

**Dilemmas of translation and identity:** Ethnographic research in multilingual homes.  
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Kate Pahl:

This paper draws on an ethnographic study of a Turkish woman's literacy practices which I have been conducting since 1999 and is still on-going. Elif was a student of mine on a family literacy class, and with her son, Fatih, agreed to be part of an ethnographic study of literacy practices in the home (Pahl 2002, 2005a). Elif married young, was brought over from Turkey to live in North London. She since divorced her husband and lives with her two sons, Hanif and Fatih. As part of the study, I asked Elif if she would be interested in writing her life story, in Turkish, in order to learn more about her life. Elif said she would, and wrote her life story specifically for me. While I tended to talk to Elif in English, as her spoken English was reasonably fluent, I wanted to gain a more nuanced account of her life, and was interested in her life story as written in Turkish. Elif had always written for pleasure, and had showed me her poetry in the past. I knew she enjoyed writing, and during interviews, her positive experience of schooling coloured her experiences of literacy. She agreed, and she subsequently wrote her life story, on about four sheets of A4, in closely written pencil.

This story was, even on my imperfect reading, as my Turkish is not strong, very complex, emotional and highly charged and its translation proved difficult. I initially asked a Turkish-speaking friend, who was Kurdish, to translate it, who did not work as a professional translator. However, this translation was not fully accurate, and did not engage with the literary flavour of Elif's work. I then asked a professional translator, to give a translation of key sentences, those that Elif herself had highlighted as important. But it did not convey the nuances of her life story, and the full emotional impact of the story was not focused on. Also, as a city born woman, she was not particularly interested in the nuances of Elif's life. Elif was born in a small village in central Turkey, and then experienced an upheaval, moving to London with her husband. Elif herself was undecided as to what to do with the life story. Initially keen for me to share it at a conference (Pahl 2005b) she was reluctant now to share the story, saying, 'That part of my life is over now'. I was left with two dilemmas, one the issue of how to translate the life story, and the other was the more complex issue of my relationship with Elif and whether I could use the life story as a researcher at all. Both difficulties have prompted the writing of this paper.

Khadeegha, at the same time, was struggling with issues of positionality and translation as an Arabic speaking woman, researching women who both seemed to be and yet were not in the same community as herself. I meanwhile, as a white outsider, yet close to the woman I was researching in that I had become her friend, also was concerned to think through issues of positionality and translation. Out of that discussion, this paper was borne, and it can be regarded as work in progress.

The final part of the story was that I did find a translator, Esra, who was prepared to work intensively on the life story. She and I met in the Autumn of 2005, and have been meeting ever since, mostly in cafes near to where we both live. The upshot of these meetings is that she and I became friends. As a student, with left-wing ideals and a child the same age as mine, we found we had thoughts in common. The translation project was shelved as we met and chatted. I ask my new friend what to do about the translation dilemma and Elif. Again, this paper explores her responses, but, once more, friendship is part of the research story.

## **Friendship as method**

Drawing on Tillman-Healy's work, I considered ways in which the methodology I used when researching Elif's life story, used similar patterns of being and ethical approaches as friendship (Tillman-Healy 2003). For example, when we met, we saw each other as friends. I was keen to share my life and we exchanged family photos. We visited each other's houses. Much of our chat, in English mostly, was intimate, and joking. I looked in the literature for examples of researchers drawing on the patterns and rhythms of friendship to navigate their field relationships. I found Tillman-Healy's insights useful in that she observed that friendship and fieldwork are similar endeavours. She argued that, 'both involve being in the world with others... and that friendship as method involves the practices, the pace, the contexts, and the ethics of friendship'. (Tillman-Healy 2003:734). Tillman-Healy also argued that, '...we research with the ethics of friendship' (Tillman-Healy) 2003: 735). With this insight, I was able to see how my decisions in the field had been shaped by the relationships I had with Elif, and subsequently, with Esra, the woman translator I had consulted to help me understand Elif's life story. With both women, I remained a researcher, with a university position, and research enterprise, but also friend, able to trade experiences, laugh at jokes and sit around longer than would be required of a field visit. Therefore, I had to bring those experiences into the fieldwork space, and ask how they informed my work.

