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Linguistic incompetence: Giving an account of researching multilingually

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This paper considers the place of linguistic competence and incompetence in the context of researching multilingually. It offers a critique of the concept of competence and explores the performative dimensions of multilingual research and its narration, through the philosophy of Judith Butler, and in particular her study *Giving an account of oneself*. It explores aspects of risk, justice, narrative limit and a morality of multilingualism in emergent multilingual research frameworks. These theoretical dimensions are explored through consideration of 'linguistically incompetent' ethnographic work with refugees and asylum seekers, in contexts of hospitality and in life long learning research in the Gaza Strip, and of early attempts to learn new languages. The paper offers a prospect of a relational approach to researching multilingually and affirms the vulnerability at the heart of linguistic hospitality.

Keywords: linguistic incompetence, researching multilingually, linguistic hospitality, multilingual, refugees

تدرس هذه الورقة مواضع الكفاءة وعدم الكفاءة اللغوية في سياق البحث متعدد اللغات. وهو يقدم نقد لمفهوم الكفاءة ويستكشف الأبعاد الأدائي للبحث متعددة { اللغات وسردها، من خلال فلسفة جوديث بتلر، وعلى وجه الخصوص دراستها عام بعنوان إعطاء حساب لنفسه. ويستكشف جوانب المخاطر، والعدالة، والحد من السرد وأخلاق تعدد اللغات في الأطر الناشئة للبحوث متعددة اللغات. يتم استكشاف هذه الأبعاد النظرية من خلال النظر في عمل إثنوغرافي 'غير كفاء لغويًا' مع اللاجئين وطالبي اللجوء وفي سياقات الضيافة والبحث في التعلم مدى الحياة في قطاع غزة ومحاولات مبكرة لتعلم لغات جديدة. هذه الورقة تقدم احتمال وجود نهج ذو علاقة للبحث في التعدد اللغوي ويؤكد الضعف في قلب الضيافة اللغوية.

اللغوية الكفاءة عدم اللغات تعددية بحث، اللغوية الضيافة، اللغات متعدد، اللغويين

If we speak and try to give an account from this place, we will not be irresponsible, or, if we are, we will surely be forgiven. (Butler 2005: 136)

I work as Professor of Languages and Intercultural Studies, and Co-Convener of Glasgow Refugee, Asylum and Migration Network (GRAMNET) at the University of Glasgow. I teach languages, religious

education, anthropology and intercultural education and education for non-violence and in each of these settings I work and research multilingually. I studied French and German at Durham University and my PhD was undertaken at the University of Sheffield and University of Tübingen involving research in German and fieldwork in the Swabian dialect. As a trained anthropologist I've found myself conducting research in a range of languages, some of which I had not even known existed until I was encountering them in my research. This is particularly the case with my present research with refugees and asylum seekers in Glasgow. My multilingual research takes place in settings which are often marked by extremes; in detention centres, campaign offices, reporting centres for UKBA and during diasporic celebrations and holidays, in community halls, churches and mosques, as well as in domestic settings.

The AHRC Researching Multilingually 'Translating Cultures' project (see Holmes, Fay, Andrews and Attia, this issue) which gave rise to the papers contained in this special issue began by asking us as advisers and participants to send a brief 'story' of our experience in researching multilingually, and suggesting we addressed the following two questions:

- (1) What is your experience of researching multilingually?
- (2) What is your experience of becoming aware of the complexities in this area?

In writing my short account of researching multilingually I was aware that much was omitted and that the task itself had triggered the opportunity for some valuable reflection and for opening out aspects of my own language story (Phipps 2009) which were not so much reflecting on my linguistic competence as on my linguistic incompetence. This paper explores the questions, philosophical and practical which this observation provoked.

It does not surprise me that my story above, produced for an academic website and for a Research Council funded project for which I acted as an adviser, performs a story of competence. Obviously, there is something of a disjuncture in being invited to act in an advisory capacity and then claiming that one is not competent to act. And yet, it is also clear to me that there is much that is masked by claims to competence and by the strength of the competency concept in driving forward certain projections of academic professionalism.

These thoughts troubled me, I could not leave the story be, so I had a go at writing the story again:

I speak several languages. My own language biography is marked by the education policies of language teaching, by the possibilities afforded me to travel by my work and for leisure. These opportunities arose in peace time

and were chosen and planned, not forced and chaotic. For the first ten years of my work as a researcher I operated happily in three or four languages, which I spoke fluently and where, in some instances, I could also affect accent and dialect as well as presenting in academic registers. In these cases I had sufficient levels of 'native sounding' competence in my speech to pass when acting in the plays in the theatres, which were my field sites for my doctoral research. Since completing this research I have entered a phase of ongoing empirical and theoretical intercultural research in areas which are a long way from my language competences and where resource to support language learning and acquisition of linguistic skills is severely limited and highly problematic.

