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Research Guided by Gaps in Understanding: Multilingual Qualitative Research in Translations

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Abstract

Due to its very subject matter, research on transnational migration inevitably involves multiple languages. As a result, such research cannot be reduced to research where the researcher's first language is English, but the interviewees' first language is not; it needs to be expanded to interviews where the researcher and the interviewee speak the same language. Even then, however, their (class, race, gender) background may become an obstacle to understanding each other. In my research project on family life worlds under Jordanian citizenship law, I conducted semi-structured interviews in Arabic without an interpreter. Arabic was the first language of my interviewees, but my third foreign language, which I speak and understand well, but not perfectly. This special interview situation seemed challenging and was initially due to a lack of financial resources for interpreters, which is often recommended (van Nes et al., 2010). In the course of my research, conducting interviews without an interpreter proved to be a helpful approach in order to take into account the co-constitutive process of reality generation in qualitative research (Finlay, 2002). Grounded in feminist and intersectional methodologies, I developed a reflexive approach on how to deal with languages, (a lack of) understanding, and the corresponding power hierarchies in research processes. I argue that the balance of power between researchers and interviewees is changed by the fact that the interviewee is in a linguistically more capable position and thus may develop a different perception of his or her own agency. I propose epistemologically that an interview outside the interviewer's first language can be a constant reminder of gaps in understanding and the different realities of the interviewer and the interviewee in the subsequent transcription, translation, and analysis steps (Larkin et al., 2007).

Keywords

family; intersectionality; interview; Middle East; reflexive qualitative research; translations

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1. Introduction

Research in the field of transnational migration inherently involves multiple languages due to the nature of the subject matter. From the research context to the data collection language, decisions regarding the use of consecutive interpreting or subsequent translation, and the language(s) of publication, languages are central to the generation and analysis of meaning in every research step (Bahji et al., 2023; Hoppe, 2018; Inhetveen, 2012; Temple & Young, 2004; Treiber et al., 2020). Unfortunately, critical reflection on the relationship between languages and their translation often remains unaddressed in sociological, linguistic, and ethnographic literature (Al-Amer et al., 2015; Jacobs & van Hest, 2025; Juschkat et al., 2025; Paneka, 2025; Schittenhelm, 2017).

This article seeks to address these silences from a sociological perspective. By focusing on languages, their understanding (or lack thereof), and their translation(s) within reflexive qualitative and interpretative research, I approach languages both from a methodological and epistemological perspective, as well as from a feminist and intersectional perspective.

Semi-structured interviews with mixed-status families form the empirical foundation for these discussions. These interviews were conducted in Jordan as part of my research on family life worlds under Jordanian citizenship law. As a speaker of Arabic at a proficient but non-native level, I chose to conduct the interviews in Arabic, the native language of my interlocutors, without the assistance of an interpreter. The decision to personally conduct and translate the interviews was initially driven by cost considerations but quickly became a deliberate methodological choice.

Despite the challenges of language barriers, misunderstandings, and translation dilemmas throughout the research process, I advocate for the value of this approach by acknowledging these obstacles as central to feminist reflexive-interpretative research. Drawing from intersectional frameworks, particularly those of feminist researchers in the United States (Crenshaw, 1989; Harding, 1991; Hill Collins, 1990), I propose that the multidimensional positioning of a researcher significantly influences the research process, acknowledging that their perspectives, biases, and experiences shape both data collection and analysis (Bettmann & Roslon, 2013; Bittner & Günter, 2013; Folkes, 2023; Sian, 2022). In contrast to the notion of an objective truth to be uncovered in research data (Temple & Young, 2004), reflexive-feminist research treats language as a tool for constructing and understanding realities, recognizing the distinct positionality of reality for each individual (Larkin et al., 2007; Mijic, 2013).

Struggling to understand the realities of people whose social position is so different from that of the researcher is thus not a deviation in terms of feminist social research but an epistemological norm. I argue that encountering these challenges while conducting interviews and research outside the researcher's native language serves as a valuable reminder of this constructivist research paradigm and the inherent lack of understanding that emerges when qualitative researchers seek to comprehend diverse realities.

The following section will explore the epistemological and theoretical foundations of reflexive feminist research. Next, I will present my own qualitative-interpretative research project conducted in Jordan. The fourth section will address the methodological and epistemological implications of interviewing and the experience of (non-)understanding. In the fifth section, I will explore the challenges and considerations

involved in understanding and translating the interviews for data interpretation. Finally, the article will conclude with a summary of how conducting research in a language other than the researcher's first language serves as a continuous reminder of gaps in understanding. Through this structure, I aim to provide a comprehensive insight into both the methodological and epistemological implications of my research approach.

