

# Qualitative Naturalistic Research

## In brief



MLT [Ricerca kwalitattiva naturalistika](#) SPA [Investigación cualitativa naturalista](#)

### summary


*Qualitative research* is one of the three methodological paradigms of research, the other two being [quantitative](#) and *mixed methods*. The term *qualitative research* denotes approaches to empirical investigations involving the collection, analysis and presentation of data in narrative form. Very broadly, qualitative research involves mainly exploratory, naturalistic inquiry within real-life settings to gather and analyze non-numerical data, in order to understand individuals' social reality comprehensively, i.e., to explore the 'whats', 'hows', and 'whys' of social phenomena. This entry focuses specifically on empirical qualitative research in Translation Studies, i.e., qualitative inquiry undertaken in naturalistic settings.

In [Translation Studies](#) (TS), qualitative research explores translators' behaviours, perceptions, experiences, processes, and so on to understand in-depth how translations are produced, how translators perform their tasks, their motivations, emotions, how they relate with their texts, tools, colleagues, etc. Core features of qualitative research are its subjective, interpretive and inductive nature, whereas its main caveats include lack of generalisation, subjectivity, and observer/interviewer bias and effect.

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# Entry



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## Introduction

The term *qualitative research* denotes approaches to empirical investigations involving the collection, analysis and presentation of data in narrative form, as opposed to numerical data. It is one of the three methodological paradigms of research, the other two being *quantitative* and *mixed methods*.

Very broadly, qualitative research studies human aspects to examine in detail how people perceive and experience the world. In Translation Studies (TS), qualitative research explores translators' behaviours, perceptions, experiences, processes, interactions and so on to understand in-depth how translations are produced, how translators perform their tasks, their motivations, emotions, how they relate with their texts, tools, colleagues, etc.

Qualitative research was not always considered empirical. For a long time it was dismissed as non-scientific, subjective and having a strictly hypothesis-generation function, hence the original rift between qualitative and quantitative researchers. Such criticism is still sometimes raised at qualitative research, with critics deeming quantitative research more scientific and objective. But, as will be discussed later on, subjectivity is one of the features of qualitative research and it could also be envisaged as a strength.

Empirical studies can be either experimental, taking place in artificial environments often a laboratory, or naturalistic. This entry focuses specifically on empirical qualitative research carried out in natural settings. Therefore, other types of qualitative TS research, such as theoretical or historical and archival, will not be discussed here because of space constraints.

While, traditionally, qualitative and quantitative methodologies were seen as antithetical and irreconcilable, nowadays they are envisaged less as complete opposites and more as complementary, suiting different purposes and one enhancing the other. Moreover, there is often a quantitative element in qualitative inquiry and vice versa; in the case of qualitative research, codes

and categories emerging from qualitative data are usually counted and presented in numerical form, and words with a quantitative implication such as most, many, frequently and never are a common occurrence in qualitative research reports.

Qualitative and quantitative research paradigms are also being blended more often in mixed methods research designs that combine procedures from both paradigms. This is particularly the case in TS, where methods are increasingly being mixed and cross-referenced in order to obtain more comprehensive and accurate insights. As this entry emphasises, what is important is not whether research is quantitative or qualitative, objective or subjective, but its rigorous implementation throughout, the application of quality criteria in order to safeguard its scientificity and, importantly, the alignment of research methods with its aims and objectives.

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## Core elements of qualitative research

Despite its diverse, dynamic and constantly changing character (Creswell & Poth 2018: 35), various features characterise empirical qualitative research. First and foremost, it is naturalistic: “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln 2018: 45). Thus, naturally occurring real-life situations, people’s thoughts and emotions, their interpretation of meanings, interactions, activities and processes are investigated in their concrete and authentic environment. The researcher interferes the least possible without manipulating features nor controlling variables, although, inevitably, the observer’s presence influences somewhat the participants (as will be developed below). The objects under study are too complex to reduce them to individual variables and be studied in isolation.

Moreover, unlike in artificial situations created in laboratories, in naturalistic studies it is difficult to identify and isolate variables. Instead, qualitative research attributes importance to the context: the participants are analysed as a whole in their habitual environment as they go about their normal routines, practices and exchanges; activities are examined in their entirety and in their real, particular and temporal context (Flick 2018: 13). Translators thus are investigated at their very place of work—say, at the translation agency they work for or in their booth while interpreting during conferences. This contextualisation is important to better understand the participants and situations, and interpret the research findings.

