

## Tools in the Toolbox, Nay, Tool-Books!

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### **Thought seed:**

All of us have used some tool or the other in our lives and some of these tools become our favourite ones. Most of us also have a tool-shelf or at least a tool box with some basic tools at home. But have you noticed that in a hospital, the nurses use bandage-gauze to tie up the shutters of a broken window or use it for various other purposes other than bandaging a patient's wound? Similarly, a tailor uses torn pieces of cloth to do the same thing, while a teacher uses gum tape. A single problem of a broken hook or the shutting mechanism in a window brings about many different solutions. If the same problem is encountered in a puncture shop, we can comfortably assume that the solution would come from old rubber tube strips and not bandage gauze, cloth, or gum tape. The same problem triggers different solutions using readily available materials that are transformed into tools based on the profession that one is following. If we regularly cook at home, what instruments (spoons, ladles, vessels etc) would we reach out to as a tool? How is a tool defined? Does its original function or its shape, size or quality decide that, or is it its utility that makes it a tool? In the hands of a great professional can any instrument/object become a tool? Bandage-gauze is made to be used on a wound in a patient, but what is it doing in a window? Similarly, cloth is cut up by a tailor and stitched to make a skirt or a shirt, but what is it doing in the broken window shutter? What about the gum tape? There are some dedicated objects

like a screw-driver, hammer, screw-spanner etc that are categorised as “tools” normally used only for specific purposes. But what do we do when we do not find them? We use something that looks like a screwdriver (like the back of a spoon or a knife) to help us unscrew or tighten something, don't we? It may/may not function the way we want it to, but we do try, don't we? Think deeply about the ‘tool kits’ we use in our life! How are they defined, constructed, categorised, labelled and used by us?



### **Awkwardness around tools: Do I know or not know!**

As researching teachers and as research students we are constantly questioned about the research tools that we have used or are going to use in our study. Our first contact with this term would have left us confused about its relevance in research in language/ humanities. Tools, for us, belong in the local mechanic shop, or big factory: in research, maybe in the sciences. It did perplex me too just like you. It is natural to feel this way. There is nothing wrong with us! It is more natural to feel that tools seem out of place in our discipline where we deal with texts, words, students etc. Some of us have done courses in research methods and read about research tools such as interviews, questionnaires, opinionnaires etc. It would naturally leave us in a more confused state when we are novice researchers. All we have is a list of names and their structure, but no one has attempted to teach us how to select them according to our research problem. We end up replicating what our seniors did and follow the safe path. We decide to answer any question about our tools with, *'Oh, I am using focussed-group interviews'* or we often say *'I sent out a google form questionnaire'*, where we often seemingly conduct data collection and map it to well-known, oft-used tools and often do not admit that *'we do not have a clue about what we are using and why!'* More often than not we just want to get out of the awkwardness in the conversation. This is again not surely unique to you, but has happened to all of us; none of us talk about such nonawareness loudly or openly. We do not realise that our awkwardness actually comes from the courses and the coursebooks that we have learnt from. The books on research methods just describe the tool box, nay, the tool shops. It feels nice to look around in a tool shop or a tool list (as listed in a research methods book/

course). By the time we complete the course, we know some of the names of these research tools but it stops there. Since we can list many 'tools' it seems that we know a lot about tools, but then deep down, we also know that we do not know enough and are very unsure of ourselves! We assume that we must wait until we actually begin to research and that, at that point, it will all fall into place; that theory will automatically get converted into practice. We feel even more awkward if we have passed that research methods course with distinction but we are not sure about the research tools that we need to use in our study.

### **The Actual Research Scene!**

After finishing a course on research methods or reading up a 'good' book, we are inspired to begin/continue researching. We seem confident because we have read up and have cleared the course with flying colours, but when someone asks us what research tools we plan to use, we find ourselves inside that same awkwardness box again. We take the well-trodden path and answer by listing a few names that we picked up from the course/course book. However, internally we know that often we have no clue about what we are saying and why. We run back to those books or notes to gain clarity, but the more the supervisor or the editor asks us about the tools we plan to or have already used in our research, we sink a few feet deeper into confusion. This seems like a never-ending vicious cluelessness circle that spins us into a dizziness.

Now, take a deep breath! It is not your fault and no, you are not deficient; there is a strong reason for your awkwardness and yes, we have a way out!