2. Reflexive Qualitative Research in a Multilingual, Postcolonial Context

This section outlines the theoretical foundations for the empirical research, specifically focusing on feminist paradigms of reflexive research. Reflexive qualitative research in general is concerned with the interviewees' construction of reality and their ways of making sense of their situation (Ganz & Hausotter, 2020; Hitzler & Honer, 2007; Labelle, 2020). The objective during the research process is to reconstruct the participant's perspectives (Inhetveen, 2012), acknowledging the subjective and context-dependent nature of human experience.

Two crucial foundations for a reflexive approach in qualitative research are derived from both the theoretical and empirical work of American feminists. The first premise is a social-constructivist and interpretivist understanding of knowledge, which Donna Haraway refers to as "situated knowledges" (Haraway, 1988). This concept emphasizes the context-dependent nature of knowledges. For interpretative research, this means challenging the positivist assumption of an objective truth that can be "carved out" during the inquiry. In sociology, quantitative methods based on this positivist assumption continue to be highly valued and widely used today. In contrast, interpretative research assumes a dynamic, socially situated, co-constructive process of reality generation between the researcher, the participants, and the social context (see also Finlay, 2002; Folkes, 2023). The second premise, closely intertwined with Haraway's concept, draws on Sandra Harding's standpoint theory (Harding, 1991). Harding complements Haraway by highlighting the power relations in which knowledges are produced, communicated, and perceived. She argues that epistemologically, knowledge produced by subjects in particular social (power) positions is inseparably connected to the subject producing it.

These feminist epistemologies have several methodological consequences, although the specific form of interpretative research varies considerably. The methodological focus centers on reflecting on one's own position and the research context. Reflexivity, in this sense, refers to the researcher's critical engagement with their own social-cultural positionality, values, and assumptions throughout the research process. This critical engagement transcends the performative practice of what Folkes (2023) calls "shopping list" positionality, referring to Macfarlane's (2022) critique of reflexivity that stops at a mere listing of the researcher's positioning within the triad of race, class, and gender. Reflexivity beyond the "shopping list" is not an end in itself but an opportunity for the researcher to critically examine their own (power) position and research approach at every stage of the research, questioning how a particular positioning and decisions may have influenced data collection and analysis (Ademolu, 2024; Hoppe, 2018). Davis and Lutz (2023) provide a reflexivity guideline for intersectional research, building on Mari Matsuda's notion of "asking the other question" (Matsuda, 1991, p. 1189). At every stage of the research, they emphasize the importance of continually re-examining questions of (self-)positionality, power, and one's own pre-assumptions.

Possible reflection strategies include research diaries, reflexive exchanges with other researchers, or deeper engagement and mutual reflection with research participants (Bass et al., 2020; Folkes, 2023; Hoppe, 2018). Decisions regarding research locations, methods, or procedures can also be part of reflexive interpretative social research, as can the critical examination of language throughout the research process (Ademolu, 2024; Lutz, 2009; Meinhof & Boatcă, 2022; Onwuzuruigbo, 2018).

The reflection on the use of different languages and their translations requires special attention in the context of multilingual (migration) research (McKenna, 2022; Treiber & Kazzazi, 2020; van Nes et al., 2010; Young & Temple, 2014). Therefore, it is crucial to specify the (sociological) concept of language and translation, drawing on linguistic and translational studies (Holmes et al., 2013; Jacobs & van Hest, 2025). Referring back to a constructivist epistemology, languages both constitute and shape realities and identities (Lutz, 2011). Therefore, different languages and their speakers create distinct realities in interaction with the socio-cultural context, realities that cannot be congruently transferred into another language and thus into another reality (Larkin et al., 2007; Treiber & Kazzazi, 2020). This insight is reflected in contemporary translational studies under the so-called "sociological turn" (Korak & Schögler, 2025). Translation is no longer seen as the accurate transmission of a statement into another language without interference or loss of meaning (Bahadır, 2020; Biagini et al., 2017; Brandmeier, 2025; Schittenhelm, 2017). Instead, it is increasingly recognized that different languages construct different realities, and translation represents the (often imperfect) search for a corresponding system of meaning (Bittner & Günter, 2013). Jacobs and van Hest (2022, 2025) show in their important work on spaces of linguistic non-understanding the significant role non-understanding plays in research contexts, even when translation is present.

