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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Promises and perils of positionality statements

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Abstract

Positionality statements have increasingly become the norm in many strands of social science research, including applied linguistics. With reference to current research, theory, and the author's own work, this paper reviews some of the promises and perils of such statements, including their performativity and lack of reflexivity. The author concludes by arguing that positionality statements need to offer both more and less, to be better targeted, and be more effectively and widely utilized within the field of applied linguistics.

Keywords: research methods; analysis; applied linguistics; ethnography; reflexivity; replication

Positionality statements have increasingly become the norm in many strands of social science research, including applied linguistics. These statements, which vary from a few sentences to a few pages, typically outline the demographic, professional, or personal characteristics of the author(s) and, to a greater or lesser extent, their position relative to the research topic or research participants. Implicitly (and occasionally explicitly) present in such statements is a rejection of the notion of research objectivity or of so-called "value-free" research. By detailing aspects of author identity, positionality statements attempt to refute and provide an alternative to the "white coat," omnipresent, invisible investigator, long common in many experimental research write-ups and evident in the use of third-person or passive voice (e.g., "the researcher coded the data," "participants were observed and interviewed"). For some scholars, positionality statements are intended as a rejection of what has been critiqued as the academy's focus on positivism, objectivity, and a white normative framework (Harris, 2021).

This shift in practice is part of what has come to be termed the "reflexive turn" in social science (and applied linguistics) scholarship. Reflexivity is the practice of sustained analysis of a researcher's impact on their own scholarship (Finlay & Gough, 2008); reflexivity underscores the importance of examining not only the findings or the *content* produced through research but also the *processes* through which this research has been produced (Gill, 1998). Those processes include ones that are internal to researchers (e.g., prior personal experiences in the world, formal training, and

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academic socialization through professional networks) as well as those external to the researcher (e.g., access to research sites and participants, institutional support for funding). As many have argued, researchers' experiences, worldviews, and connections to the population under study shape nearly all components of the research process, including, for instance, what questions researchers pose, what data they collect, how this data is analyzed and interpreted, and what researchers choose to do with those findings (Bukamal, 2022; Davis & Khonach, 2020).

The promises

Optimally, positionality statements are part of an ongoing process of reflexivity wherein scholars critically reflect on (a) their own theoretical predispositions, assumptions, and personal and socio-historical relationships vis-à-vis the researched and the broader research topic and (b) how these dynamics shape all stages of the research, from the disciplinary framing of the research questions to the choice of the research methodology, to the presentation of findings (De Costa et al., 2021). When this analysis and writing are done thoughtfully and carefully, these efforts can result in research that not only provides insightful findings but allows the reader to fully evaluate how those findings were generated, increasing the capacity for comparisons across research contexts and study designs as well as to more robust theory-building.

The perils

While all of this seems both sound and productive, there is reason for concern both about *how frequently* and *how* (or in what ways) this process is taken up. For instance, Mann's (2011) survey of published articles that utilized interviews for data collection revealed that most of the articles presented the interview data as objective, neutral participant reports rather than the result of co-constructed interactions by the interviewed and the interviewer. Likewise, Talmy's often cited (2010) review demonstrated how applied linguistics is dominated by an "interview as research instrument" ideology, in which the interview is taken to be a neutral and factual mechanism of data extraction.

While it's possible that there have been some changes in the last decade on this front, more problematic is the *how* of positionality statements. In other words, it is worth asking, as Boveda and Annamma (2023) do, "What is the power and purpose of positioning and positionality statements?" (p. 307), and moreover, what unintended or deleterious consequences might they have for the researchers, for those being researched, and for the research itself? Below, I attempt to address these questions by outlining four concerning trends; these can be characterized as (a) performativity, (b) absence of reflexivity, (c) self-focus, and (d) researcher vulnerability within or adjacent to many positionality statements.

Performativity

Positionality statements can function as performative gestures. Not unlike land acknowledgment statements (for an overview of critiques of this practice, see Robinson et al., 2019; also Fairbanks, 2023) and pronoun introductions (see Manion, 2018 for

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a discussion of problems inherent in this practice), positionality statements, in some instances, serve as signaling devices for authors' particular orientation or status, rather than vehicles for providing relevant or useful information for evaluating research methods, findings, or interpretation. As Boveda and Annamma (2023) note, these statements are often written as confessionals or disclosures of author-researcher identity (e.g., "as a former Spanish teacher" or "as a heritage speaker of Arabic") and are then used to establish and justify researcher authority through a named personal or professional identity, membership, or proximity to a (often marginalized) group.

