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What Does Multilingual Research Show Us About Research Ethics? Examples and Challenges From the Field

Sophia Schönthaler [1], Andrea Leone-Pizzighella [2], and Johanna Mitterhofer [3]

[1] Center for Migration and Societal Change, Eurac Research, Italy
[2] Marie Sklodowska-Curie Fellow, Institute for Applied Linguistics, Eurac Research, Italy
[3] Center for Migration and Societal Change, Eurac Research, Italy

Correspondence: Sophia Schönthaler (sophia.schoenthaler@eurac.edu)

Abstract

Ethics review boards (ERBs) often clash with the emergent, iterative, and co-constructed nature of critical and constructivist research. Conversely, these approaches also challenge ERBs, particularly around the role of language in informed consent, knowledge co-construction, and dissemination. Multilingual research makes these tensions especially visible by foregrounding how language shapes research processes. This article examines the overlooked ethical dimensions of multilingual research, especially in relation to institutional ethics review. Drawing on our multilingual work with marginalized communities, we show how language mediates critical aspects of research practice: from obtaining consent and navigating gatekeeping to co-constructing knowledge. We pursue three aims: (a) reflect on how language mediates ethics approval in critical and constructivist inquiry; (b) explore how sensibility toward language fosters epistemic justice, cultural sensitivity, and methodological appropriateness; and (c) raise awareness of the role of language in ethics procedures, research relationships, and definitions of data. We illustrate these aims with fieldwork examples highlighting the challenges of building trust under restrictive ethics protocols; the need for nuanced linguistic practices in contexts of inequality and underrepresentation; and the use of arts-based methods as an alternative to language-based approaches. The article concludes with examples from the formation of our multilingual institute's ERB and recommendations for other boards.

Keywords

arts-based methods; dialogic and oral ethics; discrimination; institutional ethics; Italy; migration; multilingualism; participatory methods; research ethics; Romani; school-based research

1. Introduction

Ethics review boards (ERBs), research ethics committees, and institutional review boards emerged in biomedical research in response to egregious ethical violations. These prompted foundational ethical guidelines like the Nuremberg Code of 1947 (Nuremberg Military Tribunals, 1947), the Declaration of Helsinki of 1964 (amended in 2024; World Medical Association, 2024), and the Belmont Report in 1979 (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979), which emphasized principles of autonomy, beneficence, and justice in research (Speiglman & Spear, 2009). Initially designed to safeguard human subjects in clinical trials, ERBs assessed risks, benefits, and consent for research involving vulnerable populations. Only later, as academic institutions standardized ethics protocols, did ERBs expand their jurisdiction to the social sciences and humanities.

Critics argue that this "ethics creep" has imposed biomedical-esque assumptions of risk, consent, and trust onto approaches that conceived of and handled such questions differently (N. Shore, 2007). As more awareness is generated about power dynamics, rights, and the shareability of information and data (e.g., standards regarding FAIR and Open Science standards), the shortcomings of ERBs have emerged more clearly (Hammersley, 2009). Moving outside of the postpositivist paradigm, applying ERBs to critical and constructivist research often simplifies or undermines the flexible, relational, iterative, and context-sensitive methods that resist ERBs' rigid proceduralism (Rasmussen & Cooper, 2019; van den Hoonaard, 2011).

Ethics approval procedures vary across institutions, as there is no European legal obligation to obtain formal approval, while compliance with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is mandatory for all research involving personal data. Ethical review for social science studies typically requires an outline of the objectives, methodology, recruitment strategies, and procedures for obtaining informed consent, alongside measures to protect participants' privacy and data security. GDPR compliance further necessitates details on data collection, storage and sharing, anonymization, and informing participants of their rights to access, correct, or withdraw their data.

This article focuses on three cases hosted by an Italian research institution, in which seemingly straightforward regulations were put to the test due to the multiple languages used in them. While research data were primarily subject to Italian regulations, the projects were conducted across three national contexts (Italy, Croatia, and Sweden), each characterized by distinct cultural, linguistic, and sociodemographic landscapes. We draw on these three cases throughout the article to highlight how ERB procedures, while well-intentioned, need to carefully consider the nexus of language, law, and social norms within and across national contexts. Further, at the time of writing, Sophia Schönthaler is spearheading the development of the ERB at the authors' research institute, Eurac Research, in the multilingual Italian province of Bolzano/Bozen, and is drawing on these multilingual research experiences to inform the broader ethical and legal frameworks which are being developed for a research institution of over 500 staff in 17 research specializations.

In this article we do not seek to minimize the importance of ERBs, nor do we seek to place critical constructivist multilingual research in its own category. Rather, we draw on our (multilingual) work with (multilingual) marginalized communities in order to:

1. Reflect on how language mediates ethics approval processes in critical and constructivist inquiry;

2. Raise questions about how language allows for epistemic justice, cultural sensitivity, and methodological appropriateness; and

3. Increase awareness about the role that language plays in ethics procedures, in establishing research relationships, and in what counts as data.

We use examples from our research to highlight issues that span all research approaches, but which emerge especially clearly in critical (and/or) constructivist paradigms in or around multilingualism (Jacobs & van Hest, 2024; Meier et al., 2024). Namely, we focus on how informed consent is obtained and on how knowledge is co-constructed (and therefore how "data" is generated). We focus on these key aspects because language is often erroneously treated in ethics reviews as an invisible medium that relays information between researchers and participants. We remind readers, however, that language is always ideologically charged, its use is always politically motivated, and that language and power are inextricably intertwined (Foucault, 1971). It is therefore fundamental, even in less linguistically complex research, to consider the social function and meaning of the language(s) that we use when working with research participants, developing data collection instruments, and generating data.

