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Listening, languages and the nature of knowledge and evidence: what we can learn from investigating 'listening' in NGOs

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Abstract

This chapter brings together reflections on listening in multiple languages from the field of development aid, ethnography and from academic research in general. It draws on an AHRC-funded research project that sets out to investigate listening in the work of international UK-based development NGOs, who tend to present themselves as listening attentively to the voices of those they wish to empower. However, the aid field is hugely complex, with a variety of actors that require NGOs to 'listen' to them. By interrogating the listening of NGOs, this chapter leads us to reflect on our own listening as researchers, and makes us aware of the gaps in academic reflections on listening and the role of languages in listening processes. It proposes that allowing dialogue between researcher and researched, and critically re-examining our role as researchers can enhance conceptual and methodological developments for those working in multilingual settings.

Introduction

In today's globalised world, international development NGOs operate in highly complex spaces, crossing geographical, linguistic and cultural borders and involving a large variety of actors. The concept of listening has been increasingly used in NGOs' discourse in order to emphasise that these organisations listen to those they want to empower. However, NGOs have been criticised for listening primarily to their donors, who as purse-string holders are in powerful positions to set the development agenda and to request particular forms of evidence from NGOs that demonstrate impact and results.

This chapter draws on a research project called 'The Listening Zones of NGOs: Languages and cultural knowledge in development programmes', which sets out to explore the concept of listening and the role of languages in the listening of international UK-based development NGOs.[1] The chapter uses the specifics of this project in order to reflect on how we ourselves as researchers listen. It aims to make two contributions. Firstly, it aims to contribute to development studies and the development field in general by introducing a concept of listening that is more sensitive to the use of multiple languages. English has been the lingua franca of international aid for many years, and reflections on how language affects listening are often absent in discussions on development, particularly since donors do not ask about languages. Secondly, by observing NGOs' approaches to listening in their complex working environments and by reviewing existing academic research, the chapter identifies a gap in academic reflections on listening. The chapter aims to introduce a hermeneutic model that is helpful to understand the tensions in the researcher's own 'listening zone', and the role of languages within this zone.

NGO listening

Today's aid field is densely populated by a variety of actors, including supranational organisations such as the UN, international and national NGOs, and an expanding civil society in the developing world. Working in this complex set-up, several NGOs have become interested in how they are perceived by the communities and beneficiaries with whom they work, and they have carried out self-reflective projects to gain better insight into this. These projects are often framed in terms of 'listening'. For example, Médecins Sans Frontières carried out a 'perception project' in 2005 with 'the goal of giving voice to the people living in the areas where MSF provides medical relief' (Abu Sada, 2005: 2). Equally, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) marked its 90th anniversary with an opinion survey and in-depth research as part of its 'Our World. Your Move.' campaign, aiming 'to gather views and opinions, and to give a voice to those who had been adversely affected by armed conflict' (IPSOS & ICRC, 2009: 6). By far the largest listening exercise was initiated in 2005 in the Listening Project, run by the CDA Collaborative Learning Project group. The project ran for several years, and over 400 'Listening Team members' from around 125 organisations were involved in gathering and analysing evidence. The final report, published as 'Time to listen: Hearing people on the receiving end of international aid' (Anderson et al., 2012) captured the voices of over 6,000 people. At the basis of the project was a 'growing awareness that significant changes are needed to improve the effectiveness and accountability of international assistance', and the book argues that 'the cumulative voice of people who live in aid-recipient societies provides a powerful (…) case for more radical and systemic change in the aid system' (2012: i).

Criticisms on the privileged position of international, Western NGOs, who speak, advocate and design projects on behalf of communities in developing countries, are increasingly mainstream (Bond, 2015). In this climate, 'listening' seems to have become a way to address the difficulties posed by traditional accountability frameworks used by NGOs, which have been recognised as 'mechanistic' and 'technical' (Bonino et al., 2014; Buchanan-smith et al., 2015). 'Listening', on the other hand, is seen as 'key to dialogue and changing the relationship between agencies and affected people' (Buchanan-Smith et al., 2015). Just as 'participation' in the 1980s was conceived as the key to radical social transformation and quickly became part of the mainstream development discourse (Leal, 2010), 'listening' could be seen as a new buzzword in development, a concept and a method that is heralded as the new panacea.