## **Qualitative research and translation dilemmas**

A further issue was that of translation. I was interested in how the act of translation became the subject of my research. From having being given the life story, written in Turkish, the translation of that story became a new focus. I realised that translation is not a neutral activity, but fraught with nuanced issues of language and identity. This has been discussed elsewhere, notably by Moira Inghierri (these papers) and Temple and Young, who argued that translators must also form part of the process of knowledge production (2004:164) and that there is no single correct translation of a text (2004:165). Rather, they argued that the construction of meaning is between texts, more about finding the cultural inscription of a term than finding its intrinsic meaning (Temple and Young 2004). I realised that my search for a translation of the life story was about the way in which particular words were used to describe particular experiences and these decisions were critical. My relationship with Esra, now became fore-grounded as an important part of the research, it was as much a focus for the research as my relationship with Elif. As we met, talked, and I attempted to learn some Turkish on the way, I asked Esra if I could interview her about this and she agreed. The interview took place in the café where we habitually met, where Esra knew the owner and we could sit undisturbed for hours.

## **Positionality and reflexivity in fieldwork**

The research project, initially cast as a study of one Turkish woman's life story, now had to be re-cast as a study of relationships, mine with Esra and with Elif. I realised that tracing my positionality in relation to my two informants, translator and writer, was key to the research process. For my thinking on reflexivity and positionality, I drew on the work of women researchers such as Finlay and Crozier, particularly on Crozier's work on researching black parents (Crozier 2003). As a white woman, working with two Turkish women, who, while I shared a background of friendship, I also did not share similar spaces and identities, I had to unpack the positionality of the research space. I was conscious of the complexity of the space I inhabited, recognising like Finlay, that when it comes to practice, 'the process of engaging

in reflexivity is perilous, full of muddy ambiguity and multiple trails' (Finlay 2002: 212). Because of that, I had to place myself in the research, and recognize how I came to construct this particular dynamic, recognising research as a co-constructed account, giving research participants space to be reflexive as well (Finlay 2002). Above all, I had to realise the intrusive nature of research in homes, and life story research (Crozier 2003). Elif's story was highly personal – she had allowed me to share it once, but had then asked me not to write about it again as the experiences she described were now behind her and she did not want to share them again.

### **Life story as intimate text: Canım ('friend')**

The first word of the life story was the word 'Canım' which could be translated as 'soul-mate' or in Elif's words, 'darling'. The word was directly addressed to me, as I had requested the life story. The use of this word signalled that the document was highly personal and private. In my interview with Esra, she pointed this out,

Esra: There isn't a word as far as know to describe **this** particular word  
We talked about it with you –  
You understand but still there wasn't a word enough to explain this.  
...When you are friend, or when you love someone as a friend or  
You call this if you are very intimate, if you are very close I don't know, its like  
you...  
It means you are friends and when you love some one its not falling in love you use  
this when you are one person's very intimate and very close in most situations you  
don't have to explain everything  
You can understand...you can sit hours and hours without talking  
...whatever happens you can rely on that person.

I realised that by using this particular word at the opening of the life story, Elif was signalling something very specific. It was in this context that the life story should be read. The translation of that particular word became the focus for interpretation and analysis. I asked if that was why the story was private and therefore untranslatable:

Kate: Is that why you thought you shouldn't translate it?  
Esra: It is too personal, and too personal, so simple  
she wrote it like,  
She writes like she is talking to herself  
that makes it very personal when you are talking to yourself

The concept of talking to yourself also lies within the word 'Canım' as the word soul-mate indicates a person who is like your twin soul. The privacy of Elif's language acts as a metaphor for the experience of invading the privacy of researching in homes. By signalling that the writing was intended for a 'soul-mate' the context for the reading of the text shifted. Because of the opening word, the life story becomes signalled as special and Esra corroborated that the language the story was written in made it very clear this was no ordinary tale, despite Elif's life story being ordinary, it was also extraordinary at the same time:

Esra:

I told you that it seemed that she write so simple, but it seems like she is talking for herself. That make it very personal, it happens to everybody, you know when you feel so depressed, you just maybe, not out loud you talk to yourself.

This one she has a life, I mean, as a Turkish lady, its a very ordinary life, it can happen to any Turkish woman but she doesn't have any education,

Kate: That's really interesting.

Esra: If I translated it I would feel that I would deceive because this only she can interpret, only she can translate, nobody else.

Esra was explaining that while Elif's life story was 'ordinary', it was written as an interior monologue, and was utterly private. This was the realisation I came to, that only Elif could translate her own words. Esra also recognised that the writing was very precise and beautiful, despite its 'ordinary' subject matter (see below).