2. Ethical Challenges of Multilingual (Ethnographic) Research

Critics have increasingly pointed to the rise of what C. Shore and Wright (2024), Pels et al. (2024), and others call an audit culture within academic institutions: an environment where accountability is measured through formal procedures, standardized documentation, and quantifiable compliance, often at the expense of situated ethical judgment. Within this framework, ERBs function not only as instruments of ethical oversight but as mechanisms for institutional risk management, prioritizing the legal and reputational protection of institutions over the needs of research participants (Haggerty, 2004; C. Shore & Wright, 2015). This shift has led to what Strathern (2000) describes as the "tyranny of transparency," where ethical rigor is equated with procedural correctness rather than with substantive, dialogic engagement. As a result, ERBs tend to favor projects with clearly bounded, low-risk designs that conform to bureaucratic expectations and are more suited to experimental research than to ethnographic, participatory, and arts-based projects that involve emergent or unpredictable dynamics (van den Hoonaard, 2011). Excessive procedural standardization of ERBs risks undermining the very ethical reflexivity they are meant to promote (N. Shore, 2007). Their increasing surveillance and bureaucratic control restrict academic freedom and distort research design (Haggerty, 2004), treating researchers as potential threats rather than as competent professionals (Dingwall, 2008). Together, these critiques suggest that, while well-intentioned, ethics review processes often result in a one-size-fits-all, "tick-box" approach that stifles methodological innovation and critical inquiry (Herzfeld, 2023).

In multilingual research, a set of comparable issues arises. Researchers working across languages and cultures require specialized ethical guidance when navigating issues related to informed consent, the co-construction of knowledge, and data dissemination (Behi & Nolan, 1995). One of the most complex aspects of multilingual research within the context of ethical procedures is obtaining truly informed consent. That is, when working with multilingual populations, translating consent forms is not a simple technical task (Chiocchetti, 2023). Rather, in addition to a range of legal issues, it can open up a range of ethical concerns (Skaff et al., 2002). Subtle language differences, cultural interpretations, and existing power dynamics all influence how consent is understood and whether it is genuinely voluntary (Behi & Nolan, 1995; Sehlikoglu,

2024). While accurate translation of consent forms is essential, word-for-word accuracy is not always sufficient or desirable. Researchers need to understand the cultural context, social norms, and everyday expressions to ensure the information is both meaningful and accessible to participants (Koulouriotis, 2011), as well as legally sound. In some cases, the very idea of informed consent may not align with local norms, especially in communities where decisions are made collectively rather than individually. This requires researchers to be flexible and respectful, adapting their approach while still upholding ethical standards (Timraz et al., 2017). Ultimately, the choice of translation method should reflect the research goals, available resources, and the need for translators who are not only fluent in both languages but also culturally, methodologically, and legally competent (Cruchinho et al., 2024).

In light of the issues raised above about ethical ethnographic research and ethical multilingual research, it should come as no surprise that multilingual ethnographic research is doubly complex. In this type of research, ERB challenges are given and expected: gatekeeping and consent procedures can take months to complete, may require the collaboration of multiple specialists, and can still risk not being adequate for the needs of the researcher or the participants. This type of research is necessarily more time- and resource-intensive, and risks being dispreferred by researchers and their employers who are increasingly accustomed to short-term research grants. In fact, we often see a kind of "old faithful" consent document appearing and reappearing from one project to the next because it is simpler to continue to re-purpose a document that has already gone through the review process. The language in these documents risks becoming entirely perfunctory, purely procedural, and fossilized. Institutional ethics review procedures thus risk leading researchers toward social reproduction rather than social innovation. These risks have deleterious effects on the quality of research and on the types of realities it represents.

3. Case Studies: Multilingual Challenges Across Research Phases

In the subsections below, the three authors reflect on the language-related considerations we needed to make in our research and what these considerations brought to light about how language informs and impacts ethics review procedures and data collection (which, in our research, is dialogic and co-constructed). In Andrea Leone-Pizzighella's research on two urban middle schools in multilingual contexts in Northern Italy, she reflects on the institutional obstacles to building trust and gaining the consent of newcomer students and their parents. Sophia Schönthaler then draws on her multilingual fieldwork experiences with Romani women in Croatia, Sweden, and Italy to illustrate the challenges of working with non-standardized languages with a population that is historically mistrustful of institutions like universities. Johanna Mitterhofer then discusses how arts-based methods can be used to supplement or even circumvent otherwise language-heavy data collection methods with participants who have limited knowledge of local official languages, and reflects on the challenges arts-based methods may pose to institutional ethics procedures.

3.1. Institutional and Ethical Barriers to Multilingual Inclusion

Since language is often treated by non-linguists as a transparent medium through which ideas are transmitted, its role in the legal and ethical consent process is often oversimplified. However, language plays a fundamental role in determining who participates in research, how much agency they have in the research process, how data are co-constructed among participants, what types of information and experiences eventually become "data" and which ones get thrown out. This section offers reflections based on STEMCo,

a participatory action research project in two middle schools in Northeastern Italy, starting with Vignette 1 (all names are pseudonyms).

