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Opportunities and challenges of positionality in quantitative research: overcoming linguistic and cultural 'knowledge gaps' thanks to 'knowledgeable collaborators'

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ABSTRACT

Quantitative social scientists have adopted the positivist epistemology and methodology of natural sciences, seeking objectivity, generalisability, and neutrality . However, in social sciences – unlike in natural sciences – humans are both the investigators and the object of investigation, leading to intricate interconnections between researchers and participants. This paper presents challenges and opportunities of positionality in quantitative social research. Positionality can uncover gaps in the researcher's knowledge, which may feel unusual and particularly uncomfortable from the positivist point of view, but which can in turn reveal unanticipated opportunities. This postpositivist argument is informed by a mixed-method project exploring Chinese and non-Chinese speakers' perception of emotions expressed in Mandarin, conducted by an L0 researcher – i.e. one who is unfamiliar with Chinese languages and culture(s). This particular position stimulated reflexivity and instigated the inclusion of other subjectivities in the process. Accordingly, this project illustrates both the challenges and advantages of such undertakings. Once researchers acknowledge (the influence of) the position they speak from and what they do or do not share with participants, they can overcome their 'knowledge gaps' by adopting suitable research methods and involving 'knowledgeable collaborator' in the process.

立场在定量研究中的机会和挑战：借助 '知识渊博的合作者'，克服语言和文化上的 '知识差距'

摘要

定量社会科学家运用自然科学的实证主义认识论和方法论，寻求客观性、普遍性和中立性（ 。然而，与自然科学不同的是，在社会科学中，人类既是调查者又是调查对象，因此导致研究者和参与者之间存在着错综复杂的相互联系。本文介绍了立场性问题在定量社会研究中的挑战和机遇。立场能够揭示研究者的知识差距，这从实证主义角度来看，可能会感到异常和不适，但反过来又可以揭示意想不到的机会。这个后实证主义的论点是基于一个混合方法的项目的研究。该项目通过L0研究者 （不熟悉中国语言和文化的人）视角，探索中文和非中文使用者对普通话表达的情感的感知。这个独特的视角激发了反思性，并促使其他主体性在这个过程中的融合。因此，这个项目阐释了这项工作的机遇和挑战。一旦研究者意识到他们主观立场（的影响），以及他们是否与参与者分享内容，他们就可以通过合适的方法和让 '知识渊博的合作者 '参与这一过程来克服他们的 '知识差距'。

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Introduction

In my training as a quantitative[1] researcher in applied linguistics, little attention has been dedicated to reflections about the (quantitative) researcher's positionality and the influence that it can have on the research process. This probably results from the ontological and epistemological stance of quantitative research, which relies on the positivist belief of objectivity, idealistically seeking the absence of any impact of the researcher on the research (Duff 2010). Accordingly, quantitative researchers structure reality into variables, which can be measured, manipulated, and controlled, to draw generalisable conclusions based on the reproducible outcomes of carefully conducted statistical analyses. In this process, the researcher is assumed to be removed, separate from the reality it investigates, rather than involved in this reality. Social scientists borrowed this idea from natural sciences, notwithstanding a crucial difference between both fields: in social sciences, not only the investigator but also the object of investigation are humans. This creates intricate interconnections between researchers and participants, which are however overlooked in the positivist paradigm in social sciences. Quantitative researchers rarely acknowledge their positionality as it would introduce an impression of subjectivity, which goes against the ideal (or myth) of science as an objective and value-neutral undertaking (Breen and Darlaston-Jones 2010; Teo 2018). However, denying the existence of interrelations between researchers and participants does not make this reality disappear, but instead prevents researchers from analysing the influence of these interrelations on the research process and outcomes. Although researchers' positionality and reflexivity has gained attention in social sciences with the rise of postpositivist research frameworks, it is still mainly confined to qualitative projects, where the researchers, as main instrument of the project, fully acknowledge their subjectivity and their contribution to the outcomes. Only a few voices have called for more reflexivity in quantitative studies (e.g. Wren 2004). This article makes a case for quantitative researchers to join qualitative ones in their endeavour of increased awareness and acknowledgement of the position one speaks from (Phipps 2019), although positionality might present different challenges and opportunities for quantitative researchers.

In this contribution, I understand a researcher's positionality as the interplay of the personal beliefs and values adopted in the course of one's identity development (shaped by religion, gender, sexual orientation, race, social class, geographical location, etc), the ontological and epistemological assumptions one holds (influenced by one's discipline and field of research), and the position one has in a specific linguistic, social, cultural, and political context (A. G. D. Holmes 2020). These have consequences for the type of research questions one asks, the research design one adopts to generate data and answer these questions, the findings and their interpretations, and the conclusions one draws from the research (Hope, Brugh, and Nance 2019). I argue that reflexivity – i.e. the act of reflecting on one's positionality and critically examining its impact on the research process and outcomes – can not only help unveil the challenges and limitations of a project, but also the opportunities offered by the researcher position, regardless of the epistemological and methodological approach of the study.

