

Research questions in Linguistics

Research questions are the key to any empirical research project. Without research questions, you will flounder; with them, you will be guided in terms of data needed, data collection methods and data analysis. Ask yourself, ‘What data do I need?’ The answer is ‘That which best enables me to answer my research question(s)’. ‘How do I analyse it?’ ‘In a way which allows me to address my research question(s)’. And so on. This is because a piece of empirical research is normally *designed* to address one or more research questions – the answers to which should constitute a ‘contribution to knowledge’.

In the social sciences, empirical research very often employs *explicit* research questions. If you are about to conduct empirical research, first ask yourself, ‘What am I trying to find out in my research project?’ If you can answer this, you have the basis for a research question.

Many of us go into a research project with our ideas in general, and our research questions in particular, rather broadly formulated. Alternatively, our research questions may be precisely formulated, but, we may discover, erroneous (not amenable to investigation, or otherwise inappropriate). At the start of a project, neither may be too much of a problem, because a research question should not straightjacket you. Rather, you can see it as an initial direction – like a compass point, whose needle is swinging. Further down the line, you may find that issues come up which are interesting and relevant but which do not address your research question(s), that is, which answer questions you have not asked. If these do not require new data, you may wish to consider adding a new research question. At some point, however, your research questions need to stabilize (although there is room for getting their *wording* accurate right up until the end of the research project).

You may be used to the term *hypothesis* rather than *research question*. Hypotheses are more characteristic of the natural than the social sciences. While hypotheses and research questions are related, hypotheses tend to be more precise. A hypothesis is conventionally worded as a statement, which is to be investigated and proved or disproved through empirical study. An example would be ‘In terms of school library use, boys in Year 6 of UK Primary Schools borrow (a) more works of non-fiction than fiction, and (b) more works of non-fiction than do girls.’ Hypotheses are also perhaps more characteristic of quantitative than qualitative research (see Chapter 3). Research questions, accordingly, are characteristic of *qualitative* research, and are likely to be both broader and more exploratory than hypotheses, for example, ‘What are the borrowing practices of UK Primary School Year 6 girls and boys in terms of fiction and non-fiction?’

A set of research questions should be formulated in ways which allow the identification and investigation of further issues that only doing the research can bring to light (i.e. that could *not* have been included in a hypothesis). In her own research questions checklist, Jennifer Mason (2002: 19) includes the following: ‘Are they open enough to allow for the degree of exploratory enquiry I require? Will they allow me to generate further questions at a later stage, in the light of my developing data analysis, should I wish?’ (see also Andrews, 2003). Of course, a

set of research questions should not be too general, vague or multidimensional, and below I show how these pitfalls can be avoided through the use of different *types*, *sequences*, *combinations* and *hierarchies*.