

# Managing and Bridging Language Differences in Climate Change Research in Local Knowledge Systems

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## Abstract

English is the accepted language of science, but the contexts in which climate change occur are not constrained to the English-speaking world. The languages of communities suffering from climate change range drastically, from regional dialects of popular languages such as Spanish to lesser known indigenous tongues. To conduct purposeful investigations on climate change in local knowledge systems, a researcher must be attentive to the language of the indigenous community. Critical terms for research and communication such as climate, weather, climate change and climate variability are what we might call “multifaceted” words. They do not translate perfectly from one language to another and can carry different implications and meanings that will skew outcomes if not carefully navigated and negotiated with local knowledge systems. Research and science communication require attention to, respect for and sensitivity to linguistic differences. I share recommended practices for research across language differences based on research and lessons garnered during fieldwork conducted on climate change and coffee farmers in Risaralda, Colombia, with an international team. These four practices for navigating language differences are: (1) Establish an understanding of what “multifaceted” words mean ahead of time and consult if necessary; (2) Establish a protocol for researchers to keep notes on various manifestations of or uses of particular concepts or terms in the local context; (3) Debrief with the team every day in order to rapidly adjust language of interview protocols or communications in response to local feedback; (4) Understand that if you have a foreign accent, your interviewees are tolerating you, not the other way around.

# MANAGING *and* BRIDGING LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES *in* CLIMATE CHANGE RESEARCH *in* LOCAL KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

## CLIMATE CHANGE: AN INTERNATIONAL PHENOMENON

English is the accepted language of science, but the contexts in which climate change occur are not constrained to the English-speaking world. The languages of communities suffering from climate change range drastically, from regional dialects of popular languages such as Spanish to lesser known indigenous tongues. To conduct purposeful investigations on climate change in local knowledge systems, a researcher must be attentive to the language of the indigenous community. Critical terms for research and communication such as *climate*, *weather*, *climate change* and *climate variability* are what we can call “multifaceted” words. They do not translate perfectly from one language to another and can carry different implications and meanings that will skew outcomes if not carefully navigated and negotiated with local knowledge systems.

## RECOMMENDED PRACTICES FOR NAVIGATING LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES

Decolonized research and science communication requires attention to, respect for and sensitivity to linguistic differences.

Recommended practices for navigating language differences in research:

- (1) Establish an understanding of what multifaceted words mean ahead of time and consult local language experts when necessary,
- (2) Establish a protocol for researchers to keep notes on various manifestations of or uses of particular concepts or terms in the local context,
- (3) Debrief with the research team every day in order to rapidly adjust language of interview protocols or communications in response to local feedback,
- (4) Understand that if you have a foreign accent, your interviewees or research participants are tolerating you, not the other way around,
- (5) Use local professionals to transcribe interviews as they are familiar with regional dialects.



## CONTEXT: NAVIGATING SPANISH/ENGLISH

These best practices are drawn from the research project *Climate Change Adaption in Colombia's Coffee Axis: Assessing Communicative Needs of Agricultural Producers* funded by the Purdue University College of Liberal Arts Global Synergy Grant and the Brian Lamb School of Communication. Our goal was to research and understand the communicative needs of agricultural producers in Colombia around climate change adaptation, focusing on coffee farmers in Colombia's coffee axis. During the first round of data collection (January/February 2018), we conducted 45 hour-long, in-person interviews with coffee farmers in Risaralda, Colombia, interviewing 2 – 4 in each municipality of the state. During the second round (June 2018), we conducted 6 focus groups and 23 surveys with coffee farmers.



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## EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

Each data collection between languages will have its own idiosyncrasies and unique pressure points. Here are a few examples shared from the context of our research:

- The word *clima* in Spanish means both “climate” and “weather.” Discerning which is meant in an interview and how it is used is important when analyzing data.
- Coffee farmers commonly said *este clima!* to refer to exasperation with the unpredictability of weather events under climate change. This colloquialism indicated frustration, even though it wasn't explicitly stated.
- Asking “What is your ethnicity?” during demographic data collection did not translate appropriately for this region in Colombia and made interviewees uncomfortable and confused. It was removed from the protocol after two days.