**What’s Lost in Translation? Neopositivism and Critical Research Interests**

Andrew Bennett ‘finds in translation’ potential communication between computer-assisted content analysis (which is usually quantitative and positivist) and discourse analysis (which he suggests is usually qualitative and post-positivist). Bennett is interested in combining these methods despite epistemological differences in the research purposes for which each method is usually deployed. There are a number of propositions made in “found in translation” with which I agree – including but not limited to the utility of both of methods understood as qualitative and methods understood as quantitative and the importance of thinking about the relationship between method and epistemology in complicated ways.

Still, my understanding of the possibility (and desirability) of ‘mixed method’ research as Bennett frames it is very different than Bennett’s. The core of our disagreement can be found in Bennett’s description in footnote 4 of his article of my work with Barkin. Bennett notes our work as an exception to the trend among scholars to neglect the potential contributions of research on ‘the other’ side of the quantitative/qualitative divide. While I hope that is true, the footnote suggests that our work discusses “opportunities for combining interpretive and quantitative methods.” That is not our intent – instead, we are looking for opportunities to use quantitative methods *as* interpretive research. That is, we are interested in showing the *interpretive utility* of methods traditionally understood to be quantitative.

This may seem like a trivial grammatical distinction at first glance, but it is actually a fundamental disagreement on both the nature of ‘quantitative’ methods and the relationship between ontology and epistemology. Our article later in this volume discusses our positions on these issues in depth, but, for now, I will mention briefly two features of that argument: first, that ‘quantitative’ methods have *epistemological* uses other than neopositivist; and second, that methods do not map one-to-one onto either methodologies or epistemologies.

For the purposes of Bennett’s argument, then, I suggest that DA and CCA are not different *methods* but different performances of a similar method (discourse analysis). Indeed, there is a rich history of quantitative critical discourse analysis in both linguistics and political science.[[1]](#footnote-1) Instead, DA and CCA are employed using different *methodologies* in service of different *epistemologies* with different *political* goals of the research, which is where the real difference between the research programs that Bennett discusses lies. The mistake that Bennett makes, in my view, is to characterize this difference as one of *method* (when I argue that it is not) rather than one of *methodology*, *epistemology*, and *politics* (which I argue that it is).

This mischaracterization, in my view, leads Bennett to make an argument that has both substantive and political problems. Substantively, Bennett suggests the possibility of “epistemological bridge building” by using multiple methods. Using multiple methods only builds bridges *between epistemologies* if methods inherently have and represent an epistemology. Bennett partly acknowledges this, suggesting that “epistemological differences are a bigger barrier to communication between research communities than methodological ones.” Still, Bennett suggests that it is possible to overcome what he characterizes as epistemological dichotomies to find a “considerable epistemological middle ground” in multi-method research. In my view, there is not an intellectual warrant for “epistemological middle ground.” Even if, as Bennett argues citing Patrick Thaddeus Jackson (2010: 34), epistemological and ontological assumptions should be *wagers* rather than permanent commitments, those wagers are important for the clarity of analysis. Finding “middle ground” epistemologies sacrifices that clarity, even if it were possible to do so by combining multiples method-epistemologies. That is especially true when such a search for “middle ground” employs either a “trickle-up” notion that combining methods combines epistemology or a “trickle-down” understanding that epistemological pluralism brings about methodological pluralism. Instead, it is my contention that multiple methods can be used within any given epistemology, and each epistemology can have any given number of tools. They do not match up neatly.

Even were Bennett correct that methods have epistemologies, and that combining methods bridges epistemologies, I am unconvinced by his assumption that such bridging would be a good thing. In fact, I see it as highly politically problematic. The search for epistemological compatibility in Bennett’s article suggests that it is possible to reconcile CCA researchers’ understandings that reality is objective, that objective research is possible, meaning is fixed, and power is not a variable that needs to be taken into account and DA researchers’ understanding that reality is socially constructed, knowledge is monist, meaning is not fixed, and meaning-making practices are power-infused. This reconciliation, in Bennett’s view, could help content analysis address power, and make discourse analysis results more potentially generalizable. I agree with Bennett that these ideas are reconcilable for some constructivist scholars who reject the ‘extreme’ positions of either strict neopositivism or the poststructuralism with which it is compared in Bennett’s analysis. But I think that any reconciliation along the lines that Bennett proposes catches *either* the research concerns that constitute critical theory in IR *or* critical theoretical analyses of standard interpretations of the philosophy of science in IR. Some of the research I find most interesting in the discipline – work about constitution and performativity, rather than cause; poststructuralist, postcolonialist, and feminist post-positivist work, rather than work that fits neatly within the disciplinary canons – remains outside of the “epistemological middle ground” that Bennett constructs. This incompatibility, however, does not decrease the utility of multiple (and indeed quantitative) tools being used in service of those theoretical, ontological, and political ends.

For all of Bennett’s openness to multiple methods and (accompanying them) multiple epistemologies, Bennett’s discussion of the nature of scholarship remains firmly situated in a neopositivist understanding of what research is (e.g., discussions of ‘evidence’, the consistent deployment of the quantitative/qualitative dichotomy, numerous discussions of ‘bias,’ and even the inferences he makes from the data collected for this article). This is problematic because the notion of objective, dualist research is not just a normatively neutral choice among many that can be reconciled with normative critiques about it. With many feminist researchers, I think that what counts as ‘objective knowledge’ in most neopositivist work is actually the perspectival knowledge of an elite, often white, Western, and male, segment of the population.[[2]](#footnote-2) This makes knowledge itself a power structure to which contribution is a privilege of those whose understandings of how to know fits inherited understandings. If neopositivist epistemologies (and indeed epistemologies generally) are power structures, then the question of who is empowered and who is disempowered in them is not only an empirical question, but a normative one. Particularly, reflection is necessary when combining epistemologies that constitute oppressive power structures and research that has an explicit normative and political interest in critique or emancipation. If there is normatively problematic content to an epistemological approach to IR, then ‘bridging’ to that epistemological approach may be undesirable, and pluralist inclusion of it may, at the very least, be a more complicated question than making (or rejecting) the case for the substantive possibility of inclusion.

It is for that reason that I find myself, in Bennett’s terms, among the “intepretivists” who might be “doubly skeptical” of “multi-method research,” “especially when such research attempts to bridge epistemological traditions.” I do not find multi-epistemological research *or* (any variation of) multi-method research in principle problematic. Still, Bennett oversimplifies the case for both the plausibility and desirability of such research. In terms of plausibility, I think there are two problems. First, Bennett assumes that methods have epistemologies, and that matching methods therefore matches epistemologies. I argue that multi-method research can be done *within* epistemologies, and not only *within* neo-positivist epistemologies. Second, *some* epistemological approaches are *prima facie* incompatible with others, so “epistemological bridging” may not be possible in all cases. In terms of desirability, the fact that methods *can* be mixed and epistemologies *can* be bridged, does not mean they *should* be bridged, either substantively or normatively. On the contrary, *some* epistemological bridges create normative and political problems – the biggest of which, in my view, is the problem of pairing the exclusive power structure of the notion of objectivity with the emancipatory knowledge-interests of critical theorizing.

1. see, e.g., discussions in Hayward Alker, *Rediscoveries and Reformulations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, eds. *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Sage, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, e.g., discussions in Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, eds. *Feminist Epistemologies* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Sandra Harding, *Is Science Multicultural? Postcolonialisms, Feminisms, and Epistemologies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)