

UNRAVELLING THE METHODOLOGICAL MESH OF WRITTEN MATERIALS

LAKOMÄKI, SAMI & LATVALA, PAULIINA & LAURÉN, KIRSI (eds.) 2011: *Tekstien rajoilla: Monitieteisiä näkökulmia kirjoitettuihin aineistoihin.* [Along Textual Borders. Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Written Materials.] Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura. 356 pp.

This article collection brings together researchers from social sciences, history, cultural and folklore studies who work with written materials, ranging from archives to internet discussions. The book offers multiple perspectives on current questions that apply not only to the considered texts but to all socio-cultural studies, such as: What is the relation between the narration and the 'reality'? Who is telling the stories? What kind of audiences are entangled in them? What are the power relations in the research process? Many of the authors reflect especially on the position of a researcher and discuss how this affects the interpretation and thus the results of the study. Such a discussion is well needed and the way the editors have outlined the book has produced an interesting combination of related viewpoints. The collection is divided into four sections with emphasis placed on power relations, body and affectivity, questions of privacy and publicity, and the temporal dimensions of the texts and interpretations. The structure works well and offers intriguing dialogues to the reader. The final article written by Jyrki Pöysä weaves together the strings unravelled by other authors, by considering the interconnection of temporal positions and interpretations.



Look who is reading

In their articles, Hanna Mikkola and Annamari Iranto especially, have turned their focus on the researcher as the reader and the interpreter of the texts. With the methodology of feminist stylistics – or feminist close reading as she terms it – Mikkola looks at the texts of dugout traditions as the production of gendered realities by asking, for instance: can the gendered reader be interpreted from the texts; are the characters gendered, and what do these characters tell us about the gendered world the writer lives in at the moment and in the particular situation that the writing has taken place in. She perceptively reflects her position as a feminist researcher with her own gender values which sometimes conflict with the writers' views on men and women. In addition, Mikkola introduces the methods of her analysis, which in turn renders her study process even more transparent to the reader. I think that this part of the process is still too often neglected in socio-cultural studies, and I would gladly see these essential starting points of feminist research applied in all research. Whilst Mikkola openly discusses the

emotions that the reading of the texts has aroused in her, Annamari Iranto makes such emotions the centre of her discussion.

Iranto's article is an important investigation on how emotions in written material form a dialogue with the researcher's own emotions, and how this ultimately affects whose emotions the researcher is writing about. She considers the methods used in the study of emotions, particularly in the feelings of injustice, by scrutinizing the letters received by Hannu Karpo, a TV-reporter whose program in 1983–2007 concentrated on cases where the Finnish citizens were believed to have been treated unfairly. By introducing a highly emotional example in which a woman is writing on behalf of her husband who through making several bad choices ended up dying, Iranto picks up the visible emotions of the text. Furthermore, she discusses the emotions she herself went through while reading the text and asks how these emotions might be reconstructed into the interpretations and whether the researcher is entitled to make value judgements through her analysis. Finally, Iranto argues that by positioning her/himself and her/his methods clearly, a researcher is permitted to question the values which arise from the material. She also challenges researchers to make unexpected experiments in their analysis, to use resistant reading and to even construct conflicting interpretations.

The ethics of methodological choices

A methodological book is never a good one without considering the ethical questions of research. Authors discuss ethics throughout this book (e.g. Sorainen, Saarikoski, Hyninen) and in particular, Johanna Järvinen-Tassopoulos contributes much to the book with her insight. In her study case of gambling women and their chatting in the forums for addicted gamblers, Järvinen-Tassopoulos emphasises both the question of studying vulnerable people and the responsibilities of the researcher. She argues that whilst listening to the stories and the knowledge of gambling women or any vulnerable people that may empower them, they themselves might also want to keep silence regarding the issue. To break the circle of silence and shame, extra attention must therefore be paid to the trust between the narrators and the researcher. Although the material put on the Internet might sometimes be considered as 'fair game', Järvinen-Tassopoulos underlines the importance of discussing the position of an invisible researcher who 'lurks' within the Internet and occasionally even intrudes upon the forums conversations. She claims that although people who write in online forums usually understand that anyone can read their writings, they do not think their stories will end up as research material. Järvinen-Tassopoulos's article is an excellent starting point for anyone thinking of using internet material as their research data and many of the questions she addresses apply also to the studies conducted 'offline'.

The research process is about making choices

The collection clearly shows how the research process is full of choices made mainly by the researcher, but also by people who have written or otherwise produced material that the researcher is analysing. For example, Piia Metsä-Tokila shows in her article how

the oral history material of former female political prisoners was actually collected by a group of female activists inside the communist party, and consequently the material represents the stories of this group to the exclusion of other women's stories. This starting point, as well as the political goal of these women to make their stories heard, had affected the heavy emphasis on comradeship and the justification of the women's illegal practices that can be determined from the interviews. Overall, the articles particularly demonstrate how much the position of the researcher and methodological choices, like the questions asked and the material framed in the analysis, have an impact upon the research results and sometimes even the lives of others. Therefore, the power relations of the research process, which usually are extremely favourable for the researcher, must always be made open to the readers, so as to enable counter-interpretation.

This book illuminates the situated research process from various different but intersecting angles and is highly recommendable for the students, as well as for the starting and experienced researchers in related fields.

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