Vignette 1. Fieldnotes—STEMCo:

> I take a minute to hand out the consent forms to the students while the teacher is getting set up. Three students asked for consent forms for their parents in English. The support teacher tells me that there is one girl who doesn't really speak Italian: "Actually, she doesn't speak it at all."

> Of the sixty families who were invited to an in-person information event about my project at one school, two moms showed up. Five of the forty families at the other school attended the online information event. A few weeks later, every group of students in the classroom has one person who doesn't want to be recorded or who hasn't turned in a consent form yet. I move the recorder to a new place. Two students who haven't turned in their consent forms then sit down next to the recorder. I move the recorder away from them (and will probably have to throw out this recording).

> Still weeks later, I told Kamala and Tatiana that I can see they're not comfortable with me recording them, even though they both agreed to everything on the assent form. I reassured them that I'm not trying to listen to their private conversations.

The STEMCo project involved over 400 hours of ethnographic and participatory engagement in five second-year middle school classes over the course of the 2022–2023 school year, during which time audiovisual and textual classroom discourse data were shared back with teachers during quarterly reflection sessions. The critical-constructivist and participatory approach of the project led to unexpected obstacles throughout the informed consent process: Despite the researcher's institution being focused on applied linguistics in a historically multilingual political context, complex language considerations had previously only been made in the post-consent phase. However, given that the middle school student body involved in this project was multilingual (and, in terms of ethical review, in highly consequential ways), STEMCo needed to take language into account from the beginning. While Pasolini Middle School, in the trilingual South Tyrol, was inherently involved in a framework of multilingualism at a structural and political level, this was not the case for De Gasperi Middle School, located in the officially monolingual Region of Veneto (n.b., both school names are pseudonyms). The urban location of both schools, however, meant that the student body was multiethnic, with several newly arrived students and established residents who used multiple languages in their daily lives. STEMCo aimed to explore the different strategies and supports for the accommodation of newly arrived students in a historically multilingual context (i.e., Pasolini in South Tyrol) and in a newly multilingual context (i.e., De Gasperi in Veneto), and was therefore highly attentive to the role(s) of language in the consent process (Leone-Pizzighella, 2023a, 2023b).

The first step of this project was to gauge the schools' interest in participating, a process that took over a year in the case of one school. Once this initial step was taken, the development of informed consent documents and the legal and ethical review process began in tandem. I received a copy of the research center's usual informed consent template, which was typically used for research involving adult participants who are highly literate in Italian, German, and/or English. However, given the interest in non-institutionalized forms of multilingualism and plurilingualism, two aspects of the language used in the template immediately presented the potential for

non- or miscomprehension on the part of the potential participants: (a) the legal register of the consent form per Italian laws, regardless of the language (e.g., English or Italian), and the impossibility of modifying it; and (b) the non-availability of the GDPR in languages relevant to the research aims.

The first issue is that the legal language (that is, the specific phrasing) of the consent form is binding. If it is translated or modified in any way—whether for interlanguage or intralanguage reasons—it becomes legally invalid (Stanizzi, personal communication; see also Chiocchetti, 2023). In STEMCo, a project that sought to involve especially newly arrived adolescent students, this presented a major issue. It was impossible to obtain or create a copy of the consent form that was both legally valid in Italy, in a language that all of the families could read, and in a register that was simple enough for both the children and any parents who were not accustomed to reading legal or technical texts. In this sense, most consent forms follow a one nation, one language ideology: the Italian legalese in these consent forms is meant to cover all potential research participants in Italy, but without taking into account the other languages spoken by or preferred by many Italian residents and citizens. There are some exceptions in the case of, e.g., German in South Tyrol (Italy), but since these texts must be legally approved in each language and in each country, it is nearly impossible to obtain, for instance, a Spanish language consent form for an Italian institution.

In addition to this issue of the consent form language is the fact that the GDPR only exists in 24 European languages, and is not available in the majority of the languages spoken by the parents of students with recent migration histories in Italy (e.g., Urdu, Arabic, Albanian, Russian), nor does it exist in a simplified form (see, e.g., Chiocchetti, 2024). Since the students are minors, their assent alone does not suffice for consent to participate in a research project: Their parents' consent is necessary for their involvement. Even though students may have been able to explain to their parents some of the basic points of the project (e.g., that it involved videorecording, that it was run by Eurac Research, and that it was focused on language in schools), the research team could not, in good faith, consider a signature from a parent based on these basic pieces of information truly informed consent. Many of these students are used to language brokering (Ceccoli, 2021) and are very proficient at understanding the world of adults as a result of this experience with language brokering, but the research team opted not to load the ethical and legal burden of STEMCo onto the middle school students involved in our research.

This meant that many of those students for whom STEMCo was designed ended up being excluded from the project by default. Possibly, since their parents could not fully understand the document sent home for a signature, many of them did not turn in a signed consent form. From five months prior to the start of fieldwork until two months after it was scheduled to begin—with the clock for data collection ticking—the research team attempted to mitigate this issue by providing consent forms in digital and paper formats in both English and Italian. We also provided opportunities for the parents to ask for explanations of the project in other languages, to speak to the research team in person at the schools, as well as to attend online presentations of the project. The research team also circulated a plain-language video about the project to the parents (in Italian and English), with visual aids. However, these efforts were not sufficient to bridge the gap between the research institute and the parents. Therefore, more out of logistical necessity than due to completeness, we concluded the consent process and simply worked around the non-participating students. This already difficult logistical task was exacerbated by a tough ethical decision that the research team made in light of the consent process failing in some key ways: We decided not to inform teachers about who had consented, for fear that teachers would try and "help" the researchers by, e.g., clustering all of the non-participating students

on one side of the classroom while the other side was filmed. We were concerned that teachers' knowledge of the results of the consent process could create, de facto, a segregated classroom, which we decided would be entirely counterproductive to the project as well as detrimental to the students.