Below, from my own coauthored work (shared with collaborator consent), is an example of such a statement from a 2014 case study of two adult Ojibwe language learners (King & Hermes, 2014):

> The data presented here come from the authors' experiences as teachers, researchers, and consultants in varied contexts of indigenous language revitalization. Hermes is learning Ojibwe as an adult, helped start an immersion school, and works to develop Ojibwe language learning outside of formal school. King has conducted research on language revitalization efforts in Latin America (e.g., King, 1999), and although much newer to Minnesota (and Ojibwe), has researched family use of Ojibwe language learning software (Hermes & King, 2013) and collaborated in teacher training efforts. The examples below come from this individual and collective work over the last 6 years as well as in-depth interviews with 2 adult language learners in 2013. (p. 272)

The statement above by me and my colleague, Mary Hermes, serves as a list of credentials to establish authority and expertise to research and write on this topic. The statement locates us in the research context and the broader project of Indigenous language revitalization to build our credibility while also trying not to overstate our expertise in a way that might eclipse others in the local revitalization community. Often, the idea behind disclosures of aspects of researcher identity such as this is that the information will allow the reader to better assess and evaluate the research and, further, that revealing these personal, autobiographical details will shed light on, for instance, the kind of access the researcher had, how decisions were made about data analysis procedures, or how the interpretation of results proceeded. However, the professional identities (e.g., school administrator) or background characteristics (Ojibwe language learner) highlighted here, in fact, do little to inform the reader how those identities impacted research decision-making. Worse still, there is a risk of an oversimplified or reductionist interpretation (e.g., the implication that experiences living in Latin America and researching Quichua language revitalization facilitates access to Ojibwe communities or benefits Ojibwe language research).

Minimal reflexivity

Personal disclosures like the one provided above are too infrequently connected back to the research process or decisions. Put differently, there is often little evidence of reflection concerning which aspects of the author's identity might be salient in which components of the research progress. As Rose and McKinley (2017) argue, researcher reflexivity is not simply a personal virtue; rather, reflexivity requires researchers to

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attend to the details and implications of their disciplinary understanding of how knowledge is produced across the research process. Admittedly, a full and complete reckoning is likely both unknowable and impossible given page restrictions, but certainly, this evaluation should not be left to the reader alone to guess or assume.

Further, identity claims common in positionality statements (e.g., "as a former Spanish teacher," "as a speaker of southern English," or "as a supporter of Ojibwe language learning") seem to ignore the extensive literature in anthropology as well as within applied linguistics on the complexities of identity (dis)alignments—or what's been termed the "insider/outsider" debate. In this literature, so-called "outsider researchers," typically those who are not members of the group targeted by the study, are sometimes deemed more objective and neutral. "Insiders," in turn, are often assumed to have more direct access to the research site or population and possibly deeper insights into the sociocultural mechanisms at work (Aiello & Nero, 2019).

However, this insider/outsider distinction has, in turn, been extensively critiqued and problematized, given its tendency to reduce these positions to a simplistic, one-dimensional dichotomy (e.g., Ganga & Scott, 2006). For instance, Narayan (1993), in a highly influential essay in *American Anthropologist*, argued against a fixed distinction between "native" and "nonnative" researchers, suggesting that the extent to which anyone is an "authentic insider is questionable" (p. 671). Rather than rely on this distinction, she suggests viewing each researcher "in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations" (p. 671).

While there is an assumption that shared background with participants facilitates access to communities involved in research, many scholars have maintained that the research process itself and all that it entails (e.g., recruitment work, recording participants, collecting data, asking what can be seen as obvious or invasive questions, and IRB processes) challenges or undermines the insider position and renders all researchers, in effect, outsiders (Obasi, 2014; Paechter, 2013). Others, such as Subreenduth and Rhee (2010), ask, "[h]ow do we find the dividing lines for insider and outsider?" (p. 334). To this point, Aiello and Nero (2019) describe how their own "researcher identities oscillated along the insider/outsider spectrum throughout the research process" (p. 261). They further argue that "the moment-by-moment discursive construction of these roles during interviews suggests that the definitions and enacting of 'insider' and 'outsider' roles are more complex, multi-layered, and context-dependent than heretofore claimed" (p. 261). (See also Bukamal, 2022 on what she describes as "insider–outsider ambivalence.")

Concomitantly, other factors—many of which are infrequently mentioned in positionality statements—can have a significant impact on the research design and process. These include, for example, the researcher's own training, expertise, and limitations, of course, but also the researchers' work context and the ever-increasing need for researchers to produce and publish research annually. As De Costa et al. (2021) note,

> The academy has become decidedly competitive in light of neoliberal demands placed on the education industry […] The commodification of research—applied linguistics has not been spared—has resulted in researchers being evaluated by performance-based metrics that value big grants and peer-reviewed journal publications. (p. 67)

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This pressure for quick and regular publications means certain valuable research approahces—in particular, in-depth case studies, longitudinal investigations, and delayed posttest designs—are more likely to be left by the wayside. Furthermore, many states and school systems are under increasing pressure to turn over school records due to complaints, lawsuits, and Freedom of Information Act requests (Natanson & Elwood, 2023) and increased monitoring of teachers' work, with particular scrutiny of teacher treatment of race, sexuality, and gender topics in the United States (Woo et al., 2023). As a result, research projects that involve audio and video recording in K–12 classrooms are now routinely denied in many school districts. For applied linguistics, these restrictions on collecting naturalistic, observational data in K–12 classrooms have powerful, chilling, and field-shaping implications for research design. Positionality statements need to consider how pressures such as limited access to sites shape the research we are doing, the questions we pose, and how we answer them. This is particularly the case since researchers often serve as a kind of mediator between the communities we partner with (e.g., student and teacher participants) and the myriad institutions that govern our work (e.g., school systems, universities).