Despite the relative frequency with which the concept of listening has been used in development discourse, the NGO field lacks any clear definitions or reflections on what listening is, how we do it, and what impacts on our listening. Although 'listening' may sound like a clear-cut and simple act, with phrases such as 'just listen' coming to mind, international NGOs' listening is hugely complex, involving a set of different relationships – on the ground, in the UK, or virtual – between NGOs, donors, and local people, who generally speak different languages. Teasing out some of the complexities involved, we could say that the listening exercises mentioned above share a number of characteristics.

Firstly, listening tends to be framed in terms of accountability, designed as part of a culture of monitoring and evaluation (Buchanan-smith et al., 2015). Listening exercises are usually short-term and forward looking, with the underlying assumption that listening will lead to future efficiency. The focus on experts, who are deployed for short periods of time to a variety of locations, and the high staff turn-over in the aid sector further contribute to a loss of institutional memory, and enhance the focus on the present (National Audit Office, 2008: 28).

Secondly, listening is framed programmatically, and increasingly takes place in donor terms. In congruence with the boost in NGOs' income from government funding, NGOs' listening has increasingly been geared towards large powerful donors since at least the 1990s. More recently, this trend in 'upward' accountability has been countered by more emphasis being placed on 'downward' accountability towards the communities that NGOs purport to serve (Banks et al., 2015; Crack, 2013). Yet despite their efforts to strengthen civil society, NGOs face significant constraints in a climate where they tend to work on large short-term funded projects, and where the emphasis is increasingly on 'payment by results' (Bond, 2015: 13). Listening is often a one-way process, where NGOs extract the knowledge they need but do not seem to give much back.[2]

Thirdly, there is an assumption that English is the language to listen in, and to listen to, which may be linked to the prevalent conception of British policymakers that there is a positive connection between English and development (Coleman, 2011; Djité, 1993). English is used as the main working language in the sector, yet rural communities often do not speak English. The multilingual realities of these communities in Africa, Asia, and Latin-America are very different from those of the West - where most major aid agencies have their roots - yet their linguistic make-up is often not taken into account when planning development interventions.

Fourthly, the reliance on English brings with it many power imbalances. The meta-discourse of development mainly consists of buzzwords in English, and the meaning of much of the development jargon is unclear (Cornwall & Eade, 2010). Many concepts that arose in an Anglophone framework are difficult to translate, often existing as loanwords in other languages. This is the case for some of the most central concepts of the aid field: Robinson's (1996: 242) study of language and development in African rural communities showed that when speaking their local language, respondents 'could not readily relate development intervention to their daily social intercourse' and saw development as a 'remote concept'.

The above discussion emphasises that despite NGOs' rhetoric on listening and participation, listening is still largely practiced as a top-down process, in a set-up that makes it difficult for people to speak and be heard in their chosen language. Participation as a process is not considered linguistically, and language diversity is not seen as an integral part of NGOs' working ideologies and methodologies. Despite the intentions of listening exercises to be open-minded and enter the field without preconfigured agendas, it remains difficult to listen outside of dominant structures and existing power relationships. The next section turns to academic research on listening that may be useful to come to a concept of listening that is inherently linked to language, culture and power relationships, and identifies which gaps there may be in our own current understanding of listening.