This call for positionality and reflexivity primarily emerged out of pragmatic considerations during a research project into the perception of emotions expressed in Mandarin, carried out in a context where I, as the researcher, was unfamiliar with the Chinese culture(s) and the Chinese languages – meaning that Mandarin or any other variety of Chinese was an L0 for me. My particular position posed various challenges due to linguistic and cultural unfamiliarity and what I will call my 'knowledge gaps'. At the same time, they also opened up unanticipated opportunities for a more reflexive and collaborative project, which will be discussed in this contribution. The study in question is situated at the interface between applied linguistics and psychology and investigates how emotions expressed by a Mandarin speaker are perceived by people with different degrees of familiarity with the Chinese language(s) and culture(s), namely first language (L1) speakers, foreign language (LX) speakers and non-speakers (L0) of Mandarin.[2] The study particularly focuses on the perception of valence – i.e. how (un)pleasant one is feeling – and arousal – i.e. how (un)activated one is feeling, which are two dimensions that are assumed to be universal (Russell 2003). To investigate this, I developed an online questionnaire (eventually filled in by 651 L1, 406 LX, and 542 L0 Mandarin speakers) embedded with 12 audio-visual recordings of a Chinese actor enacting various scenarios. Participants reported their perception of the level of valence and arousal experienced by the protagonist in each stimulus via slider scales ranging from unpleasant to pleasant and from calm to activated, which resulted in quantified responses, and then chose one out of 38 labels that best described the emotion perceived (see Lorette 2021). I then analysed the participants' perceptions with statistical methods. From beginning on, I was aware that my unfamiliarity with the primary context of my research may limit the way in which I would interpret these quantitative results and therefore wanted to give a voice to the participants themselves – albeit to a limited extent. Therefore, I adopted a two-phase embedded design (Creswell et al. 2003) to confront the etic perspective of the quantitative results with participants' own perception of emotion communication in China and in the rest of the world. After the analysis of the quantitative data, I conducted a focus-group interview with eight Chinese informants to allow their voice to inform the interpretation of the quantitative results.

The next section will give more details about the project and my positionality. Then, I will illustrate the challenges of researching in an L0 context, which are linked with the challenges of 'researching multilingually' (Ganassin and Holmes 2020; P. Holmes et al. 2013), although even more specific challenges arise in the case of L0 research. I then discuss possible strategies to overcome these challenges and take advantage of the opportunities that may arise from such a position. Note that I do not only use 'L0 context' to refer to a context in which the languages are not part of the language repertoire of the researcher; I use this term even more broadly. Language can be seen as a door to a culture and carries social and cultural connotations. Culture indeed encompasses a set of values, attitudes, norms, and practices which are transmitted via language, and which guide people's behaviours according to what is common or appropriate to do, feel, or say in specific contexts. Therefore, unfamiliarity with a language usually also implies unfamiliarity with its related culture(s). Therefore, an 'L0 context' is used to refer to a context in which the researcher is not familiar with the language(s) and the culture(s) of the context.

Embarking in a research project in an L0 context

Rationale and context of the study

A tacit rule of thumb in quantitative research is that the researcher should have mastery of the local language in order to communicate efficiently with the participants and with the relevant institutions. While these pragmatic considerations are valid, they also limit the scope of research one can possibly carry out. This might contribute to the Western-centrism characterising the bulk of linguistic and psychological research, with the majority of conclusions being drawn based on Western samples, (wrongly) assuming that Western populations are representative of the whole-world population. This is very much the case in emotion research (Wierzbicka 1999, 2009). Reading the literature on emotion perception, I realised that only a handful of studies implemented stimuli with non-Western samples, and from those studies, none included both the verbal aspect of (emotion) communication and the paralinguistic or extra-linguistic aspect of communication, such as intonational, visual, or contextual cues. It seemed to me that I had identified an important gap in the literature, and I wanted to contribute by diversifying the populations investigated and the stimuli implemented. Additionally, I was interested in emotion perception by people who are in the process of getting to know a language and/or a culture. Therefore, China appeared to be a particularly relevant research context, as many people across the globe learn Mandarin as a foreign language. Moreover, many Chinese are raised in one of the Chinese language varieties and only learn Mandarin once they go to school. Seeking to help the fields of applied linguistics and psychology move beyond this Western-centrism and contribute to the debate about the universality of emotions, I designed a study focussing on Mandarin – although the sample consists of both 'Chinese' and 'non-Chinese' participants. Note that I use the terms 'Chinese' and 'non-Chinese' here as a communication shortcut to summarise more complex constructs. The Chinese context is characterised by the coexistence of various ethnicities and numerous linguistic varieties, including both Chinese language varieties of the Sinitic family and several minority languages, which do not belong to the Chinese subfamily. Most people in China grow up speaking one (or several) of these language varieties, depending on the region in which they grow up. However, the official language in the entire territory is *Putonghua,* 'the common language', which is based on the Mandarin dialects – hence the vernacular use of 'Mandarin' to refer to the standard language used in China. Putonghua is the official Chinese variety used in media, public service, and education, and taught to foreign language learners. In its written form, Putonghua can be transcribed to either simplified Chinese characters, mainly used in Mainland China, or to traditional Chinese characters, mainly used in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau and oversees communities. Additionally, multi-ethnic China can be viewed as a context in which many different cultural groups co-exist, sharing some identity and/or cultural characteristics on the national level but also demonstrating extensive variation at sub-national levels (Dryburgh 2016; Liu and Faure 1996). Thus, even the terms 'Chinese' and 'non-Chinese' can be seen as imprecise oversimplifications, depending on the scale one looks at. The closer one examines a societal group, the more details and complexity one discovers. However, in my opinion the art of social research is to be able to 'zoom in and out' to understand both the broad picture and the more fine-grained individualities, and quantitative and qualitative approaches can contribute differently to this overall goal. Groupings necessarily overlook more fine-grained variability, but are unavoidable to find patterns in groups defined according to certain parameters. On the other hand, qualitative approaches necessarily limit the generalisability of the findings, since the point is to represent complex individualities – although this does not necessarily prevent some sort of generalisability (see Leung 2015 for a discussion). In this study, Chinese and non-Chinese participants were (somewhat simplistically) distinguished based on their self-reported nationality. As Rich-Edwards et al. (2018) state,