Whereas quantitative researchers maintain a distance between themselves and their subjects so as to remain objective while they gather evidence, qualitative researchers tend to study participants from up close in order to collect their subjective views. Participants are not detached from their own setting, for example, by being taken to a laboratory and studied at a distance.

Rather, qualitative researchers go themselves to the participants’ environment—often, their home or workplace—in an effort to decrease the distance between themselves and their research participants, and gather contextualised first-hand information in the field. This distance standpoint is also reflected in the terms used to describe the people involved in their research: quantitative researchers generally refer to the individuals partaking in their research as subjects while qualitative researchers prefer the term participants, implying a more active involvement in the study.

A main assumption in qualitative research is that reality is multifaceted and varies according to individuals' perceptions, which can also change with time. In the qualitative tradition, researchers study the meanings people assign to phenomena and hold that different people create different meanings of the same event. They record the way people—individuals or subgroups—construct reality, attempting to make sense of these different constructions and perceptions in order to obtain detailed insights into these diverse realities and to identify patterns and themes in the data. Qualitative studies give a voice to the participants, embracing their varied perspectives and subjective experiences on the matter being researched (e.g., of the project manager, the translators and the client involved in the same project).

Qualitative inquiry is, in fact, based on the personal views and experiences of the participants. Because of this, it frequently necessitates empathy and imagination on the part of the researcher. While quantitative research strives to exclude the participants' and the researchers' impact on the study, qualitative research acknowledges and factors in their influence. Cultural, social and other types of influences are so ingrained in us that they are practically impossible to eliminate completely from the research process. In view of this, in the qualitative paradigm, the subjective opinions of both the researchers and the participants are taken on board and become an integral part of the study.

Qualitative researchers hence do not only gather subjective data based on the personal opinions and experiences of the participants, but they also acknowledge their own subjectivities in terms of personal beliefs and biases, laying them bare in their studies. Positionality is the term used when researchers expose their standpoint vis-à-vis their research context and setting. As part of their observations, qualitative researchers record their reflections, reactions, and feelings in research diaries, which are considered as data in their own right and become part and parcel of the interpretation (Flick 2018: 8).

The researcher's reflexivity is so key in qualitative research that Creswell & Poth (2018: 50) advise researchers to commence their study by reflecting on how their personal history, their political and ethical perspective, and the way they see themselves and others impinge on the inquiry. As they aptly put it:

**Researchers are respectful co-constructors of knowledge. Ethical practices of the researchers recognize the importance of the subjectivity of their own lens, acknowledge the powerful position they have in the research, and admit that the participants or the co-construction of the account between the researchers and the participants are the true owners of the information collected.**

(Creswell & Poth 2018: 72)

The subjectivity of the researched and of the researcher is characteristic of qualitative research but because of this feature, it is sometimes considered of inferior quality than its quantitative counterpart. Yet "personal influence in research is not always negative and does not necessarily compromise research quality" (Hubscher-Davidson 2022: 3). Integrating the subjective does not automatically mean that the research is not of a high quality. What matters is the discipline, systematicity and rigour of the research process, and in TS we find plenty of examples of such high quality qualitative research (see, e.g., the works by [Napier](#), and by [Risku](#) and colleagues).

Qualitative inquiry applies an inductive reasoning. Instead of departing from a theory or setting out to test a hypothesis, qualitative researchers start from a general topic and a research question. They move in a bottom-up direction—from data to theory—to explore one phenomenon thoroughly. Their objective “is to discover and explore the new” (Flick 2018: 7), with the analysis of empirical data leading to the development of theories. Theories thus emerge from data and are grounded in them. Research questions guide the study but they can be modified during the course of the study.

Contrary to quantitative research, where cause-effect generalisations are often an important basis, qualitative research does not offer general or universal conclusions; it does not lead to generalisations. Instead it makes specific statements about the specific case under study, to generate deeper understandings, new insights, theories and hypotheses for further studies. Theoretical frameworks, however, still play a role in qualitative research: for example, they inspire research questions and are drawn upon to explain findings emerging from the data. Hence, it could be argued that no research is purely inductive nor departs from a tabula rasa.