Academic contributions to 'listening'

Academic research on listening has been conducted from a variety of backgrounds. Wolvin (2010: 7-30) identifies three main conceptualisations of listening: the physiological (how physiologically a message is received), the psychological (how we construct meaning out of the message) and the sociological (how we respond to the message; the situational nature of response being socially and culturally conditioned). Despite a growing body of research, there has been relatively little attention to listening as opposed to speaking, as exemplified in traditional communication models that tend to largely overlook the receiver. Yet studies suggest that adults spend 40% of their time awake listening (Wolvin & Coakley, 1996: 6), and listening scholars have argued that 'a theoretical foundation for understanding the message receiver, the listener, is critical to an integrated theory of communication' (Wolvin, 2010: 7). Efforts have been made to develop a listening theory particularly since the 2000s, after a review of listening research reported that the work on listening lacked a solid foundation (Wolvin, 2010: 8). A summer school from the International Listening Association provided the definition 'Listening is the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages' (1995, in Wolvin, 2010: 9). Wolvin (2010: 9) points out that such a definition effectively organises the physiological, psychological, sociological, and communicative perspectives on listening processes.

In the context of NGOs and our research project, our interest is in a sociological definition of listening, in which we can include the various instances of listening to multiple speakers or stakeholders in multiple spaces and at various moments in time, and where we can include a focus on responses that occur as a consequence of listening taking place. The listener's feedback is an essential part of the communication function of any interaction (Wolvin, 2010: 15). However, much of the research that has looked at listening from a communications perspective has interpreted listening as an individual act, having been heavily influenced by psychology. Purdy (2000) has argued that the primary problem with such a cognitive approach is that the study of listening is focused on the individual, and implies that the listener alone determines, or constructs, the meaning of what is being said. He calls for a view of listening as a community affair, where it is part of 'an inter-active (even multi-active) process, a field, involving other individuals, social and cultural forces, language (or more broadly human expression), and a physical environment, at least' (Purdy, 2000: 48). Such an approach transcends the focus on the cognitive and interpretive level and allows a discussion of the broader experience of listening and communication, defining listening as a social, political and cultural act that is essentially about connection and relationship (Purdy, 2010: 38).

This interpretation is useful to get a better grasp at the different actors and issues that affect NGO listening. The notion of relationality is one that is particularly important, and that has been explored in more depth in the field of development and humanitarian studies, albeit not specifically from a listening perspective (Eyben, 2006; Smirl, 2015). In the context of the evidence and results agenda, researchers have emphasised that much of the evidence collected in the aid field draws on personal and informal communication between staff, local partners and communities, which was built upon strong relationships with the local environment and people (Roche, 2015: 83). Furthermore, Smirl (2015) has argued that the key position of the aid worker in collecting data and in interpreting and representing local knowledge is central to how 'the field' is perceived at home, yet the experience of the aid worker has not been problematized by existing theories. This draws into question 'global claims regarding the figure of the "beneficiary" and the relationship between donor and recipient' (2015: 4).

This relationship, as well as that between the global North and South more generally, is further reflected on by Dutta (2014) who questions how we listen to those 'on the margins'. Linking listening research to postcolonial and subaltern studies in a 'culture-centered' approach, he argues that neoliberal frameworks of global governance have responded to growing critiques on top-down structures 'through the co-optation of the languages of listening and participation to further consolidate power in the hands of the global power structures' (2014: 75). In the context of social change, it is often the dominant structures that call for listening, responding to their own goals and agendas. Therefore, he argues, it is necessary 'to deconstruct existing frameworks of communication theorizing' and to use the concept of listening 'as a meta-theoretical frame for continually opening up opportunities for the presence of the other in the discursive space, and simultaneously interrogating reflexively what it means to listen' (2014: 70).

These claims recall statements from others in ethnography and sociology. Clifford, for example, in the introduction to the seminal collection of essays *Writing Culture* (1986), touches on the tendency of the West to rely on 'visual' evidence, and considers that much had been said about the ethnographic gaze, 'but what of the ethnographic ear?' (1986: 12). Similarly, from sociology, Back (2007) asks questions on the legitimacy of voices heard in society, and makes a claim for a more ethical, global sociology that pays 'attention to the fragments, the voices and stories that are otherwise passed over or ignored' (2007: 1). In a world that is increasingly focused on being heard and gaining attention, e.g. through reality TV and political rallies, Back argues that sociology should play a role in 'returning our ears to the world', to 'hear those who are not listened to', and to challenge the claims placed on the meaning of events (2007: 1, 7).