> investigators have to compromise between competing goals of validity (by narrowing subject selection to increase the likelihood that findings are true for a specific population) and generalizability (by widening subject selection to make broad inference at the risk of overgeneralizing across true differences between groups). (427)

Positionality statement

In the primary research context, my linguistic incompetence was the most immediate aspect of my identity which I did not share with my participants. Beside language, culture is also an important aspect of identity and positionality. Culture is a complex, multi-layered concept which has been defined in various ways (Cohen 2009). Minkov and Hofstede (2012), for instance, claim the delineation of cultural values tends to follow national borders. It would then be straightforward to state that, as I do not share the same nationality as the participants from my primary research context, I do not share the set of 'learned and enduring pattern of beliefs, values, and behaviours that influences a large group of people' (Burgoon, Guerrero, and Floyd 2010, 69) in that country. China is often seen as a prototypical example of a collectivist culture, while Western cultures such as the one I identify with, are often seen as individualist. This would mean that my participants would share one set of (collectivist) beliefs, values, and behaviours, while I would have another set of (individualist) beliefs, values, and behaviours. However, as Aguilar (1981, 25) points out, '[a]ll cultures (including subcultures) are characterised by internal variation'. Tamis-LeMonda et al. (2008), for instance, demonstrate how the cultural value systems of individualism and collectivism, which have traditionally been used to differentiate broad cultural groups, actually dynamically coexist within societal groups. Thus, since cultures are fluid entities, it is also an oversimplification to state that, as a researcher, I do not share the cultural background of my participants as a whole.

Merriam et al. (2001) point out that culture or ethnicity interacts with religion, education, social class, or gender, thus highlighting the multi-layered and fluid nature of identity and belonging (Staunæs 2003). By recognising both sameness and otherness, the researcher becomes more aware of their position and potential privileges towards their participants and can thus acknowledge 'where [they] speak from and on behalf of whom' (Phipps 2019, 8).

Where I speak from is informed by my identity as a white, female, middle-class, university-educated, technologically informed, early-career scholar from Belgium with limited knowledge or experience of Chinese culture(s) – aside from traditional Chinese medicine as my parents are acupuncturists – and with (Belgian-)French as my L1, Dutch, English and German as LXs – with English being my dominant academic language, and Mandarin as an L0. Thus, I am 'linguistic[ally] incompetent' (Phipps 2013, 329), and unfamiliar with the culture(s) of my primary research context. Moreover, I don't have any intrinsic long-term interest in or personal connection with the research context. The motivation for this study rather emerged from a gap identified in the literature. As a researcher, I situate myself between applied linguistics and psychology, influenced by the epistemologies and ontologies of both fields. On the one hand, psychology assumes that reality can be understood in terms of controlled variables and that research should aim for control, rigour and (internal and external) validity. On the other hand, applied linguistics aims at understanding the complexity of lived experiences and boosting ecological validity to ultimately have clear and direct real-world applications of the research outcomes. As a researcher at the intersection of both fields, I had to accept to lose some control over the experimental conditions (compared to the typical lab experiments in psychology) to gain more ecological validity, representativeness of the sample, and granularity of the data compared to the traditional psychological studies into emotion. At the same time, this study represents individualities in a less complex manner and gives less voice to participants than most applied linguistic studies into emotion.

Challenges of researching in an L0 context

In this position of an L0 researcher, I identified three different sources of challenges.