The books and the courses that 'teach' you about tools are like the tool-shop, where you have a big

choice and a wide range. There are descriptions and sometimes even a demonstration of what each tool can do if it is a big shop (as in a 'top-notch' book or course on research methods) but sometimes you will also find yourself in a local tool shop (as a mediocre book or course on research methods) where some tools will be on display but many will be put away in unseen drawers and the salesperson will expect you to tell him/her what you want to buy and in what size. Suppose you say 'I need a hammer', s/he being naturally busy in a small crammed shop with many professional customers will ask you if you need a big or a small one; whether you need a steel or an iron or a rubber or a silicone hammer! This is exactly what happens when you begin your research with the generic hammer as a tool. You may want to use a questionnaire as a tool, but what kind, and what would you want to put in as actual questions? What is the focus of your study and how do you capture your focus in each of those questions that you include? Who decides or can help you? How do you decide? And why should it matter, you ask? Well, what would help you decide which hammer you buy? If you want to drive a big nail into a concrete wall, you would buy and use a big hammer, but if you want to flatten a dent in your kitchen pot you would need a silicone hammer, wouldn't you? The same rule applies to screwdrivers or any other tool for that matter.

### **The Tools for research!**

Getting the right tool is not just about selection but also about deftness of use: a lot of skill is associated with the usage of tools. We need to decide whether we need a screwdriver or a hammer and then, which type of hammer/screwdriver. Similarly, we need to decide, first, of all, whether we need to use an interview or a questionnaire in our research. After that, we must

take care to ensure that each word used in our tool is connected closely to our research problem. This requires a tremendous amount of thinking, sorting, clarifying, choosing, rationalising and NONE of it can be a random choice! This choice is heavily dependent on the problem we intend to fix, isn't it? Is it a nail or a screw? If a nail, hammer, or if it is a screw in a wooden chair, we need a screwdriver. So far so good. This means that we need to choose our tools based on the research problem we set out to solve or examine. In other words, the research problem, written up as research questions or hypotheses, will need tools to help us examine/ answer that problem. We must choose our tools carefully and cleverly so that the job gets done seamlessly. We must be very clear in our mind about the rationales for choosing one tool over the other, and more importantly write them up explicitly in our research paper or thesis. Otherwise our awkwardness will be clearly visible to seasoned researchers, who are probably your supervisors or editors. It is usually expected that we match our tools explicitly to each research question that we have in the chosen study. Sometimes, if we spell out aims and objectives in our study, the match-making must extend there too! Phew! Yes, another important aspect of using tools is linked to handling skills. Just think about it, some of the best hammers or screwdrivers are useless if we do not have the skilled deftness required while using them. We may not be able to twist and turn the screwdriver or aim and rightly hit the nail on its head with the best and the most expensive hammer that we just bought. But a spoon or a knife blade or a stone in the hands of a skilled person can function as a screwdriver or a hammer, right? The job gets done even without a 'designated, dedicated' tool in the hands of a skilled person.

As researchers and research authors we need

to not only have a research toolkit, but learn how, when, where, and what type of tools we need to use. More importantly, we need to plan all this before we begin our research and not after we finish collecting our data with the tool we have somehow put together. For this we need a reasonable amount of clarity on the research problem/s at hand or the research path we wish to take. These will determine what research tools we need to employ to treat that research problem. Tools are used to collect data that will be instrumental in solving our research questions. This means, a mere presence or random use of research tools with non-alignment with the research questions will not help us; it will be a wasted effort like buying a toolkit when we do not know what we are going to use it for, or how to use it, particularly when we do not have the skill or deftness in handling them. It is good to make a beginning, but better to continue with a skilled execution of the research using appropriate tools. The more clarity and better practice we have, the easier it gets. And yes, the

awkwardness will reduce through practice, more conscious engagement with the tools in research and through reading up on other quality research papers in our area. Seasoned research professionals who are deft at handling research tools are like the nurses, tailors and teachers who use their favourite tools/objects to find a solution to an impending problem. And we Indians are proud of using Jugaad even in language use (Deepa, 2023)<sup>1</sup> as everywhere else often as a second nature to us. Let us activate, innovate and publish quality research using great tools!

Happy tool shopping and happier researching to you!

1. Deepa, Shree (2023) “Practices in Indian signages: The four-pronged linguistic jugaad model” at the *Language Policy Forum*, at SOAS, University of London, 15-16 June, 2023.

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