These reflections lead us to think in more depth about our processes of knowledge construction and subjectivity as researchers, and how these affect our own listening. The overview on listening research has made evident that there is a wide variety of interpretations on listening, but perhaps more importantly, it has uncovered similarities in the challenges that NGOs and researchers are faced with in today's global world, where there is an ever-pressing need for more and faster information, knowledge and evidence. The following section will follow Dutta's (2014) suggestion to use the concept of listening as a meta-theoretical frame, in this case to draw parallels between NGO and researcher listening.

The researcher's Listening Zone

In this chapter, I conceptualise the spaces that we listen in as listening zones, in which I understand 'zone' in the sense of Apter's 'Translation Zone' (2006): as a geographical space in which only certain things are translated; as a political zone, in which governments and institutions are involved in setting the agenda for language and translation policy; and as a psychological zone which bears witness to the psychological repercussions of language and translation policy and practice. It is a theoretical mainstay that is broader than a single nation or language. As such, the 'Listening Zone' is a particularly helpful concept to map the zone as constructed by all the actors involved, by organisational and individual values, traditions, etc., and to gain a better understanding of the role that languages and cultural knowledge play in constructing the zone.

Understanding listening as a broader and longer event than one-on-one dialogue (Purdy, 2000), we could visualise the researchers' Listening Zone of our project as in Figure 1. This visual and systematic representation helps to draw attention to a number of features of our specific project and of academic listening more generally. Our research project is collaborative both in and outside academia, working together with INTRAC (the International NGO Training and Research Centre, Oxford) and focusing on the practices of four international UK-based NGOs, i.e. Oxfam GB, Save the Children UK, Tearfund, and Christian Aid. As researchers in this project, we are listening to a variety of data sets, including archives, interviews with UK-based and in-country staff, and data collected through ethnographic case study observations. In parallel with the discussion above on NGO listening, I focus here on the four issues that were identified as characteristic of listening by NGOs.