Difficulties arising from unfamiliarity with the culture of the community

When researching in an L0 context, challenges may arise from unfamiliarity with the cultural norms, values, and practices of the investigated community. Lack of cultural familiarity may lead to lack of cultural sensitivity, a crucial aspect of cross-cultural research (Liamputtong 2008). When investigating a community, it is necessary – for ethical, epistemological and ecological-validity reasons – to communicate and behave according to what is appropriate in that space – e.g. ask culturally sensitive questions and ask them 'in a culturally relevant and explicit manner' (Dunbar, Rodriguez, and Parker 2002, 294). Cultural sensitivity is not only a crucial part of data collection, but data interpretation also requires consideration of where the participants 'speak from' – to extend Phipps (2019, 8) formulation. In other words, it is crucial to have a thorough understanding of the social, cultural, religious, historical and political context in which the participants' responses emerged (Niblo and Jackson 2004, 132). Furthermore, cultural unfamiliarity might entail a limited degree of shared realities and experiences between researcher and participants. This introduces a danger of 'othering' the participants, i.e. creating an oversimplified, stereotypical picture of the investigated community based on a removed perspective and disregarding the subjectivity of its individuals (Dervin 2012; Virkama 2010).

In the present study, cultural unfamiliarity engendered challenges during the development of the stimuli, the creation of the online questionnaire, and the recruitment of the participants. Although acted stimuli were chosen to ensure homogeneity and in order to control for different variables in the stimuli, the material still needed to be as natural and credible as possible. For each of the twelve stimuli, a different scenario was imagined, depicting a situation which could typically trigger a specific emotion for a Chinese person. Thus, it was important that the emotion-eliciting situations were plausible in a Chinese context, which is more challenging to determine when one is not familiar with the Chinese context. My lack of familiarity with the Chinese culture also caused challenges to develop my instrument. As I was unaware of the habits and practices of people in China when it comes to technology use, I was at first surprised by the high rate of early drop-outs, as many participants left the survey after having answered only the first few questions. I had to become aware of the fact that Chinese people mostly access the internet on their smartphones, often on public transport or outside. Hence, they may be very reluctant to type much text and are thus more likely to fill in a questionnaire entirely if it mainly involves multiple-choice questions rather than open ones.

Finally, lack of familiarity with practices and customs in China led to difficulties related to the recruitment of participants. Aiming for equivalency of samples in terms of age, education background, etc, I had to become aware of the socio-economic and demographic situation in different regions of China in order to target audiences appropriately. Moreover, I needed to discover how to formulate culturally appropriate requests for people to complete an online survey on a voluntary basis. Additionally, accessing sample groups also needs to happen in a culturally sensitive way (McArt and Brown 1990; as cited in Liamputtong 2008, 39). In China, for instance, people across all age groups extensively use the social media platform WeChat in many areas of daily life (e.g. messaging, online banking, gaming, ride hailing, food delivery, …). WeChat thus appeared to be a great way to spread a call for participants, as many people use this platform daily – although the use of such a media inevitably also excludes part of the population such as lower social classes. This also means that the survey needed to be compatible with the WeChat web browser as potential participants would directly open the link to the survey in the WeChat app. These practical considerations demonstrate the importance of knowing – or getting to know – how members of the investigated community live, behave, and communicate.

Difficulties arising from unfamiliarity with the members of the community

For my study, I only had few personal connections within the primary research context, namely my few Chinese colleagues and friends living in London. This means that I could not use my own network of family, friends, and acquaintances to motivate many people to take part in my study – which is usually a valuable source of participants when using snowball sampling. Moreover, participants may not trust the intentions of a researcher who has (virtually) no personal relation with the community, bringing additional challenges for the recruitment of participants and for the sustained involvement of the participants in the study. Being perceived as not belonging to the community might prevent members of the community from voluntarily taking time (or feeling comfortable enough) to share their experiences with the researcher because they are not seen as 'the same', or as 'family' (Pitman 2002, 285). As language can be a marker of social and cultural identity (e.g. Ochs 1993), a linguistically incompetent person can be perceived as 'not belonging' to the community (see also Selleck and Barakos, 2023). This might be particularly relevant for qualitative research, where the researcher directly interacts with the participants (see e.g. Ganassin and Holmes 2020), while the quantitative researcher may 'hide' themself behind an instrument and thus be less visible or identifiable by the participants. However, the quantitative researcher's identity might still permeate and affect the willingness of the community members to take part in the study. In my case, for instance, my linguistic incompetence was concealed from the participants due to the use of translations, but my name – written in Roman alphabet at the end of the call for participants and on the first page of the survey – was still a marker of my 'non-Chinese' identity.

Difficulties arising from unfamiliarity with the language of the community

First, linguistic incompetence prevents access to relevant literature in the target language, that is literature generated by scholars identifying as members of the research context in the language that potentially enables them to express themselves in the most genuine, complex, and complete way. Nowadays, English is the most used academic language (Gordin 2015; Stockemer and

Wigginton 2019) and can even take the form of an 'academic L1' for some researchers whose first language is not English. This enables knowledge sharing across linguistic barriers and constitutes one advantage of English as an academic language – although this practice also involves disadvantages linked with geolinguistic privileges (e.g. Soler 2019) and Anglocentrism in knowledge production and circulation (Zheng and Gao 2016). Obviously, much research is also disseminated in other languages. Thus, English as an academic language does not solve the issue of biased access to the literature all together, especially in the Chinese context, which was most relevant for the illustrative study discussed here. In fact, scholars from China have been encouraged by national and university policies to publish in English, leading to a current expansion of English-language publications in international journals (Xu 2020), yet Chinese-language journals still make up the majority of Chinese publications in humanities and social sciences (Li and Yang 2020). The Chinese situation reflects many other contexts, as much research is disseminated in a wide variety of languages, with Spanish, French, or German among the widest-used academic languages (Curry and Lillis 2018). Thus, depending on the context, an L0 researcher might miss a whole part of the literature directly written by members of the investigated community in the language which is the closest to their heart.