Acknowledging these assumptions, the goal of reflexive multilingual qualitative research cannot be to find a single correct translation and analysis of a text or interview (Temple & Young, 2004). Instead, it is about analyzing and reflecting on the entire communication situation and understanding the communicative constructions and interpretations of meaning within the research context (de Fina, 2011; Holzinger & Draxl, 2024). Following this perspective, the data collection, translation, and analysis processes are intrinsically connected to the subject engaged in these tasks. Not only language, but also the class, race, and gender backgrounds of the speakers involved shape the communication process as a whole. The paradigm that communication and social action always occur within spaces conditioned by power dynamics also applies to the reflection of languages in the research process. Drawing on standpoint theoretical assumptions regarding the production of knowledge, Spivak (2008, p. 122) poses two guiding questions for this reflection and methodological reconsideration: "who speaks?" and "who listens?" (see also Lutz & Tuider, 2018, p. 104).

Spivak's questions, as a core element of feminist and postcolonial research, are important tools for power-critical research in general. They are particularly relevant in the context of reflexive research within postcolonial settings. Postcolonial research acknowledges that colonial power hierarchies between the Global North and the Global South continue to persist today (Bass et al., 2020; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2010; Hoppe, 2018, p. 103). These hierarchies are rooted in colonial legacies of epistemic violence (Bass et al., 2020, p. 149; Baumann & Rehbein, 2025; Giraldo Herrera, 2018; Hoppe, 2018) as well as in the social positioning of both the researcher and the participants (Ademolu, 2024; El-Qasem, 2025). As a White researcher from the Global North conducting research in postcolonial Jordan, Spivak's questions guided my feminist qualitative research process. They influenced decisions regarding research methods, translation(s), and the construction of relationships with interview participants, as demonstrated in the following text.

3. Research Project

The empirical foundation of this article is a sociological PhD research project on mixed-status families in postcolonial Jordan. Jordan is one of 28 countries worldwide (Frost, 2022) that have retained a colonially inherited patrilineal citizenship law. This means that Jordanian women cannot confer their citizenship to either their foreign husbands or their joint children (Kingdom of Jordan, 1954; Massad, 2001). This legislation has significant implications for the daily lives of these families, as the status of so-called *ibnaa urduniat* (English: children of Jordanian women) is associated with numerous social disadvantages compared to the general Jordanian population, such as the lack of access to social security systems or health insurance for individuals over 18 (Nasser, 2010; Zayadin, 2018). In addition to these socio-economic challenges, research highlights how children are affected emotionally, as this patriarchal citizenship norm denies a materialized sense of belonging to people who have been born and lived their entire lives in Jordan (Arab Women Organization, 2013; El-Abed, 2021; IRCKHF, 2014).

Building on my previous research (Kawalla, 2025), my goal was to conduct a sociological analysis of the situation of mixed-status families in Jordan. The project focuses on the question of which intra-family practices and negotiation processes shape the lifeworld of these families. This includes examining both affective questions of belonging to the country of Jordan, as well as how families navigate the daily challenges associated with the lack of Jordanian citizenship and their strategies for responding to these challenges. To address these questions, I conducted 14 semi-structured interviews (Rosenthal & Loch, 2002) in both individual and family settings (Wohlrab-Sahr, 2019). The interviews were analyzed using reflexive evaluative methods such as reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). As this research is a PhD project funded by a scholarship, I heavily relied on my own resources and personal network to conduct this fieldwork, without any on-site institutional support or additional funding.

The following sections outline specific methodological decisions and procedures related to interviewing, transcribing, translating, and analyzing the data. To ensure accessibility to the journal's international readership, all quotes from the data have been translated into English, with the original language indicated for each quotation.

4. Interviewing and Non-Understanding

Multilingualism played a significant role in my interviewing process from September to December 2024. I decided to offer interviews in both Arabic and English to my interlocutors. Ten out of fourteen participants chose Arabic, their first language. In many of these interviews, English would not have been an option as Arabic was the only language spoken by the participants. Despite knowing that conducting interviews in Arabic might pose comprehension challenges for me, I chose to proceed without an interpreter, a decision that is either not discussed or rejected in the literature from various sides (Brandmeier, 2025; Senft, 2012). Whether with or without an interpreter, ensuring mutual understanding in any communication relies heavily on establishing a relationship of trust and communication (Holzinger & Draxl, 2024). A successful communication relationship requires mutual understanding, not only in terms of linguistic comprehension but also in fostering trust between the researcher and the participants (Freedman et al., 2024). This mutual understanding can be difficult to establish in multilingual communication, as the following analysis illustrates.