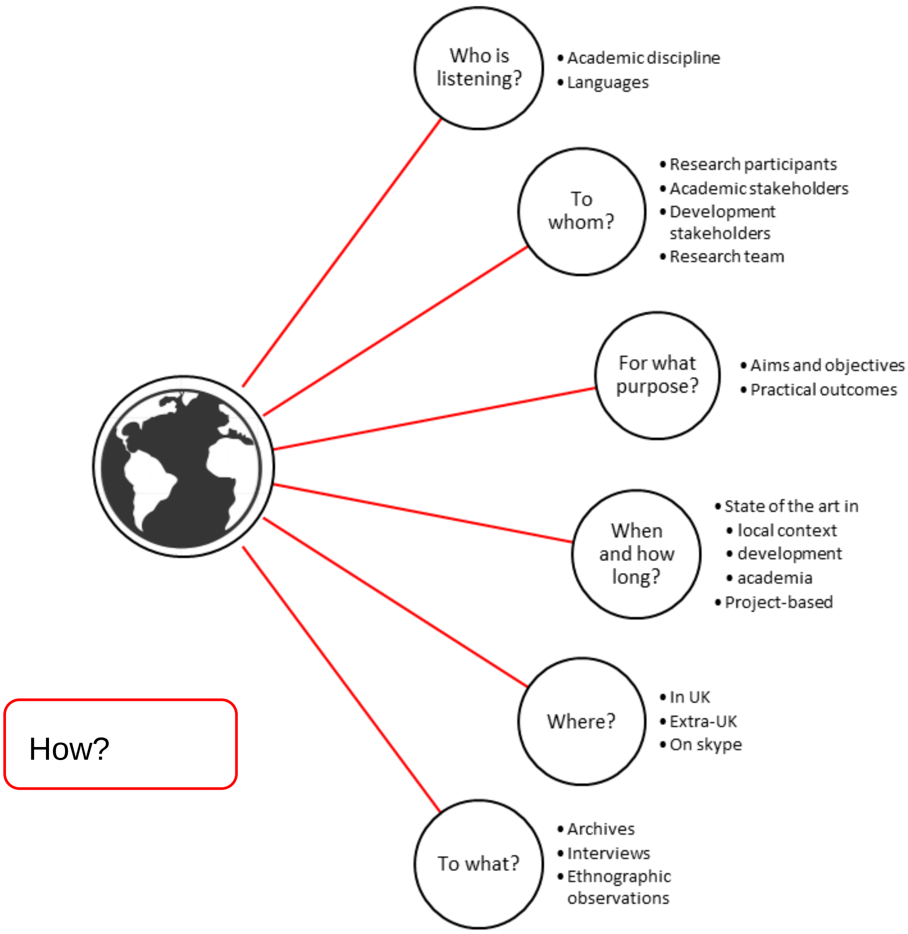

Figure 1. Researchers' Listening Zone in the Listening Zones of NGOs project

Temporality

Both NGO work and academic research are often project-based and limited in time, but time-scales can differ greatly. Our AHRC-project runs for three years, yet our partners in the aid field have asked us on a number of occasions for early results. Differences in what counts as valid evidence and data have emerged as well. For example, our research project includes historical material, which is unusual for NGOs. Policy discussions on humanitarian and development interventions tend to be ahistorical and apolitical. Rather, they focus on aspects such as the transformative power of technology and do not recognise the messiness of previous processes of change (Davey & Scriven, 2015: 114). Yet despite NGOs' preoccupation with presentism and the simple uses of history in the form of 'lessons learned' toolkits, many of the NGO staff we have spoken to were keen to find out more about their organisation's histories. The poor institutional memory of aid organisations has sporadically been commented on by the aid field as giving rise to a lack of knowledge (Abu Sada, 2005: 32; National Audit Office, 2008: 28). This presents an opportunity for our research team to argue for the value of history to challenge habitual ways of thinking and to contribute to a more reflective attitude to change (Davey & Scriven, 2015: 113).

To what? Accountability and evidence

The current academic climate with its emphasis on research impact increasingly resembles that of NGOs, where evidence of results and positive impact are key to obtaining future funding, and opportunities to report failure are sparse. Academia's impact agenda and the development field's preoccupation with the results and evidence agenda can historically both be seen 'as part of the "new public management" paradigm, modelled on corporate sector practices designed to maximize shareholder profit and eschewing any explicit ideological commitment' (Eyben & Guijt, 2015: 10). Just like NGOs became increasingly accountable to their donors over time ('upward accountability'), it is frequently the funder who sets the agenda in present-day UK academic research, for example through issuing calls for research bids on specific topics, such as the Global Challenges Research Fund. This means that our interests as researchers change, as we look for different partners in order to produce particular forms of knowledge and to ensure impact outside of the academic world. The increased emphasis on 'upward accountability' in academic research thus also brings with it a need for 'downward accountability', for example the need to design outputs that are of specific relevance to non-academic partners. The emphasis on impact raises questions on what counts as evidence, on who sets the agenda, and particularly on academic autonomy and creativity. In what way are the voices of non-academic stakeholders becoming more important? How does emphasising impact change the way we listen as researchers? Whilst it has been widely accepted in ethnographic research that the researcher's personal subjectivity plays a role throughout the research process, the increased emphasis on non-academic impact adds a new dimension to discussions on the researcher's subjectivity, ideology, and positionality (Canagarajah, 2006; Madison, 2004).

In what language?

The researchers in our project as well as the funder are part of the UK academic system, which means that our research team functions in a predominantly English-speaking working environment. Many of our research interviews are set in the UK, are held in English, and are spiked with development buzzwords like 'accountability', 'monitoring and evaluation' and 'feedback'. During the fieldwork phase, we will be confronted with the same issues that UK-based NGOs deal with when they work on the ground. We will need to rely on language intermediaries (which may be local staff members or someone from the local community), and we may encounter some of the difficulties that NGOs themselves face when aiming to translate a development discourse that originated in an Anglophone, Western context, into local languages and cultures.