Second, linguistic incompetence leads to complexities when it comes to accessing participants (Birman 2005). In the case of my study, not being able to write the call for participants directly in Chinese convoluted the processes of approaching participants, motivating them to take part in the study, and answering their questions about it. Linguistic incompetence can also hinder communication between the researcher and the participants during the study itself, be it during the generation of the data – via interviews, survey, observations, etc. – or the interpretation of these data. When conducting research in an L0 context, the researcher thus has to rely on intermediaries to ensure communication with the participants. In the case of the present study, the call for participants and the online survey I developed in English – which were used for the non-Chinese sample – were then translated into traditional and simplified Chinese for the Chinese sample. Translatability and comparability of concepts is highly complex, especially when it comes to emotion terms. First, languages have been shown to vary both in terms of structural and conceptual organisation of their mental lexicon (Pavlenko 2008). Moreover, the acquisition of emotional concepts is embedded in a specific (socio)cultural environment, leading emotion terms to evoke a *culture-specific* conceptual representation (Jarvis and Pavlenko 2008). The translation of my materials was inevitable to investigate my research questions. However, due to my linguistic incompetence, I was not able to judge the extent to which these translations carefully considered linguistic and cultural differences in meaning and use.

Finally, given my linguistic incompetence, I was not able to judge the quality of the audio-visual stimuli – which were in Mandarin – nor was I able to make sure that the stimuli were exactly as I had imagined them. As a researcher, it was difficult to accept that I did not have full control over my materials since I could not understand them – while quantitative research is usually about conducting *controlled* experiments and about *controlling* for confounding variables and undesirable effects. To sum up, L0 researchers have to be able to accept that either their study cannot become reality, or they have to let go of the fantasy of being in total control.

Strategies to overcome challenges and opportunities of researching in an L0 context

My own experience suggests that, if one identifies a relevant gap in the literature, which motivates them to conduct relevant research in an L0 context, it is possible to (partly) overcome the 'knowledge gaps' described above, in ways which can even reveal unanticipated opportunities.

Involving knowledgeable collaborators

Given my unfamiliarity with the languages, cultures, and members of the community of my research context, I knew that I would not be able to conduct this study on my own. As a doctoral student, I did not have any resource to afford formal collaborators or assistants (see Reilly et al. 2023, for an illustration of collaborative team research). Instead, I found creative ways to set up small, informal collaborations with what I call 'knowledgeable collaborators'[3] – i.e. people with linguistic and cultural expertise in the research context – in order to help fill my knowledge gaps. As one part of my target sample consisted of adults from China with either Mandarin or another Chinese variant as an L1, calls for participants needed to be spread in Chinese. I was lucky to have access to a (small) network of friends and colleagues originating from China and living in London – where I was doing my PhD – who were willing to help me and who shared a language with me – i.e. LX English. I relied on those Chinese friends to translate very brief calls for participants in simplified and traditional Chinese to invite people to complete my online survey. Luckily, these informal collaborators were also willing to share these calls with their own professional and/or personal networks in China. The recruitment of Chinese participants was thus partly facilitated by my own limited network of informal Chinese collaborators. Moreover, these friends helped me better understand the Chinese context and increase my cultural sensitivity, which strengthened my sense of legitimacy to investigate this L0 context. For instance, they pointed me to WeChat and its various functionalities, via which I could reach many potential participants. They also helped me understand the way in which Chinese people typically use the internet, which had consequences for the types of questions people were willing to answer – namely closed questions rather than open ones, as they usually consume the internet on the go and are thus reluctant to type much text.

These knowledgeable collaborators were also crucial when it came to the development of the emotion-eliciting scenarios which the actor used for the situations depicted in the stimuli. As these scenarios needed to reflect situations which could typically trigger a specific emotion for a person in a Chinese context, I developed twelve scenarios which, in my own experience, could typically trigger a specific emotion in the environments that I am familiar with, and discussed them with my (Belgian, UK-based) supervisor. I then discussed each of these scenarios with two friends and colleagues who were born and raised in China – but were living in London – in order to make the scenarios plausible in a Chinese context. Note that we discussed the scenarios in English as a lingua franca to enable me to follow along and be involved in the discussions, but I also allowed (and encouraged) my two friends to code-switch to Mandarin as they were reflecting about the scenarios in order to limit any bias because of English use and the potential cultural frame-switching that language use can trigger (Luna, Ringberg, and Peracchio 2008; Ross, Xun, and Wilson 2002). Thanks to these discussions, we adapted the scenarios to reflect current situations which Chinese people may experience, and which may trigger those emotions in them. This not only mitigated for the potential biases of the proposed stimuli linked to my own identity and my own past experiences in Central Europe, but also led to an open discussion of these scenarios, inviting different perspectives. This would not have happened if I had developed scenarios for a Belgian context, for instance, where I would have solely relied on my own subjective quality judgment. Moreover, once the scenarios were ready, they were discussed (in English as a lingua franca) with the actor, a Chinese man who grew up in Beijing, who identifies as a speaker of Beijing-coloured Mandarin, and had lived in London for a year and a half at the time of the recording. Finally, given my linguistic incompetence and unfamiliarity with Chinese culture(s), I was unable to judge the quality of the final stimuli. Therefore, I designed a short online pilot study so that four L1 users of Mandarin could rate the credibility of both the scenario and the acting of the speaker via Likert-type scales. Thus, embracing my positionality and involving knowledgeable collaborators in the research process was primarily motivated by linguistic and cultural knowledge gaps, it also contributed to a move beyond my own subjective perspective, including other subjectivities in the research design process and creating an arguably less subjectively biased project.