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## ¶ When to use qualitative research?

The foremost motivation to opt for a qualitative research design should be because it is the most appropriate one for the study’s aims and research questions. In other words, a qualitative approach should be chosen only because it is the best one for a particular study (Flick 2018: 4). The research design and methods need to match the research question, and the issues and participants under study. This is an important criterion in qualitative inquiry that cannot be stressed enough.

Qualitative methods are best to address *why* questions; for example, to explain specific behaviour and why it happens (e.g., why a translator or group of translators behave in a certain way). Qualitative research designs are often used when looking into rich, complex and unique situations from the point of view of the participants (e.g., the publisher of the translation, the translator, the reviser and the reader). They are also applied when research questions centre on experiences or meanings, and when exploring behaviours, processes, patterns and themes, new phenomena, and so forth.

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## ¶ Approaches in qualitative research

*[N]arrative originates from the humanities and social sciences, phenomenology from psychology and philosophy, grounded theory from sociology, ethnography from anthropology and sociology, and case studies from the human and social sciences and applied areas such as evaluation research.*

**(Creswell & Poth 2018: 38)**

*Approaches* signify the strategies adopted in the research process. Qualitative research encompasses many approaches, with a variety of methodological and theoretical concepts. The choice of qualitative approaches is so vast that it is perplexing (Creswell & Poth 2018: 37; see, e.g.,

the long list of qualitative approaches and methodologies in Given 2008: xiii-xiv). Among the main types of approaches in naturalistic settings we find [narrative](#), [phenomenological](#), [ethnographic](#), [grounded theory](#), and [case study](#) research. The difference between these approaches is somewhat fuzzy, as we will develop below. All five make use of similar data-collection methods, namely interviews, observation and document analysis.

Selecting one approach over the other depends on the purpose and focus of the study. For instance, if the aim is to develop a theory based on [field data](#), then a grounded theory approach is a good option. If the focus is on context and culture, an ethnographic approach may be the best choice. Mellinger & Hanson ([2022](#): 315) group narrative research with phenomenology, and ethnographic research with case studies, due to their similarities. The first pair centres on personal stories, experiences and events, while the second pivots around thorough descriptions of behaviour, beliefs and language.

A vast array of disciplines have contributed to shaping qualitative research. Broadly speaking, qualitative research is associated with soft disciplines and quantitative with hard sciences, yet nowadays scientists are increasingly valuing and encouraging qualitative research. For example, Busetto, Wick & Gumbinger (2020) advocate the application of qualitative designs in health sciences in order to shed light on blind spots in neurological research and practice. Being interdisciplinary in nature, TS embraces all five approaches mentioned above, albeit to different extents. Narrative approaches are widely employed in TS (Zanettin & Rundle 2022b: 6), which is only natural, given that TS has an important humanistic component and the narrative approach emerged from within the humanities.

Narrative inquiry centres on the experiences of individuals “as expressed in lived and told stories” (Pinnegar & Daynes 2007: 4). Paying attention to the context in which the narrative is rooted is key in narrative studies. Because narration is a social act that involves a narrator and a narratee, narrative approaches are particularly suitable for investigating social phenomena in translation, taking into account the impact of human agency and contextual factors (Summers [2022](#): 254).

Phenomenological research also explores lived experiences but instead of focusing on individuals and their stories, it identifies common themes of an experienced phenomenon shared by individuals (Creswell & Poth 2018: 121). Put differently, phenomenologists study the distinctive meanings of a human experience or a phenomenon (Adams & van Manen 2008: 614) by analysing personal experiences and views of participants. For example, what are the common aspects experienced by people during bereavement? Or an example closer to home: how do translators experience deadlines? Phenomenology thus describes the essence of a phenomenon, be it an experience, an event or an activity, based on the personal experience of different individuals. In the past thirty years, this approach has been employed extensively in many applied and professional disciplines but not so much in TS, where so far phenomenology has only been used rather sporadically (for an example, see Piecychna [2020](#)). In fact, phenomenology hardly features in key TS books dedicated to research methodologies (e.g. Saldanha & O’Brien [2014](#); Zanettin & Rundle [2022a](#)).



Five types of naturalistic qualitative research approaches.