The prevalence of English also has an impact on what voices we hear in academic literature on development. Even though counter-theories and approaches to the West's dominating views on development have been around at least since the 1950s, it remains difficult for other-language authors to enter mainstream development debates unless their work is translated into English. The absence of alternative voices from developing countries has recently been addressed by Shi-xu et al. (2016), who have aimed to introduce research on development and globalisation from Africa, Asia and Latin America into contemporary debates, in an effort to outline 'a culturally conscious and critical system of researching development' (2016: 2). The difficulty in exchanging knowledge concerns both directions: knowledge produced in English, or other major European languages, does not necessarily make its way into local rural languages (Shi-xu, 2016). This needs to be taken into account for academic research outputs: which audiences are we trying to reach? What other languages than English do we need to and want to speak and publish in in order to share what we have learned?

Through which frameworks / disciplines?

The number of partners that academics collaborate with in the present-day research climate is on the increase, which is in parallel with the increased amount of actors involved in delivering development projects. Our own AHRC-project is characteristic of a new 'mode' of interdisciplinary research in which real world issues of social, technical or policy relevance provide the starting point, involving both academic and non-academic stakeholders (Rampton et al., 2015: 21). Moreover, the researchers in our project are from different disciplines (cultural studies, international relations, translation studies, etc.) and from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. These differences give rise to lively discussions on the research topic, methods, theories and what counts as knowledge. A high tolerance for ambiguity and the feeling of discomfort are needed to make the project work.

These differences also give rise to the need to speak different languages, including that of development. In order for our project to succeed, the research team needs to engage in conceptual and theoretical discussions not just with one another but also with the NGOs that are at the core of the project, an issue that was highlighted by the NGOs themselves. In order to collect meaningful data, as well as to increase the interest in the project among aid workers, NGO staff advised us that we need to clearly frame our research and our interview questions on language and cultural knowledge in their rhetoric, i.e. that of accountability, monitoring and evaluation, and power relationships. NGO workers are busy and are under enormous pressure to deliver results, and failing to link our research interests with theirs would deny us access to the organisations. These considerations again raise questions about academic autonomy and research ethics: if we are listening to our partners to see what *they* find interesting - in order to be able to access interviewees, their institutional environment, and field sites - does our work not to a large degree resemble that of consultants hired by NGOs to do research on the questions that they want answered? Robinson-Pant (2001) recounts how she was asked by a Western NGO to develop a literacy policy, but found that '*Designing and conducting* ethnographic research in a literacy policy context is far more problematic than *making use of* ethnographic findings from academic research projects for informing policy' (as quoted in Canagarajah, 2006: 163).

The emphasis on interdisciplinary research and the co-production of knowledge is a relatively new phenomenon in social sciences, and not much attention has been paid to how stakeholders influence researchers' listening and processes of knowledge production. The above discussion had laid bare the many parallels between the challenges faced by NGOs and academics, and calls for renewed attention in academia to our listening practices, our ethical position, and our autonomy. Moreover, it has raised issues around our own use of language, and the taken-for-grantedness of using English when disseminating research results. Seeking to become more reflective about our own listening and that of NGOs, the next section turns to linguistic ethnography to further reflect on the relationship between language and society.

What linguistic ethnography can bring

Although there has been considerable exchange between the fields of anthropology and development, to the extent that ‘development anthropology’ is seen as a research field in itself (Lewis & Mosse, 2006; Olivier de Sardan, 1995), studies in this area do not tend to pay much attention to the ethnography of communication. This section turns to research that has been conducted at the interface of linguistics and ethnography that may be of help in coming to a more sensitive concept of listening and of language. Rampton et al. (2015) draws our attention to the idea that language and social life are mutually shaping. The dynamic co-construction of meaning through the interplay of language and social life calls for a closer examination of language-in-society (2015: 23). This includes both paying attention to small-scale, everyday situations as well as scaling things up into broader understandings of social life in a globalised world. Some of the concepts that researchers use to investigate and theorise the relationship between language and society can help in challenging the characteristics of NGO listening.