Finally, I set up the English version of the online survey, which had to be translated to simplified Chinese and traditional Chinese. I enlisted two L1 Mandarin-speaking translators to create the versions of the survey. Translations were reviewed during collaborative discussions between the translators and myself (in English as a lingua franca, but with code-switching to Mandarin between the translators) until agreement was reached. These translations were ultimately reviewed by a third independent L1 Mandarin-speaking translator, with particular attention to concept 'equivalence' throughout the whole process in order to minimise ethnocentric biases (Bradby 2001). Importantly, all translators were well-informed about the design and the purpose of the research project. The third translator was also a researcher in applied linguistics working on emotion. Although translations allow cross-linguistic research, they inevitably bring variation in the participants' interpretation of the survey and in their responses. Translations are performed by individuals with their own subjectivity and can thus not be seen as a neutral research tool, which has to be considered during data analysis. While many (qualitative) scholars (e.g. Bradby 2001; Temple 1997; Temple and Young 2004) have raised awareness of the 'non-translatability of some concepts and their expression in a given language' (Holmes et al. 2013, 288) and the crucial role that translators and interpreters play as 'cultural brokers' in the process of knowledge generation and interpretation (Hennink 2008, 21), this is still too rarely acknowledged in quantitative studies.

Adopting suitable research methods

Besides involving knowledgeable collaborators, a second way to limit the difficulties linked with linguistic incompetence is to adopt suitable research methods. I heavily relied on a quantitative approach with most questions of the survey being closed questions. As I used the same multiple-choice questions in the English and in the Chinese version of the survey, the data collected were automatically coded by the survey software into numbers, which I could directly analyse in statistical software. Relying on multiple-choice questions is common practice in quantitative research as it highly facilitates data pre-processing before the statistical analyses. It is also practical for L0 researchers as it circumvents the need for language competence. Moreover, it was particularly relevant in my research context given the way in which Chinese people consume the internet. However, this also constrained the type of data collected and the possibility for participants to express themselves. In an attempt to limit the consequences of this choice, a few questions allowed participants to type in some text. For single-word answers in Chinese (for instance to indicate the dialect(s) participants spoke), I relied on the translation software *Google Translate* to translate those labels back into English, and ultimately converted them into numbers to be statistically analysed. Moreover, a few (optional) open-ended questions allowed participants to freely express themselves, without any a-priori restriction. This required translations of longer sentences. Thus, I again had to rely on the other subjectivities of translators to have access to the information shared by the participants. These translations were only informal, since I did not have resources to pay professional translators, but I could rely on a few 'knowledgeable collaborators' to provide translations for the fragments that I identified as possibly insightful based on the automated translations provided by *Google Translate.*

Besides the very limited qualitative data collected via the survey, a second type of qualitative data has been collected to allow some emic perspective. Interpreting quantitative results indeed implies a certain level of 'imposing' one's interpretation on the lived experiences of the participants. In my case, I also ran the risk of imposing my own perspective, informed by my past experiences in Central Europe, on data emerging from a different context. To limit this risk, a focus group interview was organised after the initial quantitative data analysis with eight Chinese informants studying in the UK, who all agreed to participate voluntarily and were either acquaintances of mine or acquaintances of acquaintances. These informants can also be seen as knowledgeable collaborators who, once again, gave me social, linguistic, and cultural insights through questions concerning their perceptions of differences in beliefs, customs, behaviour, and communication practices between their own provinces and other provinces in China as well as between China as an entity and other cultures in the world. In the examples of informal collaborations mentioned earlier, the knowledgeable collaborators offered assistance in the research process to enable data *collection* despite my linguistic and cultural knowledge gaps. In the case of this focus group, the knowledgeable collaborators helped in the formal, carefully organised setting of an interview and this became a source of secondary data to help me in the *interpretation* of the primary data – i.e. the quantitative results. Given my linguistic incompetence, this interview was not conducted in a Chinese language variety, but in English as a lingua franca. Thus, the challenges and opportunities arising in this setting are highly related to challenges and opportunities offered by research conducted in an LX (see Ganassin and Holmes 2020 as well as King, 2023; Selleck and Barakos, 2023; Polo-Pérz and Holmes, 2023). However, even during the English-mediated interview, I still identified, and was perceived by the informants (see below), as an L0 researcher since I was unfamiliar with the language(s) and culture(s) of the research context we were discussing.