### **Researching in homes**

The study was conducted within Elif's home, and every time I entered her home I encountered a complex, intimate space, shaped by the habitus of the household, its patterns of being and doing (Bourdieu 1990). Research in homes, particularly ethnographic research, involves respecting complex boundaries around identity. Esra and I talked about this, and how part of the process of entering a home involved entering spaces where how you were in relation to your informants mattered a great deal,

Esra: I will tell you something about that. I sometimes go [to homes] because I am interpreter, I went to a lady's home, and in our tradition we take our shoes off when we enter our home, the lady has little baby and she was sick as well, and she was crawling as she couldn't walk, and the guy just came into the home [who was doing the interview] and he came in without asking and I said, 'please will you take your shoes off' and he didn't want to take his shoes off because he was in a hurry and I said you will have to cancel the interview, she has a sick baby, in the end he did [take his shoes off].

In my work, I was conscious of the fact that by entering a home, you become a 'friend' and this must be respected, with friend-type interchange, tea and talk. In time, this regular routine became friendship, with its patterns of gift-giving and laughter and gossip.

### **Writing: an intimate text and a creative act**

Because of my friendship with Esra and Elif, the data became more complex. The written text was more than just a written text. As Esra said,

Esra: If I didn't know what you want, if I saw you just as a researcher, who wants to get what she wants, I would translate and give it to you, and you would be happy because I would write the thing, but I couldn't put the feeling,

Kate: Because you and I had a relationship and you could be honest with me and I could say this to me, and it feels like a personal thing, that's a personal thing

Esra: Because I decided to be friends with you I decided to be honest with you, the importance of friendship is honesty. (interview Esra 28.2.06)

Because Esra had to be honest about the limitations of her role as a translator, she did not translate the life story for me. It became an intimate, untranslatable text, with the intimacy of a close discussion with a friend, not a researcher's piece of data.

However, the story does not end there. I went back to Elif's home, and once more described my work, the purpose of the research, and how her life story sat within my larger research purpose, its importance within that. Elif read the life story through, and then crossed out the sections I could not use – then she agreed the sections I could use. She said she was doing this for me 'as a friend' so I could write about the sections she was comfortable with, for university researchers to read. Part of the reasons why she changed her mind, is that she knew that I was very interested in her identity as *edebiyat* – roughly translated as 'literary' or 'educated'. The writing could be seen as a piece of creative writing. In the life story, her writing is very beautiful, as Esra commented,

Esra: The other thing was other people had translated bits of this and although you could not speak or write Turkish you thought it was not good enough. You said she is a beautiful writer.

Kate: She's a poet.

Esra: Exactly, exactly, It is like a poem, yes, a poem as a letter...

Esra and other translators commented that Elif, despite having a relatively low standard of education, having left school at 14 to get married, communicated her thoughts in writing in beautiful, poetic Turkish. Elif wrote in a way that reached out to me, writing was a communicative medium that she enjoyed, and her writing had always been prefaced by her words of friendship. Here is a translation of something she wrote some years ago:

Hello Kate

I want to write a few lines to you. I was very pleased that you visited me and my family and my children. My children were pleased to see you and talk to you. I would like to say thank-you again for your help. I hope I'll help you with my writing as well. I am writing what comes from my heart and from my own feelings. I wish you a healthy and happy life. Your friend who loves you very much. (written in Turkish 2002)

This piece was translated by a sympathetic translator, who commented on the beauty of her prose style. Elif's identity could be re-cast as a writer, who likes to write, and in that particular space, I could draw on her life story.

### **Some concluding thoughts**

In conclusion, then, the field of linguistic ethnography needs to account both for the nuances of language ('canim' or 'friend') and what these signal in relation to a text, and also, to the way in which life history texts are presented in life story work. In addition, the demands of translation require that a researcher needs to pay attention to contextual information about the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the researched. In this kind of work, the *context* for translation and interpretation also needs to be under scrutiny. In time, I hope to tease out the histories of both Elif's identity in relation to her life story as a Turkish woman, and Esra's own position as a translator. Part of that work will involve problematizing and

considering ways in which context shapes texts, and also considering how friendship shapes interaction and practices. By tracing the positionality and histories of the three women, including myself, and by unpacking both the continuities and discontinuities of our experience and identity, a more complex ethnographic tale emerged, only to once more be unravelled and re-thought.

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