## Ethnography

As for the ethnographic approach, it is fairly new in our discipline, and it is gaining ground. Ethnography involves researching a field through participation, observation, and writing (Flick 2018: 599) in order to obtain an insider's perspective and detailed insights into the participants' actions, values, goals, processes, interactions, culture, and the like.

Ethnographers spend a stretch of time in the field so as to gain first-hand experience into the issues and contexts being studied by listening, observing, conversing, asking questions, gathering documentation and artefacts (Hammersley & Atkinson 2019: 3). They immerse themselves in the participants' settings, investigating in-depth one or few cases, which may range from a whole cultural group or subgroup to one individual, and also to self-observation in the case of autoethnographic studies. For examples of studies taking an ethnographic approach in TS, see Borg (2024), Hokkanen (2016), Milošević & Risku (2021), and Sannholm (2021).

### What is ethnography?

When compared with ethnography, case study research tends to inquire more from an outside perspective. Case studies focus on a whole unit of investigation—i.e. a case (or several)—which is examined in-depth and in its natural environment with the aim to obtaining a thorough understanding and providing a thick (or rich, as TS scholars prefer to call it) description of the contextualised case. They are particularly suitable for studies looking into a contemporary naturally-occurring phenomenon and asking why and how questions (Yin 2003: 1). A case study could involve a single case or multiple ones. Case studies, especially single case studies, are prevalent in TS. It is one of the most prominent qualitative approaches, although in our discipline a case study seems to be associated with “singularity”. In other words, a study focusing on a single aspect—say one translator or one target text—rather than with the specific methodology it entails (Susam-Sarajeva 2009: 38). Nevertheless, since Susam-Sarajeva highlighted this issue, TS researchers started paying more attention to the particular requirements of the case study method such as contextualisation, real-life setting and in-depth analysis (see, e.g., Borg 2022).

Grounded theory is a qualitative methodology whose chief aim is to build a theory on the basis of empirical data obtained via methods such as observation, interviews, and document analysis. Data collection and analysis take place simultaneously, mutually informing each other in an evolving iterative process. Drawing on comparative methods, grounded theory provides a set of guidelines for the systematic collection and analysis of materials intended to develop, check and enhance an initial analysis, which include coding, memo writing and abductive logic (Charmaz, Thornberg & Keane 2018: 705-707). With the purpose of theory construction, the grounded theory approach can study an action, a process, a field, an event. Elements of grounded theory have been applied in various TS projects but not many have taken on a purely grounded theory approach encompassing all its specific methodical and rigorous procedures (Mouratidou, Crowder & Scott 2020: 37).

TS researchers often combine approaches. This strategy is quite popular with qualitative TS researchers who, rather than opting for one approach lock, stock and barrel, tend to draw on several and tailor the methodology according to the particular needs and aims of their project. For example,



Risku, Milošević & Rogl (2017) take an ethnographic approach in their multi case study. Similarly, Borg (2022) applies an ethnographic approach in her in-depth case study.

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## ¶ Research procedures

*Research procedures are sensitive to participants and context. The procedures of research, such as data collection, data analysis, representing the material to audiences, and standards of evaluation and ethics, emphasize an interpretive stance. During data collection, the researcher does not further marginalize the participants but respects the participants and the sites for research.*

**(Creswell & Poth 2018: 72)**

Qualitative techniques provide data that allow deeper understandings of phenomena; this data is rich and offers insights into underlying patterns and reasons. It enables the exploration of complex phenomena which are too intricate for a yes or no hypothesis.

### Data collection

Being considerate to the people and sites involved in the study implies a certain flexibility on the part of the researcher, also because data collection most of the time takes place in the participants' natural (and uncontrolled) context, usually their homes or offices although nowadays the internet is being availed of more and more, with researchers gathering data virtually instead of in-person. Because of the complexity and diversity of real situations and of everyday life, researchers have to maintain an element of flexibility when collecting data in the field.

Yet, flexibility should go hand in hand with rigor and systematicity. Flexibility implies compromise—not haphazardness—and open-mindedness to the opportunities and challenges arising during the course of the project. Qualitative data collection methods are also more open towards the study's participants; for example, semi-structured interviews are more flexible than questionnaires. While quantitative TS researchers can rely on instruments like keyloggers and eyetrackers, in qualitative inquiry the researcher is the main data collection instrument.