Overemphasis on self

Another risk is that this reflection on the research process has the potential to turn into something closer to a researcher self-study. There is an established, robust line of investigation into researcher learning and development (Bucholtz et al., 2023; Lorette, 2023). Positionality statements are not part of this line of work; they serve another purpose. Ideally, the goal of positionality statements is to understand not so much *the researcher's* developmental processes but the *research* development processes. Positionality statements, by definition, are personal, and they are often engaging and interesting; they can offer a "behind the scenes" narrative respite from an otherwise dry, dense, or complicated text. Not unlike an overly long preface, introduction, or warm-up for a conference talk, positionality statements can distract from or overshadow the core research findings. They can also potentially lead readers to over- or under-interpret research findings or overlook research design shortcomings. In short, there is the risk that positionality statements crowd out, in both word count and emphasis, the empirical findings of the paper.

Vulnerability

Lastly, it's important to recognize that there is still considerable unevenness with respect to who engages in this reflexive, analytical work and who tends to provide positionality statements. This difference tends to fall along (sub)disciplinary lines, with fewer considerations of positionality in quantitative, psychometrically oriented papers and more in qualitative, interpretive ones. These differences are also evident in journals across the field of applied linguistics (e.g., few in *Applied Psycholinguistics* vs. many in *TESOL Quarterly*). This unevenness has led some researchers to point to the ways in which positionality statements can render scholars vulnerable (Boveda & Annamma, 2023). Feminist scholars have called this *the paradox of positionality* (Davis & Khonach, 2020). On the one hand, if we avoid accountability to positionality, we are ignoring the role of the researcher in the research process and, unintentionally or not, confirming the (unrealistic) notion that entirely neutral, value-free research is possible. On

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the other, those who acknowledge positionality, and in particular those who are also minoritized scholars and/or women, open themselves up to critique, to being seen as biased, or to engage in what has derisively been mocked as "me-search" (Davis & Khonach, 2020). (For responses to the "me-search" term, see Ray, 2016 and Harris, 2021). This imbalance in who engages in open, documented consideration of their own research practices renders some scholars relatively more vulnerable.

Paths forward

For the promises of positionality statements to be met, scholars of applied linguistics from varied subdisciplines, including more experimentally oriented ones, need to engage in this work more robustly and differently. As Arora et al., (2023) argue,

> All aspects of scholarly endeavors are influenced by the assumptions, attitudes, experiences, values, and sociopolitical location of the researcher […] This is as true of statistics and quantitative measures as it is of qualitative approaches in which reflexivity is considered a hallmark of rigor. (p. 2)

Nevertheless, in some circles within applied linguistics, positionality statements remain rare or altogether absent. For many working within more quantitative and experimental designs, the notion of the neutral, white-coated, *superhuman* researcher seems to live on. This is remarkable in light of the widely covered, entirely *human*-driven limitations that have called into question many foundational quantitative studies in social psychology, behavioral economics, medicine, and other fields (Ioannidis, 2005). For applied linguists of all stripes, whether qualitative, quantitative, mixed, and/or experimentally oriented, one of the many implications of what has come to be known as the replication crisis is the value and importance of open and careful consideration of research decision-making processes (Sönning & Werner, 2021).

Positionality statements need to offer both more and less and to be better targeted and more widely utilized within the field of applied linguistics. What I mean by this is that to be more meaningful, they should offer more than a basic biographical, professional, or demographic accounts. They should not serve as assumed signals of authenticity or access based on simplistic or one-dimensional notions of "insider" versus "outsider." To be meaningful, positionality statements should engage with the aspects of the author's identity that are most relevant to the study and what these aspects of identity mean for the execution of the research. Less is sometimes more, too. One implication of this shift might result in *less* text: positionality statements should not be prewritten multiparagraph bios—cut and pasted from one article to the next—but should vary over time or across articles and reflect shifting institutional or context constraints concerning access or publication timing demands, as examples.

One approach for doing this might be to alter the standard presentation of positionality statements as a stand-alone paragraph, often under the subheading "Researcher Positionality," and weave them into a commentary that is part of the discussion of the methods. For instance, in describing the study sample, participants would not be described as "convenient" or "randomly selected," but rather the relationship between the researcher and the participants or the research context would be spelled out (see Scollon, 2002 for an example of this from his classic study of child language). Aspects

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of the author's identity can also, for instance, be woven into the discussion of how data was selected for analysis and/or varied interpretations of that data. Alternatively, more complicated research positionality statements could be posted as additional material online. It is increasingly common for data sets, research protocols, and instruments to be posted. Reflective positional statements could be included in their entirety as well.

Thinking (and writing) carefully and critically about how we approach our work and with what constraints has the potential to build an even stronger applied linguistics research base. This is important work for all of us.

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