One possible way of opening up participation to those who do make it through the gatekeeping and consent processes is to explore more and different ways of closing the gap between researchers and participants. The following sections offer two means of creatively addressing this need.

3.2. Gatekeeping and Research Approval: The Case of the "Stateless" Romani Language

In her PhD research on Romani women's political participation, Sophia analyzed political opportunities for Romani women in three national contexts (Schönthaler, 2025). From 2023 to 2024, 31 interviews were conducted. The reflections presented in this section thereby rely on, first, the process before entering the field, and second, the interviews conducted with politically active Romani women from three countries (Croatia, Italy, and Sweden), many of whom are involved in international advocacy work at both the national and EU levels. All research participants were literate, with many having completed at least secondary education. It should also be noted that the doctoral project was self-funded and not embedded within a larger, externally funded research project. See Vignette 2.

Vignette 2. Fieldnotes—Italy, April 2023:

> Elena welcomed me warmly in her hometown in Southern Italy. By car, we drove to the office of the association she leads. At first, our conversation in Italian was light—she laughed often and spoke with pride about her work. But the mood shifted when we began discussing the situation of Romani minorities and their language in Italy. "We cannot preserve our Romani language," she said, her voice tinged with both frustration and sadness. She pointed out a crucial but often overlooked fact: The Romani language is frequently portrayed as a single, unified language, when in reality "there are various Romani dialects, some of which I cannot understand." Still, Elena's determination shone through. Her work with the association, rooted in community solidarity and everyday advocacy, offers a quiet but powerful form of resistance—and a reminder that the preservation of language often begins in small acts.

Conducting research in multilingual and marginalized contexts, such as with Romani communities, presents a set of complex ethical and methodological challenges (Barany, 2002; Bhopal & Deuchar, 2015) particularly during the stage of ethics approval, as certain aspects of the research process itself are difficult to predict before entering the field. As discussed in Section 3.1, a concrete example is the language of the consent form, which must be presented in both specific wording and particular languages during ethics approval, and potential gatekeepers must be identified. These ethical compliance challenges are especially acute when working with stateless or non-standardized languages, such as the Romani language, which varies in its recognition from state to state, and is characterized by significant dialectal variation between groups (Matras, 2005, 2015). This variety of Romani dialects, with varying degrees of mutual intelligibility, reflects the community's diverse migratory histories (Matras, 2005, 2015). This linguistic complexity is cyclically bound together with the long-standing marginalization and persecution of Romani populations throughout Europe, fostering collective mistrust toward formal institutions, including academic researchers (Sigona & Trehan, 2009).

This section focuses on three crucial components of the doctoral research process: first, gaining access to the field and the role of gatekeepers in navigating linguistic complexities; second, the development of the consent form; and third, the languages used during the interviews.

Firstly, the author's outsider status complicated the research process, as a non-Romani researcher who does not speak any Romani dialect. The absence of a shared linguistic repertoire meant that Sophia was structurally dependent on gatekeepers to broker access to the field. In this PhD study, gatekeepers were primarily politically active Romani women, as well as Romani men who held visible and influential roles within their communities, such as leaders of grassroots associations, NGOs, or political parties. Their dual positionality as insiders and as public figures significantly shaped the dynamics of access, the framing of research encounters, and the ethical terrain of participation (Andress et al., 2020; Ruhland et al., 2023).

Relying on gatekeepers as linguistic and social intermediaries had major methodological and ethical consequences (Gřundělová et al., 2024): During early fieldwork, each time the gatekeeper translated, paraphrased, or shifted register, the meaning risked drifting. In the absence of a standardized orthography or common written reference point, these processes resembled a "chain of transmission" in which messages could be recontextualized as they passed from person to person (Berman & Tyyskä, 2011).

Nevertheless, gatekeepers were crucial in unfolding the linguistic complexity of the research before entering the field. In Croatia, where Romani people are officially recognized as a linguistic minority, the use of the Romani language in everyday life was more prevalent (Posavec & Hrvatic, 2000). In contrast, Italy does not officially recognize the Romani language as a minority language. Participants frequently noted that this lack of recognition has a negative impact on both the perception and status of the language, resulting in reduced funding and limited institutional support for its speakers. Consequently, the use of the Romani language is more restricted, with many individuals primarily speaking Italian as their first language (Scala, 2020). And finally, in Sweden, Romani dialects were less commonly spoken and largely confined to private, family settings. Swedish was the dominant language used in everyday communication, particularly among younger generations (Hancock, 2021).

Overall, across all three research contexts, several research participants in this project indicated that Romani dialects are predominantly used in oral, private, or intra-community contexts, rendering their deployment in a formal research setting potentially uncomfortable or stigmatizing. Moreover, as different dialects are spoken, one research participant in Italy explained that they speak Italian during meetings among Romani women. Hence, the three national contexts have different linguistic norms, where language proficiency and the appropriateness of its use do not align in predictable ways (Halwachs, 2003).