Qualitative researchers can adopt an insider or an outsider stance. In the insider stance, data are collected from the perspective of participants; in the outsider stance, from the researcher's own observations. In qualitative inquiry, data collection is characterised by prolonged engagement in the field; it is generally not a one-off activity—as, say, in the case of survey research where data are collected once during a restricted period of time—but occurs over an extended period of time. The data collection process keeps on going either upon completion of the observed process/activity or until new information stops emerging and the researcher starts observing same and repeated information. Depending on the approach, it can also be iterative, intertwining with data analysis.

### Data collection methods

While some disciplines are associated with one main method, such as experiments in psychology and participant observation in anthropology, in TS, due to its interdisciplinary and multifarious nature, the range of methods used to collect qualitative data is broad and there is no one key method. A common data collection method in our discipline is *interviews*. Conducted either in-person or virtually, interviews can differ in the level of structure and degree of flexibility. The most standard and inflexible are *structured* interviews, where questions—including their wording and order—are determined in advanced and uniform for all participants.

More popular with qualitative researchers are *semi-structured* interviews, which allow more flexibility in terms of order of presentation and wording of the questions. Although the researcher enters the interview with a set of predetermined questions, these are followed more loosely, serving more as a guide rather than a rigid list, and questions can be added or skipped according to the way the interview unfolds. Similar to a free-flowing lengthy conversation on a targeted topic, unstructured interviews are very flexible, and they enable questions to arise naturally during the course of the interview and to vary from one participant to another.

Resembling a group interview, a *focus group* is a qualitative data collection method based on group interaction. A moderator, usually the researcher, facilitates or leads the discussion on a set topic between a small group of people selected according to predefined criteria who interact by asking questions to each other, exchanging ideas, opinions, and so forth.

Another way of collecting qualitative data is through *observation*. In this method, researchers do not rely (solely) on what participants tell them in interviews. They also observe participants in their natural situations and record their observations, descriptions, thoughts, reactions and interpretations in field notes. By means of field observation, researchers acquire direct experience of the environment, activity, process, behaviour or event under study.

Observation can take various forms. The first distinction depends on the role the researcher assumes in the observed field ranging from complete observer to complete participant, termed as *non-participant* and *participant observation* respectively. In non-participant observation, the researcher observes at a distance, whereas in participant observation the researcher participates in the field and may even become an active member. Another frequent distinction is between *overt* and *covert observation*. *Overt observation* refers to when the participants are aware that they are being observed and consent to it, whereas *covert observation* takes place without the participants' knowledge nor consent and hence the covert form raises many ethical concerns.



Diaries are another method of collecting observation data. Here, participants keep a diary in which they document their activities, experiences, feelings, thoughts, behaviours, processes and so on over a period of time. They can be written while or after completing an action—for example, whilst translating a text, after an interpreting session or after encounters with customers about translation assignments—and are usually kept for a specific time and frequency

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Qualitative interviews: A  
how-to guide

upon the researcher's request. Apart from participants, diaries can also be kept by researchers. Whilst participant diaries are a stand-alone observational method, researcher diaries are an integral part of, and arise from, field observation (Borg, Heine & Risku forthcoming).

[Click to access video of translator Toni Aquilina being observed while revising a literary translation and thinking aloud \(for details see Borg 2022\).](#) Like diaries, think-aloud is an introspective qualitative data collection method. Previously a much used method in translation process research, think-aloud has now been sidelined due to criticism targeting its validity and reliability as well as because it is deemed cumbersome. In think-aloud, or concurrent verbalisation, participants are asked to verbalise their thoughts while performing a task. If the task is carried out in pairs or groups, the verbalisation method is referred to as dialogue think-aloud. Another form of verbal reporting is retrospection, which taps into participants' reconstruction of their own cognitive processes after the task has been completed. Retrospective verbalisation is still very much in use, particularly in interpreting research where the think-aloud method obviously cannot be deployed. Albeit the criticism, think-aloud still offers various unique benefits as studies continue to show (e.g., Dorer 2020, Borg 2022) and "remains a strong method, as there may not be a better way of getting information about a person's mind than by having the person tell us about it in words" (Jakobsen & Alves 2021: 4).