And so it is that I begin to give an account of myself, to use the phrase taken up by Butler (2005) in her consideration of what it means to live an ethical life under vexed social and linguistic conditions. In this second version of my account I am appealing to my training which would provide some assurance of my competence and authority to speak of researching multilingually. But I am beginning to speak of my incompetence, performing a role as a somewhat heroic or perhaps foolhardy researcher, one shaped by anthropology's own origins of going out into unknown territory to participate and observe. This creates a vulnerability, professionally and personally, and in what follows I will attempt to excavate this.

Firstly, there is the institutional management of the risks my incompetence and practice may engender. The risk assessments I am required to fill out for fieldwork in some of the areas of the world, where some of the languages I do not speak are spoken competently by others, perhaps compound my sense of being 'called to account'. They ask me to account for how I will ensure I remain safe, not how competent I am to form social and intercultural relations in the languages. What the assessors seem to require is not an account of how I will communicate with others but where I will stay and whether I have consulted the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website, whether I will register with LOCATE. They then require me to travel in pairs. Alongside a list of risks which includes avalanches, food poisoning, earthquakes, sleeping sickness, HIV, civil unrest, muggings, robbery, and kidnap comes 'language/communication'. Language is an insurance risk for my employer. It is not clear whether this is because I can or cannot speak the language, though I infer the latter. Perhaps I only do so because I am a linguist, bound now into an ethic which is socially formed and studied, and which finds me believing an aspect of morality, or at the very least, courtesy, resulting from speaking or trying to speak other languages.

Secondly, the questions asked of me by the AHRC Researching Multilingually team position me in such a way that I am beginning to give a particular account of myself as a multilingual researcher, a new category to be judged in. In her discussion of accountability, Butler describes this place of fear as the drive for giving an account of oneself:

We start to give an account only because we are interpellated as beings who are rendered accountable by a system of justice and punishment. This system is not there from the start, but becomes instituted over time and at great cost to the human instincts. (Butler 2005:10)

Thirdly, I have been asked to give an account of myself and of my experience as a multilingual researcher, and there is a fear I may be found wanting. Like many research subjects asked for a view from where I stand in the world, I am keen to please but also lacking in a practised version. My answer to the second of the questions asked – ‘what is your experience of becoming aware of the complexities in the area?’ – is becoming increasingly fraught.

Firstly, there is now my socialization into what I will term a ‘morality of multilingualism’, and my account of how I may measure up to this – how many languages will I need to speak, how well in order to competently conduct research? And I am now struggling to give anything close to a coherent account of my language self. Secondly, there is the requirement to assess risk from a monolingual perspective. Not possessing another language equates with earthquakes, HIV, muggings, intermittent electricity, diphtheria. In her paper *Monolingualism: the unmarked case* Ellis presents scholarly descriptions of monolingualism as (i) the presumed norm, (ii) as limiting cognitive, communicative, social and vocational potential and (iii) as critically employing “metaphors of disease, sickness and disability to portray monolingualism as a pathological state” (Ellis 2006: 173). Under Ellis’s description risk assessments which require me to give an account of myself have me doing so in a system which at best assumes socially and professionally damaging limits to my skills and my competences, and at worst, sees this as a pathological state. I am indeed “becoming morally accountable as a consequence of fear and terror”, in this particular, rather novel interpellation of myself as an incompetent linguistic subject (Butler 2005: 11).

The logic of this mode of questioning and risk assessment of linguistic competence has consequences. Firstly, linguistic incompetence, opens me out for punishment or remedy. Punishment comes in the form of the withdrawal of insurance, or of ethical approval for a research project, or of requirements to attend language *training* [my emphasis], and of injunctions to ensure that, as a researcher in a hostile linguistic environment, I am always in possession of a fully charged mobile phone into which I may speak the languages in which I possess competence. Intermittent electricity notwithstanding! Such policies in research contexts which attempt to deal technologically with risk and by using a morality of efficiency, are described as follows by Lyotard:

Technology is therefore a game pertaining not to the true, the just, or the beautiful, etc., but to efficiency: a technical ‘move’ is “good” when it does better and /or expends less energy than another. (Lyotard 1984)

Secondly, the assessing of risks suggests that my linguistic competence or incompetence may have a causal ethical relationship to the past, present or indeed future suffering of others:

The problem is that, [...], it tends to be monolingual discourses, in powerful Western nations, and particularly in English speaking nations, which dominate discussions in educational and social policy. It is often monolinguals who are formulating policy on bilingual education and on ESL provision for immigrants and refugees. Monolingual perspectives dominate in educational testing, in curriculum development and in the perennial discussion of the 'problem' of literacy among young people. Monolingual worldviews of language and dialect infect our policies and processes of determining the origin of refugees [...] and the application of these policies can lead to statelessness, imprisonment or even death. These are not small stakes. (Ellis 2006: 185)

Why do I spend time on these questions of the account and technical competence? It has to do with giving an ethical account of myself to those who begin with a view of the ethics of researching multilingually, however tacitly or practically nuanced. It also offers an answer to the second question 'What is your experience of becoming aware of the complexities in this area?' My experience of becoming aware of the complexities in this area is that it all becomes very difficult.

The area is fraught with difficulties which seem to highlight a range of areas in which I lack answers or where the answers I would give are not appropriate to the requirements of managers, systems, insurers, professional bodies. Further more I am finding myself caught between critical imperatives and ethical assumptions about the rightness or wrongness of researching multilingually or monolingually. Taboos are being raised around the extent of linguistic competence possessed by those undertaking research in social and cultural fields and their findings which has consequences for understanding the validity of different research methods. All this together prompts a masking of the issues or a resistance to the question of competency perhaps. This said, I also know that valuable understandings have come from my work from a place of linguistic incompetence and this prompts another version of my account of my own linguistic incompetence when researching in multilingual contexts.

There are four areas of research which have marked my work as an anthropologist and linguist over the last five years, all of which have underscored by my linguistic incompetence. First of all I went to study language classes through participant observation and 'going native' to use the shorthand, learning Portuguese and Italian in open access courses and through language holidays. In each I was a beginner, time poor and, it seemed, always a little behind the others who in their retirement or youth,

led lives of greater leisure than my own. Mostly I felt a bit stupid as I tried to study what I did not know – the languages. The entire study was marked by my struggle with incompetence.

Secondly, I began to volunteer with detainees in the UK Border Agency's Detention Estate. In short, I began to visit those who, for the most part, have been offered a judgment in English – a language which they speak often hesitantly – that means they are awaiting deportation. Whilst visiting we passed the time by the detainees teaching me, a teacher of languages at a university, to speak greetings in their languages. I learned phrases in Swahili, Georgian, Congolese, and Somali. The language teaching acted as a leveller. Thirdly, I have begun to undertake research for a project on Lifelong Learning in Palestine. This project requires me to spend time doing ethnography in the Gaza Strip and is generative of the risk assessments detailed earlier. I have no Arabic. As the drones do their worst and our hosts show us the narrow strip of land 6km by 45km which is home to nearly 2 million people and allow us in to their resources of hope and hospitality, my experience of my own lack, the wound which is the absence of Arabic, is acute.

Finally, and more personally, when a young girl landed on our doorstep from Eritrea with nowhere to live and no family in the UK, persecuted for her faith and lost in a dizzyingly contradictory bureaucratic system of immigration law, we didn't really stop to think, but took her in. At the start of her living with us we had no language in common, just a phone number for someone who would interpret. Gradually she learned English and I learned a few words of her mother tongue, and I theorized this experience of fostering a young girl, of becoming a mother, of learning a daughter tongue, of fostering languages (Phipps 2012). Life became an auto-ethnographic field site as a necessary dimension of giving an account of myself for the purpose of understanding what was happening in such time-intimate linguistic ways.

It is here, after three attempts, that I must pause in my attempts at narrative and consider their limitations for understanding (in)competent multilingual research practice. Accounts are addressed to someone, and importantly, the accounts are not fully individuated and the narrative structure may not succeed in fully authorizing the account. In other words, I will give you – the researchers asking the questions, and the readers of this piece – my account of my experience and practice of researching multilingually in an attempt to make myself recognizable and understandable. However, I must do so whilst fully aware that I can never fully disclose myself to myself or to others:

The account of myself that I give in discourse never fully expresses or carries this living self. My words are taken away as I give them, interrupted by the time of the discourse that is not the same as the time of my life. "This interruption" contests the sense of the account's being

grounded in myself alone, since the indifferent structures that enable my living belong to a sociality that exceeds me. (Butler 2005: 36)

Another way to say this for our purposes here would be to point out that my account is not my account alone; my languages and my lack of languages are also not my responsibility alone, but are bound into the social, historical, familial, political, economic and cultural discourses which precede and exceed the span of my life and its narration. I believe these multiple accounts and discourses are important for the theoretical and empirical details of the emerging study of what it means to research multilingually. To write of multilingual research conduct from the perspective of multilingualism, practised and inhabited within research fields, is to write of a practice which is social and where the account given of researching multilingually must recognize its partiality and what Butler, following Thomas Keenan, describes as “surely fabulous” (Butler 2005: 37).

To make this more concrete I could point to the fact that, as someone born to parents who spoke to me ‘only’ in English, and having attended a school where the languages offered were only French and German as a legacy of the *entente cordiale*, my linguistic incompetence, shown up in later life is not *my* incompetence but ours. It is part of the ways systems of education unproblematically decided for me what my language options are to be. This means I find myself having reached the age of forty needing to speak an African language for which there are no written language learning resources and only around 100,000 speakers. To predict this would have been surely fabulous. Nor could I have predicted the way the Palestine Nakba, or disaster of 1948, would have played out politically to land me in Gaza City with a need for Arabic and a job which requires me to assess the risk of not having that language, ranked alongside the risk of earthquake or electricity failure.

So, as I pause the narrative and attempt to find a way out of this impasse, my questions begin to change the questions asked. Judith Butler draws on the work of Adriana Cavarero to ponder ways of giving an account of oneself. It is here that we begin to find ways of opening out the ‘fabulous’ narratives of competence and incompetence into a relational mode of potential multilingual research address. The philosophical key here is in the question asked of the one called to give an account in language.

The question asked of me is ‘what?’ Butler, following Adriana Cavarero, suggests that “the question to ask is not ‘what’ we are, as if the task were simply to fill in the content of our own personhood” (Butler 2005: 30–31) or experience, but of who we are, having engaged in multilingual research competently or incompetently and having experienced an awareness of the complexities of doing so. And she suggests that this is not a question the individual subject can ever fully disclose as it is dependent on multiple others, and most particularly, on social relationships, which she sees as ethically bound to the responsibility of making oneself vulnerable because of what one

cannot know: "My account of myself is partial, haunted by that for which I can devise no definitive story. I cannot explain exactly why I have emerged in this way, and my efforts at narrative reconstruction are always undergoing revision" (Butler 2005: 40).

This 'fabulous' dimension of engaging in research, in multilingual fields, where I did not possess the languages, means I have found myself open to important ethical dimensions and have experienced research from a position of considerable humility, lack, limitation, wound and partiality – the very qualities which Butler determines as necessary for an account to be received and for ethical social relations to form. "Do I need to know myself in order to act responsibly in social relations?: Surely, to a certain extent, yes. But is there an ethical valence to my unknowingness?" she asks (Butler 2005: 84). Is there an ethical valence to my linguistic incompetence? Can there be an ethical valence even to monolingualism, and certainly to the impossibility identified by Spivak (1999: 22), of "knowing all the languages in the world". How can I know what researching multilingually means if I am monolingual? I have no point of comparison, no narrative of my growing access to other linguistic worlds, no experience of leaving one set of framings and using a different set, no experience of the feel of competence.

Whilst I do not want to argue us out of learning languages, training students to work multilingually, and reflecting on the use of translation and interpretation in many different contexts of research in a multilingual, mobile world, I do want to suggest there are dangers in following the logic of the risk assessments outlined earlier. It is too easy to create a binary of multilingual 'good': monolingual 'bad' as a knee-jerk response to the very real concerns which have emerged from research where linguistic domination has been assumed and even prescribed historically. Rather than focusing the discussion around questions of competence and incompetence, I would like to suggest shifting the discourse from one of competency to one of capability. Since Chomsky's (1965) linguistic competence and Hymes's (1972) communicative competence, through Byram's (1997) intercultural communicative competence, to Kramsch's (2006) symbolic competence, and critiques detailing the limits to competence (Barnett 1994), language education and research practice has been dominated by the need for assessing competence and for individuals to give an account of their linguistic competence. The linguistic turn has, however, given way to the ethical turn (Garber and Hanssen 2000) with works by leading philosophers including Nussbaum, Levinas, Derrida and Butler considering ethics throughout the last two decades (Nussbaum 1990; Levinas 1998; Derrida and Fourmantele 2000; Derrida 2001a, b; Butler 2005). The discourse of competence places ethics in a technocratic zone of risk management and performativity, or measures which serve well to situate multilingual performance (Byram and Parmenter 2012) but which cannot easily encompass the dimensions at play in the considerations of responsibility and ethics, and where it is at best questionable as to whether such performative scales should attempt this.

These limits to competence allow an alternative discourse which makes space for considerations of the kinds of relationships and social formations of being. Butler (2005) highlights linguistic, multilingual and ethical dimensions which are also present in Spivak's (1988) view of the human subject as a being in relation with subalterns who cannot speak. For researching multilingually is an ethical, messy, relational, collective enterprise, as well as one which may indeed turn out to be more 'competent' in terms of the gathering and analysis of data. It requires consideration of who the researcher and researched are when the linguistic landscape is opaque and when, metaphorically at least, speech and communication are muted. A discourse which allows these relations to come more fully into being for multilingual research practices is the discourse of capability, first developed by Sen (1985) and extended by Nussbaum (2011) into an approach to education and human development.

Whilst capability approaches have developed in main stream education and the school system over recent years, the competence models have continued to dominate the field of language and intercultural studies. Crosbie (2012) opens up a discourse, grounded in the theoretical work of Sen (1985) and Nussbaum (2011) which allows dimensions of human security, imagination, human rights, identity, languaging and intercultural being to come centre stage, from positions where they have been seen as, at best, heroic interventions and curricula add-ons in the field. Perhaps even more importantly, she enables a framework to come into being for multilingual forms of research and education, grounded in action research, which makes space for human values, interrelationships and their ethics to be made manifest. As such Crosbie's work is both exciting and timely for the project of researching multilingually, as the competency debates are tired and the present age of austerity and anxiety needs human qualities in a transformative education that can be sufficient to the task of protecting and advancing the space for the human being *qua* human being, rather than for the human being *qua* worker/employable wealth creator.

Crosbie articulates the capabilities approach and its potential as follows:

Pedagogical practice is imbued with values, often contradictory, that are held by teachers and students, and also to be found in classroom lesson plans, artefacts, curricula, and discourses that circulate the social sphere. As the capabilities approach is informed by values that help shape beings and doings, this moral dimension needs to be acknowledged and critiqued at all levels, especially where multicultural classrooms become the norm. (Crosbie 2012: 266)

Such a discursive and theoretical shift from competence to capability will open out spaces for giving an account of ourselves which go beyond those limited by competency models and allow us to speak of what we have become through not knowing, or not being able to speak *the* language. For my own part I have found a capability approach, as opposed to a competency approach

to my lack of the language, positions me differently in the contexts I spoke of in my third narrative, where I outline the contexts of research for which I did not possess the language skills.

Firstly, as a language learner I had to give up my comfortable teacherly position and my familiar fluency in other languages to be *capable of being a beginner* again. Being a beginner I filled my notebooks with reflections at the time on the difficulty and struggle to hear and make meaning, the terrible slowness and also the sudden jolt of *jouissance* of making progress. I found that a *resting capability* in languages we, as students, shared in common was something of a necessity and a common practice, giving us the chance to relax from what, certainly in immersion courses, felt like an unrelenting inability to make sense of the world – what Butler (2005: 80) might refer to as the impossibility of living solely in the unconscious without someone to address or who might address me in such a way that our narratives might be received and changed.

Secondly, as a mother needing my daughter's tongues, I found the contours of a new script and the exhaustion and frustration of autodidacticism giving way when alphabet flashcards and a fascinated six year old Eritrean began pointing to my ears, nose, mouth, lips, and face, urging me to chant back what she was saying. A forty year old white professor of languages learning a language from a six year old Eritrean refugee girl in the Sudan. *Capability for a relationship* across so many divides, colonial histories, atrocities and surprises was made human and possible because we could begin to communicate with each other through an inversion which humoured us both. I can tell you nothing of what was in the conversations from this multilingual encounter but much of what happened was enabled through these inversions. The invitations, the fun, the trust grew exponentially, and a *capability for hospitality* formed and was made habitable. I developed a *capability of attentiveness* as my attention was drawn to the ways we would greet each other physically, to the words which were taught me in the coffee ceremony and for all kinds of different food which I was called on to repeat endlessly. I also began to notice the importance of names and words which came from faith practices – words for mercy, goodness, thanks, beauty. In this I was not far away from the descriptions of early anthropologists, conducting their research in fields where they would understand nothing and were often, alongside missionaries, the first to transcribe many languages and make them available for new generations of researchers to learn (or not). Evans-Pritchard's (1940) early ethnographies of the Nuer focus on material culture and corporeality, perhaps because the language was not yet open to him. Many of his early writings focus on bodily markings, milking, cattle, homesteads and he described his situation *vis-à-vis* the language with the Nuer as follows:

My main difficulty at this early stage was inability to converse freely with the Nuer. I had no interpreter. None of the Nuer spoke Arabic. There was

no adequate grammar of the language, and apart from three short Nuer-English vocabularies, no dictionary. Consequently the whole of my first and a large part of my second expedition were taken up with trying to master the language sufficiently to *make inquiries* (my emphasis) through it, and only those who have tried to learn a very difficult tongue without the aid of an interpreter and adequate literary guidance will fully appreciate the magnitude of the task. (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 10)

I emphasised the aspect of making inquiries as this positions the researcher in the same scene identified by Butler, the one where we are formed as subjects through social address and also through the wounds and lacks of language which make any account partial, yet necessitating a vulnerable struggle which enables connection to others: "I find that my very formation implicates the other in me, that my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others" (Butler 2005: 84).

Thirdly, in the ethnographic field work I undertook without Arabic, in Palestine, I found that a corporeal capability developed as my attention was drawn to material aspects of life. I was, of necessity, largely silent in social gatherings, or was an object for the practice of English. How to wear scarves and a hijab, words of appreciation, how my body moved in segregated spaces, what the patterns were of gift giving and where children would sit in a room all became fascinating to me during the time for observation. Usually I have been able to rely, in multilingual research, on my fluency to enable access, trust and relationships to develop; however, in this area these capabilities needed to take a non-verbal form, and to be articulated by myself through a willingness to join in times of prayer, or in the wreathing of the hijab, or in practising the forms of greeting which showed clear respect. These are small points in many ways, but not having the language meant these corporeal dimensions of who I am were far more present to others – the consternation at my modes of dress and help given to enable me to wear my hosts' clothes well. Corporeal dimensions of others were also far more present to me as the language was not available for the relations to be formed. In short, I was required to extend a *capability of de-centring* my own subject position into one with which I was far less practised.

More than this, however, I believe each of these situations opened space for the exercise of new and distinctive capabilities which go beyond those of competency models as well as intersect with them, for instance, with the practice of de-centring found in intercultural communicative competence. What the questions and my interpretations and failed attempts at answering them here have revealed is the complexity, opacity, wound and lack that comes into being when we give an account of what it means to research in other languages, and when we are unable to research in these ways. Researching multilingually, I argue, makes all of this more apparent than in many other fields as language is our prime human and professional means of making sense of and to ourselves and others; and our first point of entry into

a symbolic system comes with our entry into language as infants. When learning a new language we begin to repeat this action. We become like little children, marked, often comically as my six year old teacher demonstrated so ably, by this lack, and rendered all the more human for it.

If I am wounded, I find that the wound testifies to the fact that I am impressionable, given over to the other in ways that I cannot fully predict or control. I cannot think the question of responsibility alone, in isolation from the other. If I do, I have taken myself out of the mode of address (being addressed as well as addressing the other) in which the problem of responsibility first emerges. (Butler 2005: 84)

To conclude: at this stage in the development of a field of reflexive practice, poised as it is between performative, competence-based paradigms and those based on capabilities and ethics, it is important to take stock of what the relations are between the subjects, languages and the field of possibilities that emerge for re-forming researchers. It is possible that what may emerge here is a programme of work which allows reflection on narratives of language acquisition, humility, vulnerability and mistake, on the inversions which inevitably follow, on the processes and forms which acquisition takes, and how our relations to the field and with research subjects are changed over time through the learning or using of languages or interpreters. It may also be that a capabilities approach can help to highlight the value of frustration and a sense of powerlessness which can engender qualities of empathy through the ethical connections which are formed as a result of the need to care, and when the responsibility to protect is mutual in research relations. It may be that other aspects of human life are noticed, that the corporeality of address and observation becomes pertinent. In addition, there is scope for this field to develop the capability of patience in researcherly practice, observation, and of sensory dimensions (Pink 2009).

But perhaps most significant, for our purposes here, is the way our capabilities with methods and reflection on researching multilingually may enable us:

to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us [languages] diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone [to experience language as wound or lack] in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human. (Butler 2005: 136).

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