



Evidence Summary

The Illusion of Care: Limited and Superficial Caring Discourse in Bilingual Public Library Interactions

A Review of:

Frye, J., & Hasler-Barker, M. (2024). "Lady can talk forever...": Exploring caring discourse in bilingual librarianship. *Library & Information Science Research*, 46(2), 1–9.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2024.101301>

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Received: 9 Sept. 2025

Accepted: 9 Jan. 2026

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DOI: 10.18438/eblip30884

Abstract

Objective – To investigate how bilingual reference librarians in a public library express care in their interactions with community members, and to examine whether and how librarians' linguistic choices reflect authentic caring discourse in multilingual contexts.

Design – A case study of bilingual reference desk transactions.

Setting – Online.

Subjects – A public library in a U.S.-Mexico border town.

Methods – Members of the research team digitally recorded approximately 20 hours of reference desk interactions over one week and collected extensive field notes. Bilingual transcribers produced full

transcripts, categorized by language use (Spanish-only, English-only, bilingual). The research team examined the transcripts under the guidance of the critical discourse analysis methodology.

The researchers used Fairclough's three-dimensional framework (description, interpretation, and explanation) to summarize interactions, examine linguistic features, and analyze expressions of care in relation to social and cultural contexts. Coding of the transcripts was refined through feminist research practices, ensuring attentiveness, validation, and dialogue across researcher perspectives.

Main Results – Caring discourse was infrequent in bilingual reference transactions. Out of 20 bilingual interactions, only 3 contained explicit expressions of care. The caring discourse was mostly brief, primarily delivered in English regardless of the community member's language choice and often tied to emotional disclosures rather than the initial informational requests. The researchers identified three main categories of caring discourse: commiseration, soothing assurance, and expressions of condolence. These were supported by five conversational devices: interjections, idiomatic expressions, lexical intensifiers, voice modulation (such as whispering), and humor. For example, the librarians used commiseration to acknowledge difficulties with English pronunciation or experiences of discrimination or offered condolence in response to disclosures about illness and loss. Humor appeared occasionally but often reflected discomfort or reinforced stereotypes rather than building solidarity. Although some librarians attempted to show empathy, their responses often revealed underlying deficit-based perceptions. For instance, disabilities were minimized through whispered assurances, implying embarrassment, while older patrons' struggles with technology were met with dismissive humor about aging. Hispanic librarians also avoided using Spanish with community members who initiated conversations in that language, which created distance and limited deeper connection. The researchers believe these patterns indicated that surface-level caring expressions frequently masked disengagement, callousness, or adherence to dominant cultural norms. Several broader themes emerged: including camouflaged needs, where community members sought emotional support disguised as informational inquiries; the failure of shared identity to guarantee care, as Hispanic librarians sometimes distanced themselves from Hispanic patrons; and the dismissal of patrons' emotional needs due to inattention or institutional pressures.

Conclusion – The researchers believe bilingual caring discourse at the reference desk was often more illusion than reality, reflecting institutional conformity rather than genuine responsiveness to community members. Thus, the researchers recommend using care theory for continued use as a framework for examining librarian discourse, especially in multilingual and multiracial contexts. Additionally, the authors encourage further research to explore other aspects of care such as competence and responsiveness. Librarians need to be prepared to meet both informational and emotional needs, with cross-cultural communication and multilingual skills integrated into education/training and employ improvisation and role-play to practice caring responses. The authors also encourage reflective analysis of language use and advise institutional support to help manage the emotional labor of care.

Commentary

This study is a valuable contribution to the scholarship on caring practices and bilingual service in library and information science (LIS). Examined under the The CAT: A Generic Critical Appraisal Tool (Perryman & Rathbun-Grubb, n.d.), this study is strong in the following areas: 1) the authors clearly identified an important gap in research by noting that care in bilingual librarian-patron interactions had not been empirically examined, and they framed their study with a well-defined research question about whether and how care is expressed linguistically; 2) the case study design, grounded in care theory and critical discourse analysis, was well-suited to capturing both the discourse itself and the broader social context, making the methodology appropriate for the research aims; 3) the authors rigorously conducted data analysis through Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional framework, supported by bilingual transcription, repeated listenings of recordings, and feminist research practices

that strengthened validity and reliability; 4) the findings are directly relevant to the field of(LIS), offering practical implications for librarian training, cross-cultural communication, and professional development in multilingual and multicultural contexts; and 5) the recommendations for LIS education and professional development, including integrating multilingual training, role-play, and reflective practice, were well aligned with the study's findings and supported by the broader literature.

The authors acknowledged several limitations that affect the breadth and generalizability of the study's findings. One such limitation was the observer's paradox, as the presence of recording equipment and librarian consent may have altered behaviours during reference desk interactions. The short, one-week data collection period also restricted the opportunity to capture the full range of librarian practices, and unintelligible portions of the recordings may have obscured additional instances of bilingual discourse. In addition, the anonymity of community members prevented the collection of demographic details, limiting the ability to apply a fully intersectional analysis. Member checks were not conducted with librarian participants, leaving interpretations to rely primarily on researcher positionality and field notes.

The study examined librarian discourse but did not include interviews or surveys with community members. As a result, whether patrons actually perceived or experienced interactions as caring (or uncaring) remains unknown.

Regarding data analysis, the study primarily linked caring discourse to linguistic expressions (e.g., commiseration, condolence, idiomatic phrases). Nonverbal forms of care, relational dynamics, or institutional practices that may also communicate care were less emphasized, potentially narrowing the picture of how care is enacted. Since the analysis focused on short reference desk transactions, longer-term relationships between librarians and community members, which might demonstrate deeper or sustained care, were not captured. While the authors used feminist research practices to check interpretations, their reliance on critical discourse analysis and care theory could have led to overemphasis on power dynamics and deficit perspectives, potentially overshadowing more positive or neutral aspects of bilingual service, like routine helpfulness, efficiency, or even subtle forms of support.

By empirically examining how care is, or is not, expressed in bilingual reference transactions, this study explored an area that has been largely overlooked in prior research. It broadens the understanding of bilingual librarianship, underscores the importance of preparing librarians to meet both informational and emotional needs, and offers practical implications for LIS education, professional development, and cross-cultural communication.

References

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