Finally, in *document study*, TS researchers collect a wide range of authentic documents such as translated texts, draft translations, source texts, correspondence, policy documents and style guides, depending on the focus of their study. Researchers also tap into digital communication such as emails and messages sent via online messaging applications (obviously, with permission of the involved parties) to obtain insights into translation processes and practices.

Each method has strengths and limitations. For instance, diaries have been found to yield a reduced recall error but participants may suffer fatigue, their reporting becoming less detailed with time (Verbrugge 1980: 81). Field observation offers contextualised data but there is a potential loss of objectivity on the observer's side (McKechnie 2008: 575). To alleviate the shortcomings of a specific method and obtain a fuller understanding of the issue being studied, TS researchers are increasingly applying multi-method research designs in which data are gathered via two or more methods on the same event. This strategy can be applied to methods, data and theories in order to study a phenomenon from different perspectives which can then be compared and contrasted. The action of cross-referencing data of different kinds and nature has been variously called in different research domains. [Triangulation](#) is one of the terms used to refer to this strategy; while the practice is widely embraced and recommended, the same cannot be said for the term.

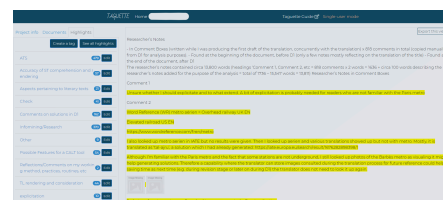
### **Data preparation and analysis**

Preparing and cleaning data is a crucial interim step between collecting data and analysing it, as it lays the foundations for meticulous and robust interpretations. It involves actions such as typing and elaborating field notes, transcribing recorded interviews, observations or verbalisations, editing recordings, anonymising and backing up data. Data preparation is best done as close as possible to

fieldwork, i.e., to data collection. In fact, in qualitative research, data collection and analysis are not necessary two separate processes; they often overlap or rotate, particularly in grounded and ethnographic approaches.

The prepared data (e.g., typed and elaborated field notes, transcribed interviews, think-aloud protocols) are coded either manually or using qualitative data management software in order to detect patterns or themes. A principal data-analysis process in qualitative inquiry is coding, defined as the identification of concepts, ideas, behaviours, features, themes, patterns and so forth, and tagging them with codes. Codes help researchers to organise, make sense of and interpret data. Recurring concepts in the data are marked with the same codes. Coding can be both inductive and deductive, although in qualitative research it is often inductive, with codes “emerging” from the data. In relation to ethnography—though applicable to qualitative research at large—Hammersley & Atkinson (2019: 3) write:

**The analysis of data involves interpretation of the meanings, sources, functions, and consequences of human actions and institutional practices, and how these are implicated in local, and perhaps also wider, contexts. What are produced, for the most part, are verbal descriptions, explanations, and theories; quantification and statistical analysis play a subordinate role at most.**



Coding of researcher's notes in [Taguette](#), a free and open-source tool for qualitative research (screenshot from the author's data).

This interpretation aspect is an integral part of all kinds of research. However, it is publicly associated to qualitative research, so much so that the adjective interpretative is frequently used to qualify qualitative inquiry. Not only is the researcher's interpretation (of meanings, behaviours, practices, etc.) acknowledged but qualitative research also factors in the observers, the researchers, in that it does not try to hide them but acknowledges them as an important element of the interpretation and of the entire research process. A common trait of qualitative research is reported speech. When presenting their findings, qualitative researchers tend to quote what the participants have said often through direct speech by extracting participants' real words and using them as evidence. The participants' voices, the researcher's reflexivity, a detailed description and interpretation of the phenomenon, as well as the study's contribution or a call for action, all feature in the final written report or presentation (Creswell 2013: 44).

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## **¶ Main caveats and challenges**

Often mentioned caveats of qualitative inquiry include lack of generalisation, subjectivity, and observer/interviewer bias and effect. The unavoidable influence of the observer on the participants' behaviour is designated as the [observer's paradox](#) or *observer effect*, while in interviews it goes by the term [interviewer effect](#). This should be acknowledged in research studies and researchers should endeavour to minimise their influence as much as possible.

