University of Groningen

Critical sociolinguistic research methods

Strandberg, Janine Astrid Elvina

Published in:
International Journal of the Sociology of Language

DOI:
[10.1515/ijsl-2019-2055](https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2019-2055)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2019

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Strandberg, J. A. E. (2019). Critical sociolinguistic research methods: Studying language issues that matter. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2019(260), 199-201. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2019-2055>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

Book Review

Heller, Monica, Sari Pietikäinen and Joan Pujolar, editors. *Critical sociolinguistic research methods: Studying language issues that matter*. New York: Routledge. 2018. 208 pages. Hardback £115.00, Paperback £33.99, eBook £17.00 (Routledge website). ISBN: 1138825905

Reviewed by **Janine A. E. Strandberg**, Center for Language and Cognition (CLCG), University of Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands, E-mail: j.a.e.strandberg@rug.nl

<https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2019-2055>

In *Critical sociolinguistic research methods* (2018), Monica Heller, Sari Pietikäinen and Joan Pujolar employ an innovative critical ethnographic approach to sociolinguistic research. According to the authors, this means gaining an understanding of the part that language plays in social processes of power and inequality, while also mapping how these processes work (p. 2). The examples used to illustrate this critical approach to language and power involve the authors' own research projects on three linguistic minorities, i. e. Canadian francophones (Heller), the Sámi of Northern Finland (Pietikäinen), and Catalan Spanish speakers in Barcelona (Pujolar).

Despite its name, the book is not designed exclusively for sociolinguistic researchers, but for any researchers employing qualitative methods to study language use within the humanities and social sciences. Heller et al. (2018) argue that the traditional split between the linguistic and the social has hindered researchers from exploring the role of meaning from a social and historical perspective (p. 5). Thus the focus of the book is not language itself, but rather the “conditions and consequences of language,” that is, the sociology of language (p. 4). The book includes a substantial introductory chapter, five chapters on the research process, and a final section titled “Shop floor,” The authors' research projects are used as examples throughout, and Pujolar's and Pietikäinen's projects are expanded upon in autobiographical threads at the end of each chapter.

In the five main chapters, Heller et al. (2018) move progressively through the different stages of research. The first chapter highlights the challenges of finding and narrowing down a research question, while the focus of the second chapter is research design, specifically the task of adapting one's design based on its presentation context (p. 65). The chapter also emphasises the ethical challenges that a researcher faces, either when studying linguistic practices through direct contact with the research participants, or when working with materials that are meaningful to a linguistic group (p. 61). The third chapter focuses on fieldwork

and its central role for data collection, giving practical advice regarding observation and elicitation in interviews. The fourth chapter takes the reader through the steps of analysing data, presenting the data analysis as an ethical and political conversation between the researcher and the participants (p. 120). The final chapter details the last part of the research process: writing a paper or thesis. The writer is described as a “knowledge producer,” with emphasis placed on the concept of knowledge exchange and the importance of keeping the audience in mind whilst writing.

Heller et al. (2018) strongly underline the responsibility of the researcher when it comes to the ways in which the findings are presented. Taking a constructivist position to knowledge, the authors state “knowledge does not derive directly from evidence or experience, but is mediated by how we choose to formulate it and represent it in specific contexts of communication” (p. 74). With emphasis on communication, the authors stress the importance of conversation, which may be defined as the dialogue between a project and the field of research, the exchange of information between a researcher and the audience, or the discourse between a researcher and the people affected by or involved in the project. The authors describe their book as a work for the interlocutors, “a recommendation on how to participate in, what is, after all, a conversation” (p. 8). Heller et al. (2018) also overtly oppose the positivist approach, which claims that scientific knowledge is unbiased and neutral. The authors argue that the unavoidable condition of social research is that the data are always the product of the researcher’s involvement in the topic (p. 58).

Although the book takes the reader systematically through the process of sociolinguistic research, the authors state explicitly that it is not a work of theory or a self-help book of literal instructions, but a guide based on practical personal experience (p. 11). Yet a quarter of the book is dedicated to the “Shop floor,” which is fundamentally a step-by-step guide to conducting a study. This section provides advice on the procedures of critical language research, including proposal development, interview design, coding, writing, and peer reviewing. Additionally, although the book claims to be a casual guide, its narrative style is comparatively advanced. While some recent works on sociolinguistic research have been written to be approachable for the non-specialist reader (see Meyerhoff et al. 2015; Smakman 2018), the language used by Heller et al. (2018) is more appropriate for readers with an academic background. Overall, the authors succeed in their ambitious endeavour to re-invent the telling of the sociolinguistic research process. Arguing against the traditional split between the linguistic and the social, the book vividly demonstrates the role of language practices in society. *Critical sociolinguistic research methods* (2018) is a user-friendly guide for the novice researcher, in spite of the authors’ protests against

their work being viewed as a handbook. The book offers a modern take on methods of critical research, with topics ranging from the vital to the more mundane; from advice on delivering a compelling argument, to examples of different ways the authors take notes during fieldwork (pp. 82–83). Compassionate to the struggles of young researchers at the start of their careers, Heller et al. (2018) reassure the reader that every research process is filled with uncertainty and error. An appreciated addition to sociolinguistic literature, the book is a valuable resource for advanced students or established researchers embarking on novel research projects. With their expertise and humble reflection on their own work, Heller, Pietikäinen and Pujolar demonstrate why the critical ethnographic sociolinguistic approach is essential, and why language matters matter in society.

References

- Meyerhoff, Miriam, Erik Schlee & Laurel MacKenzie. 2015. *Doing sociolinguistics: A practical guide to data collection and analysis*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Smakman, Dick. 2018. *Discovering sociolinguistics: From theory to practice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd.