*Language Teaching* (2026), 1–5
doi:10.1017/S0261444826101578

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

BAAL /CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS SEMINAR 2026

# Beyond the default: Rethinking pseudonymisation in applied linguistics research

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(Received 15 September 2026 UTC; revised 15 September 2026 UTC; accepted 9 October 2026 UTC)
**Keywords:** applied linguistics; ethics; pseudonymisation; reflection

## 1. Introduction

In Applied Linguistics (AL) qualitative research, pseudonymisation is often treated as a standard procedure (Guenther, 2009; Heaton, 2022; Wang et al., 2026). Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that decisions about naming research participants are rarely discussed or critically reflected upon (Guenther, 2009; Wang et al., 2026). This procedural approach is also reflected in how pseudonymisation is addressed within UK universities. Although university research ethics structures lack a systemic framework or overarching governing body (Vadeboncoeur et al., 2016), pseudonymisation is typically presented as the default. Yet, naming decisions are not merely procedural but ethical acts, deeply connected to questions of power, representation, and participant trust. Reflecting this ethical dimension, the seminar created a space for researchers to critically reflect on naming decisions, considering how these shape participants' representation and researcher–participant relationships, and how researchers might move beyond procedural compliance towards more reflexive ethical practice. In doing so, it responded to calls for greater transparency, reflexivity, and collaboration around pseudonymisation (Allen & Wiles, 2016; Lahman et al., 2023).

## 2. The seminar

We began the day by welcoming attendees from a diverse range of countries and universities, creating a rich and international environment for discussion and collaboration. We were particularly pleased to welcome participants from within the UK, including London, Nottingham, and Leicester, as well as from Austria and Tunisia, whose attendance was made possible through scholarships generously funded by the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL).

The programme featured three parallel short-talk sessions, in which 18 presenters shared their reflections and experiences of naming and pseudonymisation in their research projects, exploring these issues from the perspectives of researchers and participants. Sessions were delivered in a hybrid format: in-person attendees could engage with both face-to-face and online presentations, while remote participants joined dedicated online sessions. This structure ensured broad participation and accessibility throughout the event. The day concluded with a plenary discussion featuring Professors

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444826101578 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Ema Ushioda (University of Warwick), Steve Mann (University of Warwick), and Maggie Kubanyiova (University of Leeds).

The tone of the seminar was established from the outset, as attendees arrived to find out that they would be choosing a pseudonym rather than wearing the traditional name badge. Reactions quickly moved from surprise to deep thought as attendees realised that this was not an easy choice to make; how did they want to present themselves to others? Did any of the names sufficiently represent their identity either real, imagined, or desired? The range of reasons behind the decision-making process was shared and discussed as part of the first activity. As this was a relatively small event, we wanted to ensure that everyone had the opportunity to contribute their viewpoints, and to do so, we aimed to create a welcoming, inclusive atmosphere. This informed our decision to facilitate a 'Find someone who …?' mingling activity, where everyone moved around the room asking questions to get to know each other and share their pseudonyms. Delegates then returned to their tables to share their answers and reflect on how it felt to be addressed by the pseudonym they were using.

The first parallel session, 'To pseudonymise or not to pseudonymise?', explored the ethical complexities of anonymisation and pseudonymisation in AL research today. It examined the risks, responsibilities, and justifications involved in decisions to name, conceal, or alter participants' identities and data. Chisa Matsukawa (University of Lancashire) focused on learner-as-researcher projects involving Japanese and Korean language learners. In her research, participants contributed to highly valuable analyses, creating a case for recognising them by name. However, their accounts included sensitive personal information, producing a dilemma between acknowledging participants' contributions and protecting their privacy. Minghao Hu (University of Warwick) broadened the discussion beyond individual identifiability. Studying gender-focused solutions journalism on Chinese social media, Hu argued that naming journalists, organisations, or sources may expose them to censorship or political risks in an authoritarian context. Ethical decisions thus involve not only anonymisation but also citation, attribution, and the researcher's responsibility when amplifying the visibility of vulnerable actors. The session closed with a talk by Piotr Wegorowski (University of Glasgow), who drew on his experience reviewing nearly 500 ethics applications. He criticised the routine recommendation to anonymise data, arguing that researchers often provide weak or formulaic justifications either for preserving anonymity or for allowing participants to be named. He called for a more theoretically grounded, flexible, and ongoing decision-making framework, one that treats anonymisation as an evolving practice rather than a one-time form-based declaration.

Session 1B hosted three online talks that foregrounded the theme of multilayeredness of pseudonymisation across healthcare and educational settings. Chengcheng Guo (Regent College London) offered a reflexive account of teacher pseudonymisation in a Sino-UK transnational MA programme, focusing on a specific dilemma related to gendered language as remaining hidden in smaller context, and subsequently, influencing pseudonymisation decisions and regenerating identifiability. Her account called for more practical, context-sensitive decision-making on the ground. Banish Ikhlaq (Oxford University Press) offered a critical overview of participant agency and power dynamics. Banish argued that naming practices are sites of power that can either reinforce or challenge hierarchical researcher–participant relationships. The talk advocated for collaborative naming as a means of enhancing participant agency and identity. Finally, Chi-Jen Lin (National Taiwan University of Education) broadened this perspective by reconceptualising naming in healthcare contexts as a dynamic ethical practice, rather than a one-off procedural task. Proposing a four-mode framework on naming, Chi-Jen demonstrated that naming practices can vary according to different priorities, including safety, agency, dignity, relational considerations, and legal compliance.

Session 2A, 'Collaborative representation and cultural authenticity' focused on participant naming practices in qualitative language learning research and the role of collaborative pseudonymisation in shaping participant representation. It involved two presentations. In the first, Toru Yamagami (University of Warwick) drew on research with Japanese learners of English, noting that high school

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learners tended to choose pseudonyms based on the names of role models, whereas university students, who may have a stronger sense of self-identity, tended to choose Japanese names. In the second, Siying Shen (University of Graz) focused on British learners of Mandarin Chinese. She highlighted how participants engage with naming processes in different ways, with some using pseudonym choice as a means of self-expression and identity representation, while others preferred greater distance from the process.

A different set of concerns emerged in Parallel Session 2B, 'The pitfalls of pseudonymisation: Silencing and identity erasure', where three online talks addressed the risk of pseudonymisation erasing or silencing participants. Elhadj Moussa BenMoussa (University of East London) shared his reflections as a researcher on his naming decisions, considering the potential for pseudonymisation to erase the voices of multilingual researchers. Tausif Zafar (Prince Sultan University) shared his experience of being a participant whose identity was erased when the pseudonym 'Mr T' was chosen without his consent. This talk called on everyone to consider how consent often stops at participation and rarely continues to the dissemination of findings. The final talk of this session came from Gabe Jackson (University of Nottingham/University of Bristol) who shared his experiences of using pseudonyms for participants from the transgender and non-binary communities. Jackson highlighted that, despite being an insider to this research, there were still many unexpected challenges and researchers must be willing to listen carefully to the participants' needs.

Session 3A, 'Narrating the individual: Reflecting on ethical representation', brought together three talks examining pseudonymisation through the lens of individual research relationships. Louise Dearden (University of Birmingham) drew on her experience of conducting classroom research with adult migrant learners of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) to talk about the inseparability of how we name our participants and how they appear to readers of our research. Using creative nonfiction to represent one of her participants, 'Henry', she reflected on how a close researcher–participant relationship can also create assumptions of greater knowledge than is ethically justified, calling for more reflexive naming and research practices in AL. Sabina Perrino (Binghamton University, SUNY), joining online, presented her work with Northern Italian executives to highlight a fundamental paradox: US institutional ethics processes afford researchers no flexibility in naming decisions, yet pseudonymisation in practice fails to achieve invisibility, undermines narrative credibility, and can enact epistemic injustice by erasing participants' authority over their own representation. Jason Anderson (University of Warwick) offered a counterexample of a study he conducted with expert English teachers in India. He talked about the importance of giving research participants voice and agency, as well as keeping them fully informed about their representation in the research outputs.

Session 3B, themed 'Small contexts, high visibility: Confronting deductive disclosure and traceability', featured three talks exploring the ethical complexities around participant identifiability. First, Marianne Talbot (University of Leeds) focused on ethical researcher discretion in participant de-identification through self-selected pseudonyms. She reflected on inviting participants to choose their own pseudonyms, noting that this supported their agency and ownership while requiring greater consideration of de-identification throughout data collection and management. Then, Jing Liu (University of Warwick) argued that pseudonymisation in case study research is often insufficient: in a small transnational English Medium Instruction (EMI) programme, contextual and professional details embedded across the research can leave participants identifiable, requiring careful, ongoing decisions throughout design, analysis, and writing. The final talk by Yanyan Li and Xinran Gao (University of Warwick) examined the limitations of conventional pseudonymisation in discourse analytic research involving small groups, where there was a tension between preserving analytic validity and safeguarding anonymity. Their partial preservation approach emphasised the role of ethnicity, language background, and cultural positioning in participants' meaning-making.

