the case of cross-language studies,

interpreters (Baxter and Eyles, 1997, Esposito 2001). For my research, interviews and focus groups were supplemented by a household survey, key informant data logs, and ecological evidence of resource extraction from the national park, with all social data collection instruments interpreted through various combinations of up to four interpreters.

A somewhat unique attribute of my study was the ability to compare interpretations for the same focus groups. Having interviewed the interpreters to understand their lives and perspectives allowed these interpretation differences to be at least partially understood and permitted me to reflect on how these interpretation differences altered the discourses I sought to analyse. However, even with this increased awareness of the potential influence of our research assistants can we ever really know the degree to which meaning is filtered? As Temple (2002: 851) discovered when she conducted an interview with her interpreters to understand if their professional, social and religious positions differed from those of the research participants, 'I was not sure if the extent to which the views I was picking up were those of the two support workers [her assistants] or of the people they interviewed'. In qualitative research we accept that knowledge is situated and constructed by the social relationship that occurs during data collection (England, 1994; Rose 1997). Our background, social position relative to the participant, and interview style all influence the knowledge created during the research project (Kobayashi, 1994; Pezalla et al., 2012). Our subjectivity can shift and be fluid throughout the research process and we have to be ever vigilant to minimize the projection of our own position into the interview or into how we interpret the experiences of our participants (Berger, 2013). Reflexivity helps us construct a representation of ourselves relative to our participants to attempt to manage this process, but no matter how hard we try, that self-representation is



never fully realized or completely transparent (Rose, 1997; Berger 2013). So if accounting for our own subjectivity is so difficult, how can we presume to be able to account for the social position and subjectivity of our research assistants and interpreters? In reality, we can only capture an under developed snapshot of our interpreters' subjectivity, but even this small glimpse helps us situate the knowledge created, making it critical to collect information about our interpreters' subjectivity during the research process. I used a subjectivity interview as recommended by Edwards (1998) and Temple (2002). Caretta (2014) and her assistants kept reflexive journals that they shared during the field season and that she incorporated into her doctoral thesis, helping her understand how her assistants projected their own positions into focus group discussions.

Although I worried about the experiences of participants being misrepresented due to the interpretation differences identified by comparing the two sets of transcripts, having two different interpretations of the same comments was also an opportunity. If knowledge is filtered through the lens of our own subjectivity, then having two interpreters provided me with two additional lenses through which to produce knowledge. Each member of the research team brings different skills to the research process and different perceptions about the research topic, situated through their own positionality and subjectivity (Turner, 2010). This introduced variation in knowledge production broadens the understanding gleaned from the research project (Pezalla et al., 2012; Caretta, 2014). Juxtaposing the literal anecdotal responses as interpreted by Mark next to the explanatory interpretations of Peter provided deeper understanding of what the focus group participants wanted to convey whilst retaining the context of how they said it. Since interpreters act as both 'gatekeepers of meaning' (Heller et al., 2011: 75) and cultural brokers (Caretta, 2014), our

qualitative writing can be enriched by the perspectives and verbiage that multiple interpreters can bring to the discourse we analyse. Creating a debate about differences in meaning expressed by the participants stimulates the production of knowledge and validates that 'Knowledge claims are thus contested and contingent' (Temple and Edwards, 2002: 17). Explicitly acknowledging the role, identity and subjectivity of interpreters in the research process requires us to also recognize and reflect upon the reality, pitfalls, and opportunities that filtered meaning presents.

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## **Endnotes**

- 1- Peter requested his real name be used, but Mark is a pseudonym.
- 2- Brian is also a pseudonym.
- 3- A draft of this paper was e-mailed to Peter and Mark so they could provide feedback on how I had interpreted their positions and interpretational subjectivities. Peter responded with many comments including the explanation about paraphrasing, adding context to his social position (that was included in the paper), and concluding that “the paper is good and I am glad I can see the statements made by me that with in my heart I say, yes I remember saying that”. Unfortunately, Mark never responded to the e-mail or my follow-up e-mails requesting his opinion.

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