Reflections on my positionality in the qualitative focus groups revealed two important opportunities offered by the interview I conducted as an L0 researcher. First, thanks to the use of LX English as a lingua franca, no dominant or minority variety of Chinese had to be agreed upon by the participants who came from different regions of China and thus had different varieties as L1. This contributed to a less political and dogmatic atmosphere for all informants, regardless of their origin and their linguistic repertoire, since linguistic varieties are regarded as more or less prestigious, more or less dominant, and linked with more or less positive connotations. However, the use of an LX may have led to linguistic difficulties to express certain ideas and created complex power dynamics because of different proficiency levels, both among the informants and between the informants and me (Rolland, Dewaele, and Costa 2020). Moreover, the use of an LX may have led to cultural frame-switching or may have created an emotional distance (Pavlenko 2005). However, this distant perspective can also be positive, as it can enable sharing ideas which would be too taboo or emotionally too loaded to be expressed in an L1 (Marcos 1976). Obviously, the voices represented in this English-mediated focus group interview are only the ones from Chinese people who were able to learn English and could afford moving to the U.K. to study there. Despite this limitation of the representativeness of the focus-group informants, coupling my perspective on the quantitative outcomes with theirs still reduced the subjective bias that I would have otherwise imposed on the data if I had been the only person involved in the interpretation of the results.

Second, in this qualitative part of the study, I felt, and was perceived by the informants, as an 'outsider'[4] of the research context due to my physiology, my name, and my linguistic incompetence. Due to our limited shared lived experiences and knowledge, informants did not fall into an 'illusion of sameness' (Pitman 2002, 285) towards me. Accordingly, informants gave very detailed answers, explaining aspects of their experiences in China which they would probably not have mentioned if I had been perceived as Chinese. However, once they had stated these (from their perspective) 'obvious' facts, they reflected on these facts and brought the discussion beyond these obvious statements, which ultimately led to richer and more articulated data. An example of such a situation is given in the excerpt below. Zhang, who comes from the North-Eastern province of Jilin, states the rather known fact that Chinese people ('we', 11:39) perceive differences in terms of culture and practices between people from the North ('us', 11:39) and people from the South of China. However, this leads the conversation towards a reflection on the strength of Chinese identity versus regional identity (12:00), which might not have emerged in the data otherwise.

Excerpt 1, Focus group, 31 May 2019 (pseudonymised).

11:39	Zhang	Sometimes, we differentiate us (sic) from the / people from the South and people from the North.
11:44	Luo	From the middle / middle part.
11:46	Zhang	Yeah. I think in general, we tend to divide the culture into two groups: people from the South and people from the North.
11:56	Researcher	Mmmm … I was getting to that. [smiles]
11:58	Zhang	Yeeees? [smiles, seems surprised that the researcher knows about this divide]
12:00	Zhang	

> But in my opinion, it's even like, within the people from the North, we are different, in some way. But this kind of regional identity is not as strong as the identity that I am a Chinese. Like the national identity is the strongest identity.

This fragment supports Merriam et al. (2001) argument that, in qualitative settings, being an insider is not always advantageous, because participants may take a common background with the insider researcher for granted. This may lead them to use a more cryptic discourse, which contains less complete explanations and lacks crucial references to (their own understanding of) important historical, political, or cultural events.

At the same time, I was an 'insider' of the academic circle in which we met, as they were all research students (or friends of theirs) in London. The fact that these knowledgeable collaborators knew me and/or each other necessarily influenced *what* they shared and *how* they shared it. Moreover, it may have contributed to create a specific atmosphere motivating uninhibited conversations, but these connections between participants and/or me may also have prevented the expression of specific opinions that were known (or thought) to not be shared by the rest of the group.

In summary, involving knowledgeable collaborators in the research process – which is possible when the researcher and the knowledgeable collaborator are lucky enough to share a language to communicate – and adopting a primarily quantitative research approach with sequential qualitative data collection can be strategies to help mitigate difficulties arising from unfamiliarity with the language(s) and culture(s) of the research context. Of course, not all challenges can be overcome easily and some limitations inevitably remain. For instance, linguistic incompetence does limit access to literature written by members of the investigated community, unless it is written in the academic lingua franca – i.e. English. In such case, this gap cannot be filled, but the researcher may carry out an informal search of the literature in the target language – e.g. using tools such as *Google Translate* – to compare the literature in English versus the target language, at least in terms of quantity of publications, and where possible even gaining a rough idea of the topic treated in these inaccessible publications.

