Navigating methodological landscapes

Introduction to the Special Issue

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Reflections on doctoral studies commonly frame doing a PhD as a learning process (Lindgreen, Vallaster & Vanhamme 2001; Morrison-Saunders et al. 2005), or metaphorically as a journey (Amran & Ibrahim 2012) that involves following, or better yet making, paths (Brook et al. 2010). This process/journey is not necessarily a very streamlined one. It may go in fits and starts; it is arduous and often confusing; in some cases, it doesn't even end. No matter how we choose to describe it, one thing is beyond dispute: doing a PhD is a lot of work, and part of this work often remains unseen. This Special Issue of the *Wiener Linguistische Gazette* (WLG) aims to shed light on the work involved in applied linguistics doctoral projects. It presents papers by doctoral students for doctoral students, in which the authors reflect on methodological challenges that they had to face and overcome in their projects.

Falling in with the PhD-as-a-journey metaphor, the title of the Special Issue speaks of "navigating landscapes," specifically landscapes of method. When she first came up with the idea for this issue, Carina

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Lozo observed that thinking about and struggling with method is something that unites us all as (early-career) researchers: it is the landscape on which we all meet. The diversity of research pursuits found under the umbrella of "applied linguistics" is notorious. While it has historically been most often tied with language learning and teaching, applied linguistics is defined primarily by being problem-oriented and thereby bringing linguistics to "the real world" and its many, messy matters. This results not only in a wide variety of empirical foci but also in an openness to insights from other disciplines (Grabe 2010). At the end of the day, though, no matter the exact focus and direction of their studies, researchers always have to grapple with choices regarding the methods through which to approach "the real world." This grappling may be especially challenging for doctoral students, who have to make such decisions while also juggling the pressure and expectations associated with getting an academic degree and emerging at the other end of this process as "scholars" (Brook et al. 2010).

Through this Special Issue we wanted to give PhD students like us the opportunity to reflect on this, both in their texts and in an accompanying reading workshop, held on 27-28 September 2023 in Vienna. The Workshop was designed to discuss the issue of reflexivity in early-career scholars' work and to provide room for collective debate, insights, and feedback on early drafts of the papers submitted. Besides the authors whose work is featured here, the Workshop was attended and supported by special guests Brigitta Busch and Jonas Hassemer, whose invaluable input helped shape the final versions of these articles. We are grateful for their participation, which fostered more open dialogue among us and strengthened our efforts to critically reflect on our projects' methods from a variety of angles. This diversity of perspectives is reflected in the issue's articles.

In the opening paper, **Carina Lozo** reflects on the challenge of bringing together in her project two disciplinary angles that seem to be at odds with each other: acoustic phonetics and interactional socio-linguistics. While the former is characterized by a positivist epistemological stance and an emphasis on controlled laboratory settings, the latter

seeks to analyze naturalistic, "authentic" data in situated ways. Carina argues that not only is it practically difficult to operationalize this combined approach (e.g., how does one find data, and what kind of data?), but the epistemological clash of the two traditions may raise questions for the researcher herself and her identity as an (early-career) academic – an often overlooked struggle.

Roshanak Nouralian in turn focuses on another type of struggle that is not talked about very often: the work of familiarizing oneself with new approaches in the midst of one's doctoral studies. Roshanak describes how she came to conceptualize her project as a transdisciplinary effort by deciding to adopt methods from Grounded Theory. This involved getting acquainted with the approach from scratch and eventually having to weigh which practices from Grounded Theory research would be best suited to her own work. Roshanak's paper thus stresses how narrow disciplinary paths may not be the way to go for doctoral students, and how exploring new territory brings its own questions and challenges, which ultimately enrich one's experience and the resulting academic output.

While Grounded Theory involves metaphorically going where the data takes us, **Florian Grosser** writes about literally going places to "follow the data." His paper reflects on (junior) researchers' mobility and its emotional repercussions related to drawing precarious divisions between "the personal" and "the public." The participants in Florian's ethnographic project lived in Japan and his engagement with them necessitated traveling to another continent to conduct his study. Drawing on diary entries he wrote over the course of his fieldwork, Florian traces how the complexities he had to contend with affected him and his research process. He specifically examines his assumptions on the separation between "personal" involvement with his project's participants (who he was previously acquainted with) and his professional interest in studying their (meta)communication. All this while the Covid-19 pandemic also affected his travel plans, contributing an additional layer of practical challenges.

In my own contribution, I (**Vinicio Ntouvlis**) also deal with the practical challenges of ethnographic work, but in this case the ethnographic effort was not rooted in physical but in digital spaces. The paper discusses the process of finding willing interviewees in my study of Facebook groups by contacting them online. I argue that the channel one chooses for approaching people to interview is a generally under-discussed yet important factor in the establishment of a research relationship. This is due to media ideologies, which are an unavoidable aspect of digitally mediated communication (DMC) and its study. At the end of the day, interviewee recruitment involves one person (the researcher) reaching out to other people. When the two parties communicate through digital media, considering the media themselves and how people relate to them becomes essential for the digital ethnographer.

Finally, **Jenia Yudytska**'s paper also frames the study of DMC as a people-centered matter by focusing on ethical issues. In her corpus-driven study on the effect of communication device on language use, Jenia analyzed her participants' writing across both public ("Twitter/X") and private channels (Discord). Therefore, if her participants' anonymity was compromised, their private messages (besides their public ones) could be traced back to them. This necessitated taking measures beyond the routine practice of pseudonymizing users. Through her discussion, Jenia highlights that to ensure her project's ethical integrity, the researcher must make dynamic and creative decisions, avoiding one-size-fits-all approaches and weighing academic interest against her duty to safeguard people's privacy.

Taken together, the papers in this Special Issue paint a picture of the difficulties doctoral students of applied linguistics face in the methodological implementation of their diverse research pursuits. This picture is drawn by doctoral students for the benefit of doctoral students as well as other applied linguistics researchers dealing with similar questions. Despite their widely divergent topics, all these articles are devoted to "saying the quiet part out loud" when it comes to the work that doing a PhD entails. We have strived so that these students' voices could be heard loud and clear.

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