One of the ethically and bureaucratically most sensitive components of the author's project was the development of an informed consent protocol. Preparing consent materials required navigating not only the ethical and legal obligations for conducting interviews but also the linguistic heterogeneity of Romani communities and the legacies of institutional mistrust (Foster & Freeman, 2013). These challenges varied across the three countries, each with its own socio-political recognition (or lack thereof) of Romani minorities. Because there is no standardized Romani language, and dialectal variation limits mutual intelligibility, providing a single "Romani" consent form was neither technically nor ideologically defensible. Instead, consent materials and interview protocols were prepared in English, Italian, Croatian, and Swedish, reflecting the expectation that participants may prefer to read in one language and speak in another.

This sociolinguistic complexity challenges the assumptions embedded in many institutional ethics review frameworks, which often take standardized, written consent forms and formalized procedures for granted. Such protocols, while designed to ensure protection and clarity, may be ill-suited to the realities of multilingual, marginalized, and historically mistrustful contexts. In this research project, ethical rigor was best achieved not through rigid documentation but through a flexible and dialogic approach that was attuned to the context and relational dynamics. Oral explanations of consent, the use of trusted intermediaries to mediate meaning and expectations, and the framing of research aims in culturally resonant terms were essential to ensuring informed and voluntary participation (see Bhupathi & Ravi, 2017).

As with the consent materials, interviews were not conducted in any Romani dialect. Using interpreters would have required dialect-specific mediation across sites, increasing the risks of inconsistent translation, attenuated rapport, and loss of nuance (Berman & Tyyskä, 2011). This excluded Romani women speaking only Romani dialects, but for this specific research project, all Romani women did speak a second language (national majority language) or English. Sophia's working languages are German, Italian, and English, and the vast majority of politically active Romani women interviewed were already accustomed to discussing political participation in English through involvement in international projects and EU-level advocacy. In Croatia, one interview was conducted in Croatian at the participant's request, and since Sophia does not speak Croatian, a trained research assistant served as language facilitator and conducted the interview. The assistant received targeted training on the interview guide and ethical procedures, and Sophia was present during the interview and asked ad hoc questions, which the translator translated in addition to the questions in the co-constructed protocol. The Croatian interview was audio-recorded, transcribed by the facilitator, and subsequently translated into English through a collaborative process between the facilitator and Sophia. Throughout this time-intensive collaboration, reflexivity was crucial, both in recognizing the translator's interpretive role and in critically engaging with how meaning was negotiated and potentially transformed in the process.

The methodological choices were additionally conditioned by resource limitations typical of doctoral research. These precluded the specialized linguistic and methodological infrastructure that would have been required to accommodate multiple Romani varieties. In multilingual contexts characterized by fragmented dialects and the absence of a standardized orthography, high-quality linguistic mediation would have required multiple dialect-specific interpreters, professional translation and back-translation of instruments and consent materials, and specialized transcription, all of which exceeded the project's budget. Under these constraints, prioritizing majority-language interviews, chosen collaboratively with participants, constituted the most methodologically consistent and ethically defensible strategy to preserve comparability and minimize mistakes during translation.

To sum up, a key challenge in preparing ERB applications is the need to anticipate factors that may only emerge during the research process. For instance, the role and significance of the gatekeeper often become evident only once fieldwork is underway and therefore may remain unidentified at the application stage. Likewise, the linguistic complexity of each research project and process emerges over time and can never be entirely accurately foreseen. It calls for an ethics that is not only procedural but relational, one that is responsive to the lived realities of research participants.

During the process described above, the role of language becomes particularly evident, and it is not without its challenges. The following section will therefore explore an alternative mode of data collection in fieldwork, with a focus on how visual communication can augment data collection with multilingual participants.

3.3. Co-Constructing Knowledge: Potentials and Challenges

Arts-based methods have increasingly been recognized not only for their ability to enrich data collection but also for promoting inclusivity in knowledge production: a central aspect of research ethics in critical-constructivist approaches with multilingual participants. Mitterhofer and Obukhova (2024a) wrote:

> We are in a classroom, sitting around a large sheet of paper. There are cards everywhere, some with words, others with scribbles, colors and shapes. Ten young people—apprentices at a vocational school in South Tyrol, Italy—and us: a social anthropologist and a design researcher. We have gathered not for play, but for a crucial conversation about discrimination: Do these young apprentices, about half of them with migration background, encounter discrimination due to their ethnicity, gender or age? Alessandro, Ahmed and Adina have selected the cards they want to place on the big sheet of paper: the scribbles, the colors, the words that best reflect what they associate with the topics written on the paper (e.g., work conditions, relations with colleagues, tasks and responsibilities). "Why did you choose the cards you chose?" my colleague asks. Ahmed laughs, pointing at the red card he just placed on the term "work conditions": "Red because you have to do what you are told to. You have no choice. [Red] like a traffic light." He continues joking with his fellow apprentices about the cards they chose. And then suddenly and without prompting, the discussion turns more serious: talks about customers who refuse being served by an apprentice with a headscarf, colleagues who snicker at somebody's accent, employers giving the worst shift to the person with a foreign surname, teachers who don't take seriously the child with Pakistani parents.