The concluding section of the day began with a plenary discussion between Ema Ushioda, Steve Mann, and Maggie Kubanyiova. They reflected candidly on their own careers, acknowledging that

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they had used the full range of naming approaches discussed throughout the day, from generic labels such as 'Participant 1', to pseudonymised names and places, to real names. They also noted that in some cases identifiability had often been more illusory than real.

The final activity for the in-person attendees focused on ethical dilemmas. Each of the five organisers shared a naming dilemma from our research experience, which attendees discussed in small groups and reported how they would deal with the challenge to the wider group. This provided everyone with the opportunity to reflect and draw on everything that had been presented and discussed throughout the day, illustrating the real-world practical applicability of the seminar.

## 3. Findings and implications

Several themes emerged from the discussions throughout the day. Many researchers noted that naming had not been a major consideration in their early research projects. In retrospect, they recognised its significance and felt that they would approach it differently were they conducting those projects today. This ranged from giving participants a choice over whether they remained identifiable or were assigned pseudonyms, to allowing them to choose their own pseudonyms, to being more open with participants about the risk of remaining traceable despite pseudonymisation. This finding supports the assertion that, because pseudonymisation is so widely taken for granted, the rationale underlying naming decisions is often overlooked (Guenther, 2009; Wang et al., 2026).

This lack of early consideration is compounded by the role institutional ethics processes play in shaping researchers' naming decisions. The 'macroethical principles', which are concerned with codes of practice, are utilised by ethics committees to protect participants and ensure ethical research practices (Kubanyiova, 2008). Yet, these principles are sometimes at odds with the 'microethical level of research practice' (Kubanyiova, 2008, p. 516). For instance, participants are often asked to complete a tick-box checklist indicating whether they wish to remain anonymous or be assigned a pseudonym. However, some participants may wish to be identified by their real names to gain recognition for their contributions. The macroethical requirement for anonymity thus may conflict with participants' preferences and autonomy.

This tension between institutional rigidity and researcher reflexivity is mirrored in a second theme: the gap between promises of confidentiality and the realities of participant identifiability. While assurances of confidentiality may encourage participants to disclose information they might not otherwise share, research participants are often aware they remain potentially traceable, particularly if insufficient attention is paid to removing identifying information. This may expose participants to various forms of harm. As Damianakis and Woodford (2012, p. 713) argue, pseudonyms may provide only 'ineffective protection', as participants can still be identified through the language they use, the experiences they describe, and/ or other contextual details.

Naming raises a related but distinct set of concerns. Discussions highlighted the need to critically examine the rationale for naming participants. Researchers should not only consider whether participants wish to be named but also reflect on what participants, researchers, and wider audiences stand to gain from such recognition. Although participants having a choice over naming was generally viewed positively, in line with Wang et al., (2026, p. 13) call to reduce researcher–participant power imbalances by offering participants meaningful choices, 'rather than allocating names autocratically', participants' preferences cannot be treated as the sole ethical consideration. The appropriateness of naming remains shaped by the specific research context, the nature of participants' contributions, and the potential risks associated with identification.

Taken together, these discussions suggest that neither pseudonymisation nor naming should be treated as an ethical default. Pseudonyms cannot guarantee protection, while naming is not inherently empowering or beneficial. This again echoes Piotr Wegorowski's earlier call for a decision-making framework, one that would move beyond binary debates about whether participants should or should

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not be named and instead encourage researchers to engage with the ethical complexities of representation. Crucially, this is not a one-time decision: naming and pseudonymity may need to be revisited as data are collected and participants' perspectives evolve. For this reason, we call for more flexible, ongoing ethics processes that support researchers in making nuanced, context-specific decisions balancing participant autonomy, recognition, and protection.

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**Cite this article:** Webb, K. L., Sidaway, K., Patrick, M., Gulzar, N., & Li, Y. (2026). Beyond the default: Rethinking pseudonymisation in applied linguistics research. *Language Teaching*, 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444826101578

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