

Ethics and Research Relationships in Forensic Linguistics

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Abstract

Research and impact in forensic linguistics often requires working with and obtaining data from external organisations, such as the police and law enforcement agencies. As noted by Haworth et al. (2022), researchers in forensic linguistics are increasingly successful at gaining access to data through building long-term relationships with practitioners. These relationships and ‘insider’ access to authentic data are crucial to the development of the field. However, this can also present ethical challenges, both in the relationships established with partner organisations and in the sensitive data that researchers can become privy to through these connections. Drawing from interviews with twelve researchers in applied linguistics and a recent case study from the author’s own work with the police, this paper presents an overview of these challenges for the field, focussing on the following areas:

- (1) There can be a perceived disconnect between ‘regulatory ethics’, as enacted through initial applications to university research ethics committees, and ‘ethics in practice’, (that is, ‘the everyday ethical issues that arise in the doing of research’ (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004, p. 263)), with the researcher as a professional who must make decisions on the conduct of research and/or consultancy work on an ongoing basis while in the field.
- (2) As well as regulatory research ethics, data collection in forensic linguistics is also likely to necessitate the researcher following the external organisation’s own rules and procedures, such as (in the UK context) adhering to data protection requirements and drawing up data sharing or processing agreements. These requirements can occasionally come into conflict with university ethics procedures, particularly where data protection rules make it difficult to contact data ‘subjects’ about a research project.
- (3) More generally, research ‘with’ participants and partners has been a key concern for applied linguistics for several decades (cf. Cameron et al., 1992), with a focus on the power disparities that can exist between researchers and those researched and drawing attention to the benefits linguistic research should bring. However, when working in professional contexts, where research partners and participants are not necessarily viewed as less powerful, these research ‘with’ relationships can be challenging and questions of who should primarily benefit from the research can become difficult to navigate.

References

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