By incorporating visual elements such as photographs or drawings, researchers can help bring certain experiences into the light. Often, this sharing of experiences is not a question of language proficiency alone, but of taboo, stigma, or fear, which may be further compounded by language proficiency. Arts-based methods allow for the emergence of sensitive and nuanced information that might be overlooked by traditional verbal methods, thus producing different, richer, more diverse, and hence potentially more representative data. Although direct comparisons between verbal and visual approaches are limited, scholarship suggests that visual methods can uncover aspects of participants' experiences that might remain hidden in traditional research frameworks (Pain, 2012); they allow access to the "unspeakable" and elicit experiences and perceptions that otherwise may be hidden in carefully practiced narratives (Reavey, 2020). Indeed, by serving as a "neutral third party," visual tools allow participants to articulate intense feelings and challenging memories without speaking directly about a sensitive topic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Thus, especially in contexts where research is conducted in a language in which research participants are not fluent, where a linguistic slip can lead to embarrassment and misunderstanding, arts-based visual methods can provide alternative avenues for self-expression.

Visual methods don't only broaden the scope of gathered data. In contrast to traditional language-heavy research methods such as interviews, surveys, or focus groups, often characterized by profound power hierarchies between researchers and research participants, arts-based methods may provide the setting for

more equal, participatory research relationships and enhance epistemic justice. They acknowledge research participants as experts in their own lives, fostering inclusivity, empowerment, and collaboration in knowledge production instead of, in addition to, or beyond spoken language. This is impactful particularly with regard to marginalized or underrepresented groups such as migrants, minors, indigenous communities, and other minorities, and in the study of complex or sensitive topics. As such, arts-based methods can be key tools in ethical research practice in multilingual settings.

The potential benefits of arts-based approaches were at the core of the decision that led us to adopt these methods in a study investigating experiences of discrimination of apprentices with a migrant background (Mitterhofer & Obukhova, 2024b; Obukhova & Mitterhofer, 2025). Together with social designer Kseniia Obukhova, Johanna, an anthropologist, organized participatory, arts-based workshops with young apprentices in addition to traditional expert interviews and a survey. The workshops were composed of two parts. First, a collective activity was designed to stimulate a subsequent group discussion on apprenticeship-related topics. The initial task involved a large sheet of paper positioned centrally in the classroom, which outlined various macro-areas pertaining to the apprenticeship experience (Figure 1). Participants were asked to choose one of the 86 cards containing adjectives (in Italian and German) and various graphic elements, such as shapes, scribbles, and colors, selected to evoke specific emotional experiences (Enzmann, 2024; Jonauskaite et al., 2020). The subsequent individual activity aimed to explore participants' individual feelings and emotions related to different aspects and moments—past, present, and future—of their apprenticeship. Using a printed timeline, participants were encouraged to use the cards, stickers, and graphics as scaffolding to articulate their thoughts in a spontaneous, silent manner (Figure 2).

Although the group discussion that followed the arts-based activities relied on oral interaction in one of the official local languages (Italian), the activities themselves enabled participants to engage with the themes on their own terms. Participants with limited knowledge of Italian and/or those who might have been hesitant to speak during the discussion were nonetheless able to contribute in meaningful ways, and their perspectives formed an integral part of the data. The activities also provided a valuable means of articulating otherwise

Figure 1. Workshop participants placing cards on a poster during the collective activity.

Figure 2. Workshop participants selecting and placing stickers during the individual activity.

"unspeakable" or difficult experiences of exclusion, discrimination, and racism within a relaxed and informal atmosphere, first in a non-verbal manner and then, if the participant so desired, verbally. By rendering verbal expression optional and allowing extended time for individual and collective engagement with the themes of the study, the design-based visual methods broadened participation beyond linguistic constraints, fostering a more inclusive and empowering research environment, and, ultimately, generating richer data.

Arts-based research, with its innovative and often experimental methods, introduces an additional level of complexity to the already complex landscape of research ethics procedures in multilingual settings. Unlike more conventional research approaches, such as structured interviews or focus groups, where the boundaries between researcher and research participant are clearly delineated, the dynamics within participatory approaches are much less straightforward. In such contexts, participants may shift fluidly between different roles: at times they are positioned as the passive "subjects" of research, while at other moments they act as co-researchers, actively shaping the process by contributing ideas and co-producing knowledge alongside the academic investigator. This fluidity, while enriching the research process, also complicates questions of consent, authorship, and responsibility.

For this reason, it was crucial to ensure that the aims of the participatory, arts-based workshop and the intended use of the resulting data were clearly communicated to participants both in written consent forms and during the workshop itself in the two local official languages (Italian and German). Use of these two languages, which are also used at school and in their apprenticeships, was a less-than-perfect solution, but they were the closest option we had to a common lingua franca. Ethical transparency required not only clarifying what participation would involve in practice, but also outlining how participants' contributions would be integrated into the broader research project. Equally significant was the need to carefully manage participants' expectations regarding the scope of their involvement and, therefore, not to simply present them with a consent form for them to sign, but to engage in substantive and clear dialogue with them. While participatory research is often framed as collaborative and empowering, it is not always possible to fully co-create research with participants, particularly in projects where participatory elements form only one component of a larger, researcher-led design, such as the case study presented here. Here, researchers must navigate a delicate balance: acknowledging the value and agency of participants' contributions while also

making explicit the structural and institutional limits of co-creation. Failing to do so risks both ethical misrepresentation and the disillusionment of participants who may feel their role was overstated.

