Narrating language life and death – Responsibility management in a research interview

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The study focuses on a Sámi-Norwegian bilingual speaker’s engagement and his negotiation of language revitalisation activities during a research interview.

The informant’s local Sámi community has experienced a widespread engagement in Sámi linguistic and cultural revitalisation. But in spite of a successful vitalisation of Sámi culture, linguistic revitalisation only proceeds in small steps.

Against this background, the case study shows how one informant employs multiple means of meaning making to negotiate personal and common attitudes and engagement: the speaker’s own and others’ responsibility for the maintenance of Sámi is negotiated and linguistically construed in relation to roles (the interviewee and others within the community, the researcher and the informant as insider, outsider, recipients, actors), identities (ethnic, local, professional), and attitudes. By these means, the speaker justifies the importance of his decision to use the formerly stigmatised Sámi language in the community, and he claims moral support for ways of action that he sees fit in the local sociolinguistic situation. Narrative is employed as an artful and elaborate means to exemplify and emotionally underline the importance of action. In his narrative performance, he points out parallels between a dramatically performed 3rd person story, the community’s life situation, and the interview setting.

When we take into account the setting and the goal of the conversation as a research interview, we receive an amazing picture of the linguistic interaction. The analysis shows how the interviewee draws upon the meaning making resources of the whole situation to underpin his ideas (e.g. interacting with the presence of the tape recorder: ”You can record it on tape. It’s not more than that.”). Using the possibilities and resources of both storytelling and the research interview as a genre, the informant also appeals to the responsibility of both the researcher and science in general.

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