Firstly, a concept of listening that emphasises the dynamic nature and situatedness of interaction reveals the relativity of meaning-making. As Blommaert and Jie describe, the ‘patterns of interpretations are never fixed (…) there is both a processual and a historical dimension to every act of language-in-society’ (2010: 9). This challenges NGOs’ focus on the present and on short-term projects, with experts being seconded overseas for short periods and a loss of institutional memory. It underlines the importance of relationality, continuance, and history.

Secondly, understanding language and listening as constituting patterns, expectations of regularity, and the building blocks of institutions is valuable to counter the focus on quantitative and written evidence in the development field, which essentially forms part of a Western paradigm in which the truth of vision has dominated. It challenges the frameworks in which NGOs listen, particularly the Anglophone metadiscourse of development, which also shapes the forms that NGOs will use to listen in as part of their monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

Finally, an understanding of language as not fixed in time and space but as linked to individual speakers, each with their own personal, cultural, and socio-political background and history, will raise better awareness of the complexity of monolingual and multilingual meaning-making processes. This makes us more conscious of the fact that listeners come to particular interpretations through linking what is said to what they as individuals know and expect. Moreover, it also allows us to give more consideration to the language choices of individuals and institutions, which are linked to ideology and issues of power. In the words of Robinson, ‘development will not be owned by local people until they are able to discuss it amongst themselves and with outsiders without the barrier of someone else’s language’ (1996: 260).

Conclusion: a language-sensitive concept of listening

This chapter has reflected on the concept of listening, and the role of languages in the listening, in the context of development, ethnography and academia. It has aimed to make a number of contributions. Firstly, in development, the chapter has moved away from a concept of listening that is linked to a neoliberal model of knowledge and evidence, where listening is contractual, standard, and quantifiable, and geared towards the donor. Rather than interpreting listening as an inward-looking process linked to specific projects, I have introduced an understanding of listening as linked to diversity and situatedness, where attention is given to the role of language, culture, and tacit power relationships. This interpretation also challenges the labelling of actors in development as binary categories, such as those of ‘donors’ vs. ‘beneficiaries’.

Secondly, the visualisation of our ‘listening zone’ as researchers has laid bare some of the tensions in current-day academic listening, which are comparable to those of NGOs: the tendency to listen project-based; the emphasis on impact, evidence, and interdisciplinary work, which in its turn increases the power of other stakeholders; and the predominance of English and absence of reflexive practices on working multilingually.

Lastly, the chapter argued that the increased emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration, both within and outside of academe, has consequences for our methodologies and positionality, and how we as researchers listen. NGOs have been criticised for listening primarily to their donors ('upwards accountability') and not as much to their beneficiaries. This chapter has raised our awareness that a similar assertion could be made for academic research that is highly focused on creating impact, and that may therefore heavily emphasise listening to one particular group of stakeholders. Concerns about the effect on academic autonomy and creativity due to the increased role of impact have previously been raised (Gray, 2015; Martin, 2011; Smith et al., 2011), but little attention has been paid to research ethics and the implications for the researcher's subjectivity. On the other hand, the chapter has also shown that collaborating with our academic partner has led to new forms of knowledge and understanding of their but also of our own practices. Allowing dialogue on their expectations and understandings has thus also meant a new way forward. What is essential then in current-day academia is a critical re-examination of the role of the researcher in social sciences and ethnographic research designs and methodologies in order to able to continue to produce high-quality and ethical research with valid results.

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[2] See for example the ‘Time to Listen’ project, which concludes ‘If we did nothing else to improve the aid system, the very act of adding occasions and opportunities for aid providers to listen to people with whom we work, and to let them know that their ideas and judgments are valued, would by itself bring a fundamental shift in the relationship of aid providers with aid recipients (…) We should, in short, listen to what people say. To do so is fascinating; it is also helpful. And it is the responsible and respectful thing to do.’ (Anderson et al., 2012: 146-147).