The use of arts-based methods was therefore not merely a methodological choice, but a central component of striving toward a more ethical and reflexive research practice, which takes seriously the voices of marginalized young people, no matter what language they are in. However, the integration of these methods required the researcher to reflect critically on their implications at multiple levels. On the one hand, there were practical considerations: ensuring informed consent in a multilingual setting, navigating issues of authorship and credit, and safeguarding participants from potential risks linked to sharing personal or sensitive material in a relaxed and informal setting. On the other hand, there were institutional and epistemological considerations: how such non-traditional, fluid methodologies fit within the rigid frameworks of ERBs described above, which often privilege conventional research designs, and how they challenge dominant hierarchies of knowledge production by validating creative, experiential, multimodal, and translinguistic forms of knowing.

Ultimately, the arts-based approach used in this case study served both as a means of generating situated knowledge and as an ethical stance that sought to redistribute, even if only partially, the authority and authorship of research. At the same time, the researcher's responsibility was to remain critically attuned to the limitations of such an approach, ensuring transparency with participants via constant creative feedback and accountability within institutional review structures via standardized consent procedures. This dual awareness of the opportunities and constraints of the method used was essential to ethically sound and epistemologically robust research practice.

4. Towards Ethical Multilingual Research: Implications for ERBs

The following section brings together key insights from our research and proposes six concrete aspects for enhancing the ethics review process in light of issues raised during our multilingual research experiences. Based on the development of our institution's own ERB, these suggestions highlight how institutional ethics can evolve beyond bureaucratic standardization toward a more responsive, inclusive, and ethically grounded practice. These ideas are not meant as rigid prescriptions, but as starting points to invite reflection on how ethics oversight can be more attuned to the complexities of language, power, and context.

We identify the following areas for improvement:

1. Institutional flexibility through iterative review and researcher feedback;
2. Inclusion of ad hoc (linguistic) experts;
3. Oral and dialogic ethics application processes;
4. Recognition of linguistic diversity as an ethical domain;
5. Support for multilingual dissemination and reciprocity;
6. Building researcher capacity through training and mentorship.

4.1. Institutional Flexibility: Revising Protocols Through Iterative Review and Researcher Feedback

Our case studies show that rigid ethical frameworks risk (further) marginalizing particular populations and risk rendering impossible research that does not fit conventional biomedical or post-positivist designs.

To counteract this, ERBs should be governed by living protocols—ethical guidelines that are revisited on an annual basis and revised in light of researchers' vastly diverse experiences, fieldwork dilemmas, and disciplinary innovations. "Complex" cases should be treated as the rule rather than as the exception, and ERBs should take seriously the emergent ethical concerns that researchers encounter when engaging with new research contexts. As the research projects discussed in Section 3 demonstrate, language-sensitive ethics particularly benefit from flexibility: Multilingual settings are rarely predictable or reducible to a single standardized application process, and many linguistic specificities only become apparent once fieldwork is underway.

At our host institution, annual review meetings invite feedback not only from board members but also from researchers whose projects were reviewed in the prior year. These discussions highlight recurring tensions, gaps, and good practices, enabling the ERB to evolve in step with the realities of multilingual (and) ethnographic fieldwork. This practice fosters a culture of learning rather than auditing, aligning ethical oversight with principles of reflexivity and responsiveness. It also counters the bureaucratic inertia often associated with institutional ethics by normalizing procedural adaptability.

4.2. Inclusion of Ad Hoc (Linguistic) Experts

One major shortcoming of many ERBs is their lack of linguistic expertise. Our case studies highlight the importance of treating participants' languages with care and considering the role that language plays in generating data. To address this, we recommend that ERBs establish procedures for inviting ad hoc experts, including sociolinguists, translators, legal terminologists, and/or regional specialists, whenever projects involve languages unfamiliar to board members or contexts where language plays a critical role in ethical decision-making.

A concrete example is the role of gatekeepers discussed in Section 3.2, who may become pivotal actors in the research process yet are not always anticipated or explicitly identified in the ERB application. The deep sociolinguistic knowledge and communicative competence of these gatekeepers are often the bedrock of ethnographic research, especially when it is also multilingual.

In our own ERB, this approach has been particularly practical in research involving minoritized or stateless languages such as the Romani language. Linguistic experts have helped board members understand not only translation and consent challenges, but also culturally specific norms of communication, naming, and representation. This has led to more nuanced, contextually grounded assessments of ethical risk and participant agency. Crucially, such consultation helps ERBs avoid imposing dominant-language assumptions on multilingual projects and participants.

4.3. Oral and Dialogic Ethics Application Processes

Written application forms often fail to capture the complexity of research carried out in multilingual contexts. To address this limitation, researchers at our institute are invited to present and discuss their projects at ERB meetings. This provides space to clarify language practices, consent procedures, and collaborative dynamics that may not be easily conveyed in a written document. Such oral presentations shift the ERB process from a gatekeeping model to one based on co-reflection. In multilingual and critical research, where field relations

evolve and ethical challenges are ongoing, direct dialogue between the ERB and researchers helps to build trust and recognize the legitimacy of ethical decisions made in the field.

4.4. Recognition of Linguistic Diversity as an Ethical Domain

ERBs must move beyond seeing language as a mere logistical concern and begin treating linguistic diversity as an ethical domain in its own right. This means explicitly including questions about language in ethics application templates—e.g.: What languages will be used in the research? Who will translate? How will consent be negotiated across languages? Who controls the interpretation and dissemination of multilingual data?