*Observer bias* ensues when scholars carry out their observation and interpret the data through the lens of what they already know (McKechnie 2008: 575); in interviews, *interviewer bias* occurs for instance when the questions are worded to prompt biased answers. Therefore, researchers should be very careful when formulating interview questions. Since the number of participants in qualitative inquiry is often small, generally results cannot be generalised. However, the results can lead to tentative generalisations, usually in the form of hypotheses to be tested further. Subjectivity and lack of generalisation are, however, compensated by strengths such as the richness of the data. Qualitative research provides thick descriptions which offer deeper insights and fuller understanding of phenomena, on the basis of which grounded hypotheses are generated.

Another downside of qualitative research is its time- and resource-consuming nature. The processes of gathering and analysing qualitative data tend to be laborious and long, yet qualitative inquiry is more feasible in cases of small budgets and if only a handful of participants are available since data gathering tools (e.g. diaries, audio recorders) are often inexpensive and no large samples sizes are required.

The main challenges probably are negotiating and gaining access to the field and to research participants, a common difficulty reported by qualitative researchers. *Gatekeepers* (directors, managers, etc.) are key in granting access because they are in a position to either enable or hamper it but access also hinges on the collaboration of individual participants who must also consent to participate. Access, thus, is a complicated matter also because it often has to be granted by both gatekeepers and participants, and one does not bind the other. For example, if a director of a translation unit in an organisation grants permission to a TS researcher to pursue a field study, then the researcher also requires the consent of translators, revisers, and other participants who might not collaborate to the same extent or not at all.

Despite the difficulty in gaining access, various TS scholars ascertain in research reports that obtaining access was not a major issue and at times even plain sailing (see, e.g., Borg 2022: 47; Koskinen 2008: 4; Sannholm 2021: 48). Among the reasons cited that facilitate access, we find the researcher's familiarity with the research site and/or participants, the researcher's experience as a practitioner and previous roles, such as a former employee in the same or similar setting, and interest and openness in the project on the part of management and employees. Another important factor is establishing trust, which not only simplifies access but is also crucial for enrolling participants and maintaining them on board throughout the duration of the project.

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## Quality criteria

*[Q]ualitative research's central criteria depend on whether findings are grounded in empirical material or whether the methods are appropriately selected and applied, as well as the relevance of findings and the reflexivity of proceedings.*

**(Flick 2018: 7)**

Various measures can be applied to strengthen the quality of a qualitative study and reduce its limitations, such as prolonged engagement in the research site, ecological validity, triangulation of

data and methods, [thick description](#), [member checking](#), [peer debriefing](#), active reflexivity on the researcher's part, co-coding, voluntary participation and anonymity of the participants (see, e.g., Li [2004](#), who discusses safeguards in relation to think-aloud in TS). Some of the criteria, for instance member checking, are sometimes considered as gold standards for qualitative research but questions and opposition are being raised against a specific validity check being imposed as a condition for rigorous qualitative research (e.g. Motulsky [2021](#)).

Of course, not all criteria should nor can be present in all qualitative projects but researchers should choose those criteria that are congruent with their specific project and apply them with care. Still, principles such as transparency, systematicity and the meticulous pairing of methods with the aims of the research are core elements of rigorous research. Transparent research designs describing clearly the procedures applied during the recruitment of participants, data collection, preparation and analysis processes, enhance the quality of the research conducted and allow for the replication of the study or transferability of the findings. Discipline and rigor during the entire research study, together with thorough descriptions of the procedures implemented, accompanied by examples, increase the credibility and veracity of the research.

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## Ethical issues

Conducting [ethically sound](#) research entails giving careful consideration to potential ethical issues during the research design stage as well as during the entire duration of the project. Although requirements vary among countries and institutions, naturalistic researchers are normally expected to seek approval for new projects from a research ethics committee which reviews the project and gives feedback on ethical aspects.

A core ethical principle is *informed consent*, whereby the researcher provides prospective participants with information on the project, invites them to participate in the research, and obtains their consent. It is the researcher's responsibility to check that participants are aware of what they are agreeing to. Due consideration should also be given to the researcher-participant relationship. In cases of power relations, for example, participants being the researcher's subordinates, say their students or employees, they might feel uncomfortable not accepting participating or might fear repercussions. Voluntary participation and the possibility to withdraw anytime without any consequences—another basic ethical principle—should always be stressed when seeking consent.

Ethical behaviour implies establishing trust, avoiding [over-report](#), avoiding [conflict of interest](#), and when it occurs, declaring and managing it. Deceiving participants about the topic or aims of the research is unethical, and researchers must do their utmost to avoid harming participants, for instance damaging the reputation of participating translators, interpreters or language service providers. Tying in with this is the principle of anonymity, through which the identity of the participants is safeguarded either via the anonymisation of data or the use of pseudonyms. However, anonymity is not always desired nor possible. In such cases, participants must explicitly consent to being named and identified in studies. Interestingly, the drive to increase translator's visibility has actually led participants of TS research to sometimes explicitly request to being identified.

Ethically-designed research takes into account how data will be managed, secured, stored and archived and by whom it will be accessed. Other considerations include being cognisant of the researcher's own bias, ideology and power, thus the constant need for self-reflexivity. Treating participants with respect is another guiding principle: protecting their confidentiality and privacy, offering something in return for their contribution, i.e., reciprocity, and debriefing the participants and gatekeepers once the study has been completed, and leaving the field in the most appropriate way after the completion of the study should all be given careful attention.

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## **Research potential**

As an object of study, translation can be approached in a variety of ways. Given its complex and interdisciplinary nature, TS researchers frequently borrow approaches, methods and frameworks from other disciplines and customise them to better match their studies. With TS often situated mainly within the humanities and the social sciences, where qualitative research is central, TS scholars have over the years extended their methodological and theoretical repertoires by inspiring themselves from wide-ranging disciplines.

Over the years too, quantitative research has gained more and more ground in TS with certain branches—Cognitive Translation and Interpreting Studies being a case in point—becoming predominately quantitative. However, recently the tide is beginning to turn again as calls not to succumb to methodological uniformity are on the rise as “diversity in both philosophy and methodology encourages exploration of phenomena from multiple perspectives” (Mellinger & Hanson [2021](#): 121). Various TS scholars are highlighting the significance and value of qualitative inquiry for our discipline through arguments in favour, as well as with robust and insightful qualitative studies (e.g., Koskinen 2008; Risku, Milošević & Rogl 2017; Sannholm 2021; Borg 2022; Hubscher-Davidson 2022).

In TS, empirical qualitative researchers seek an in-depth understanding of real life translational phenomena and processes, endeavouring to grasp specific issues, understand how translation happens in particular contexts and situations, and to generate solutions to translation-related problems. While text- and interview-based studies remain strong in qualitative TS research, translation is increasingly being studied as a situated activity. Accordingly, workplace and field studies are gaining traction (see, e.g., the work by [Ehrensberger-Dow](#) and colleagues, and [Risku](#) and colleagues).

TS researchers are spending time on the ground, studying from freelancers' home offices to translation agencies, publishing houses and international institutions. Attention is being paid to the natural working environment of the network of people involved in translation practices including their tools and interactions, with all its specificities. The huge individual differences revealed by studies aiming for generalisations concerning translators' behaviour have put the spotlight on the wide variation of translation practices and processes that are context- and time-dependent, changing from translator to translator, agency to agency, institution to institution. This realisation has led to insightful studies into situated translatorial behaviours and practices, and to calls for more similar studies; this is one fertile ground for future qualitative research.

Literary translation can benefit greatly from field studies and qualitative process-oriented research as the work of scholars such as Buzelin ([2006](#)), Kolb ([2017](#)) and Borg ([2022](#)) has shown. Although phenomenology lends itself well to the study of translatorial phenomena and experiences, as a qualitative approach it has not yet been used to its full potential in TS. It can be applied to explore a wide variety of phenomena and experiences such as how translators' experience the anonymity of their work or how they feel when they are offered low rates for their work, or what it is like to read literature in translation.

Drawing on virtual ethnography and the like, translators and their workplaces are also increasingly being investigated over the Internet. Internet-mediated qualitative research is picking up pace not only because of the convenience and accessibility afforded by the Internet but also due to the translation profession becoming increasingly Internet-based. The Internet opens up a world of research opportunities as long as quality criteria are implemented and ethical principles safeguarded. Maintaining methodological diversity is important for our discipline as is choosing the right research design for a specific study, and instilling rigour and systematicity in research, irrespective of the paradigm, the approach and the methods.

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## Credits



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