Opportunities of positionality in quantitative research

This project illustrates the opportunities of embracing positionality in quantitative research and calls for more reflexivity among quantitative researchers. The argument originally developed from an instrumental approach to positionality as a way to identify 'knowledge gaps' and find means to potentially overcome them. However, positionality also instigates an ontological shift from a positivist to a postpositivist, more critical approach to research – be it quantitative or qualitative. This study still has remnants of the positivist tradition as I attempted to 'measure' emotion perceptions among many people across the world and analyse these perceptions as quantifiable 'variables', which can be correlated with other variables such as origin, language, age, etc. However, in my attempt to discover generalisable patterns in emotion communication, I adopted the postpositivist idea that research cannot be 'objective' as it is inevitably biased by the researcher's own perspective. By embracing subjectivity, one can uncover the positionalities unavoidably affecting the research from its design to its outcomes – as we are human researchers conducting studies with human participants. Becoming aware of these biases opens the opportunity to take them into account in the interpretation of the data, leading to findings that better represent reality. Adopting this approach involves communicating the results as one interpretation of a snapshot of reality, rather than as 'true facts'. Metaphorically, one could say that researchers are taking a picture of reality from a particular corner, with a particular lens, and at a particular moment. Taking positionality and reflexivity into account, postpositivist researchers accept that they would have captured a different aspect of reality if they had had taken the picture with a different lens, from a different corner, or a second later. All pictures are valid and informative representations – or indeed interpretations – of reality, but realising and acknowledging how the lens, the perspective or the moment of the snapshot influences the ultimate picture enables to create less biased knowledge.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented reflections on researcher positionality in the particular context of conducting research in an L0 environment – i.e. a context in which one is particularly unfamiliar with the language(s) and the culture(s) of the investigated community – with a (primarily quantitative) mixed-method approach. I have discussed a number of challenges which this particular position poses due to linguistic incompetence and unfamiliarity with social and cultural practices, which lead to what I have called 'knowledge gaps'. I have also offered illustrations of ways to (partially) overcome these complications based on my experience with such a research context, such as involving what I have called 'knowledgeable collaborators' in the research process and favouring quantitative methods, as they rely more on numbers and less on language than qualitative ones. Moreover, I have highlighted opportunities which this position offers. I do not claim that scholars who are unfamiliar with their research context can necessarily find strategies to conduct research in the same way as indigenous researchers would do. Depending on one's level of familiarity and shared background with a community and its context, one conducts research in different ways, which each have advantages and disadvantages. For instance, researching in an L0 context leads to a heightened risk of othering, potential issues with translations lacking equivalence, and inaccessibility to certain sources due to linguistic incompetence. However, research in an unfamiliar context also offers opportunities. Since an L0 researcher needs to rely on collaboration with knowledgeable collaborators, this pushes the researcher to move beyond their own subjectivity by involving several subjectivities in the process, which arguably decreases the individual subjective bias imposed on the project by the researcher. Moreover, the relative distance between the researcher and the context of investigation arguably decreases the familiarity bias which might prevent a familiar researcher from noticing nuances or particularities of the context (Bishop 2001; Gerrish 2003), which applies to both qualitative and quantitative research. Instead, the L0 researcher might notice different, unfamiliar aspects. The distance perceived by participants between the context and the researcher may also increase the granularity of the participants' responses, who may articulate their answers more clearly or more specifically if they do not assume shared experiences and shared knowledge with the researcher. Ultimately, daring to embark on such a project can broaden the scope of research in contexts which are usually underexplored, and lead to finer-grained reflections upon the researcher's positionality. This is an essential part of any research project, but is still very much lacking, especially in quantitative paradigms where positivistic approaches prioritise and idealise objectivity and ontological realism. Reflecting on one's positionality can feel particularly unusual and uncomfortable for quantitative researchers who are supposed to be 'absent' from the research outcomes, but doing so enables to acknowledge their inevitable presence in and impact on the research process and results. In this sense, positionality and reflexivity show the limit of positivism in social sciences, which contrary to natural sciences, deal with humans as object of study. Thus, intricate interrelations between the investigator and the object of investigation are unavoidable. Therefore, positionality calls for a shift from a positivist to a postpositivist approach to quantitative research. It can be seen as a way to generate findings that are closer to reality, since being aware of one's (otherwise unacknowledged) influences on the research outcomes may help teasing apart the effect of the investigated variable and the effect of the researcher's presence.

These considerations emerged from this research project due to my particular position as an L0 researcher, which made my knowledge gaps particularly salient and undeniable. However, I believe that the considerations discussed in this paper can be relevant for any research project, be it qualitative or quantitative, as the researcher should always reflect on one's positionality, on what they do or do not share with their participants, in order to inform the design and the interpretation of the results of the project. Ultimately, aided by reflections on and engagement with my L0 status, I was able to bring (what I regard as) a valuable contribution to the study of emotion perception based on an investigation of perceived emotions in Mandarin … and I still cannot count up to three in Mandarin …

Notes

1. Note that quantitative and qualitative research are here artificially used as a dichotomy for the sake of the argument, although both are combinable – e.g. mixed methods – and not always clearly distinguishable – e.g. qualitative studies may involve some quantitative analysis.
2. This study has received ethics approval from the Birkbeck School of Science, History and Philosophy.
3. No parallel is intended with the distinct notion of „knowledge collaborators' used in education research (e.g. deLeon-Carillo 2005)
4. Note that the insider/outsider discussion goes beyond the scope of this article but see e.g. Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009) and Merriam et al. (2001) for further discussions on the insider/outsider status in research.

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