By foregrounding these questions, ERBs can encourage researchers to reflect on power relations embedded in linguistic practice, such as who speaks for whom (e.g., parents for children, or vice versa), which languages are legitimized in academic dissemination, and how translation affects knowledge production. Recognizing both language proficiency and speaking rights as sites of potential vulnerability and coercion can help better conceptualize the inclusion of participants who might otherwise be excluded due to age, language proficiency, and/or lack of written literacy in dominant languages.

4.5. Support for Multilingual Dissemination and Reciprocity

Ethics does not end with data collection. ERBs should encourage researchers to plan for multilingual dissemination and feedback to participants, particularly in projects involving historically marginalized communities, such as the Romani minorities, where returning knowledge in a locally meaningful form is part of ethical reciprocity and contributes to enhancing trust.

Our institute's ERB encourages researchers to outline how findings will be shared across linguistic boundaries, for example, through bilingual reports, community workshops, or translated summaries. Benefit sharing is one of the key points of research; in some projects, this has taken the form of visual or audio materials adapted to the linguistic repertoire of participants, particularly when participants are minors, have limited knowledge of the dominant language, or do not use written language regularly. Recognizing such efforts as part of the ethical process validates researchers' commitments to inclusion and community engagement.

4.6. Building Researcher Capacity, Training, and Mentorship

Finally, integrating multilingual ethics into ERB work also means supporting researchers themselves. Across all three case studies, sensitivity to linguistic and cultural contexts proved fundamental to the quality of the research. Such support may include training in linguistic ethics and culturally sensitive consent processes, as well as mentorship programs that connect early-career researchers with experienced scholars who have navigated similar ethical and linguistic challenges. Within our ERB, members also offer one-on-one consultations beyond the formal review process, providing tailored guidance as ethical questions emerge throughout the research lifecycle.

Such initiatives contribute to a broader shift toward an ethics culture rather than an ethics bureaucracy. They acknowledge that ethical expertise does not lie solely in policy documents or institutional procedures, but also in the lived experiences and reflexive practices of researchers on the ground.

Ethical multilingual research demands more than minor adjustments to existing ERB processes—it requires a rethinking of the principles and procedures by which ethical approval is granted. Through flexible regulation, expert consultation, dialogic processes, and recognition of language as an ethical concern, ERBs can evolve into more inclusive, equitable, and context-sensitive institutions. Such transformation is not only possible but urgently needed to ensure that ethical review keeps pace with the complexities of critical, multilingual, and participatory research.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we focus on the often-overlooked ethical dimensions of multilingual research, particularly as they intersect with institutional ethics review processes originally designed within biomedical paradigms. Drawing on detailed case studies, we explored how language mediates critical aspects of research practice: from securing informed consent to navigating gatekeeping structures and co-constructing knowledge. In each of these phases, linguistic dynamics are central to how research relationships are formed and how ethical commitments are enacted. In particular, we first reflected on how language mediates ethics approval processes in critical and constructivist inquiry by showing how the register (e.g., legalese), language (e.g., Italian), and modality (e.g., textual) of consent forms, while legally sound, risk alienating potential research participants. Second, we explored how language allows for epistemic justice, cultural sensitivity, and methodological appropriateness by showing that greater flexibility and creativity during the research process can move participants' experiences from the margins to the center of areas of social interest (e.g., education, political activism, employment). Third, we aimed to increase awareness about the role that language plays in ethics procedures, in establishing research relationships, and in determining what constitutes data by sharing the risks, limits, and benefits of using paid or voluntary local linguistic experts in gatekeeping, data collection, and data analysis.

Our analysis suggests that ethical rigor in multilingual and critical research contexts cannot be reduced to procedural checklists. Instead, it calls for a flexible, dialogic, and relational approach, one that acknowledges cultural and linguistic nuances, power asymmetries, and the lived realities of research participants. Ethics, in this sense, becomes not only a matter of compliance, but also of negotiation, co-construction, and responsibility. Critical and constructivist multilingual research makes visible the limitations of current frameworks, which are rooted in assumptions of linguistic homogeneity, universal consent protocols, and standardized risk assessment. These pose barriers for any critical research project that engages deeply with social complexity, plurality, and marginalization.

By foregrounding language as an ethical concern in its own right, ERBs have an opportunity to move beyond one-size-fits-all procedures and toward more context-sensitive and responsive forms of oversight. Our institutional experience demonstrates that such change is not only necessary but also quite feasible— through practices like iterative review, inclusion of linguistic expertise, dialogic application processes, and support for multilingual dissemination.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Portions of STEMCo data will be published at www.projectstemco.eu.

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About the Authors

Sophia Schönthaler is a researcher at the Center for Migration and Societal Change at Eurac Research and Ethics Officer at the same institution. In her PhD at the University of Graz, she explored political participation among women from minority backgrounds, applying an intersectional lens.

Andrea Leone-Pizzighella is a discourse analyst and educational linguist interested in language ideologies and policies in secondary education contexts. She is currently a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow at Eurac Research, where she is developing an open access website of teaching videos and transcripts from her fieldwork at two middle schools.

Johanna Mitterhofer is a social anthropologist and senior researcher at the Center for Migration and Societal Change and the Institute for Minority Rights at Eurac Research. Her research explores the impacts of diversity on individuals and society, as well as issues related to plural identities, inclusive heritage, and borders.