The section below describes the linguistic and relationship-related challenges I encountered during the interviews. I also reflect on my methodological decisions in dealing with these challenges. The empirical examples presented here come from my field notes and interview transcripts, which I translated from Arabic into English. All of the names used are pseudonyms.

4.1. Building Trust

The field work note below was written after my interview with Mohammad and his extended family, one of the very first interviews I conducted:

> First of all, it was important to the family that I don't work for an institution or anything like that. I didn't quite understand it, they did not know at the time that I'm German, so it's probably not about reservations about Germany but about something else. Later it turns out that they had spoken to journalists before (the last "interview" was years ago, now nobody is interested in the topic anymore in their perception), but it is not clear whether they had bad experiences. For them, the fact that I come from "outside" is rated rather positively (because I could raise awareness for their situation?!). The fact that I speak and understand Arabic is also rated positively. (Field work note of the interview with Mohammad)

Mohammad inherited his Egyptian citizenship from his father, although he was born and raised in Jordan by a Jordanian mother. He himself married a Jordanian woman, so his children face the same exclusion from Jordanian citizenship as he does. This fieldwork note reflects two important aspects of my experience. The first aspect was my "outsiderness" in relation to the Jordanian context; the second pertained to my ability to communicate in Arabic.

Concerning my "outsiderness," my participants could clearly tell that I did not have a Jordanian background, both phenotypically and linguistically. This created an initial challenge in establishing trust, as different backgrounds and life experiences can complicate mutual understanding (Mijic, 2013, p. 106). For a long time, anthropological research followed the "going native" paradigm (Malinowski, 1922; Senft, 2012), in which the researcher sought to become an insider in the research setting to understand the emic perspective of the field (Förster et al., 2011). However, informed by postcolonial epistemologies, "going native" was neither possible nor desirable for me. To acknowledge this power imbalance, it was important for me to reflect on my position as an outsider, which proved to be a more appropriate and power-sensitive approach to dealing with the different contexts in which both my research partners and I were socialized (Juschkat et al., 2025; Zingg & Robin, 2025).

My foreignness helped me not to be perceived as an accomplice of the Jordanian state (Juschkat et al., 2025), but it also opened up opportunities for honest conversations about power differences, various backgrounds, and our respective social positioning. For example, the most striking power imbalance concerned the fact that I possess a (powerful) international passport while most of my interlocutors did not have any valid passport or travel document. Talking about this injustice in and around the interviews was one way to acknowledge this power imbalance. In this context, I learned that sincere listening and empathy often build much more trust and overcome differences than repeatedly addressing power imbalances or one's own privileges. Another effect of reflecting my own power position was, i.e., in the research relationship with Nabil, a young Egyptian

man without a valid passport. Over time, we developed a relationship where he felt comfortable enough to request my help to find ways to emigrate from Jordan because of my knowledge of living in Europe. Using the knowledge I had about the German immigration procedures, while at the same time being very open about my limited knowledge of other countries and my even more limited capacity to support his emigration process, was my way of carefully navigating these conversations.

The second factor that influenced the establishment of a relationship of trust was my use of the Arabic language. Even though I was open about the fact that I do not speak Arabic fluently, my use of the Arabic language facilitated many stages of the research process. As the field note from above shows, speaking Arabic not only allowed for communication and research with people otherwise left out of my sample, but it was also appreciated by my research partners. It did not matter whether I made conjugation mistakes or if it took me longer to find the appropriate word: being able to communicate in Arabic was seen as an effort I had made to be able to enter into their world (El-Qasem, 2025). The following quote from an interview with Halime and her daughter Farah is a good example of how many conversations started, either in the interview itself or the establishment of contact beforehand:

> Interviewer: You speak Arabic, and if I have a question, I will ask you. I understand a lot, I don't speak very well, but it will be fine.
>
> Halime: Okay, God willing. God bless you. [Transcript Halime and Farah, Pos. 1–3]

In the conversation with Halime and Farah, it was not only my ability to speak but also that I was a woman, had the same age as Farah, and had a small child that also influenced (maybe even more than my linguistic skills) the establishment of a relationship of trust. The fact that my presence and my questions were not perceived by the two of them as unusual or even dangerous became particularly clear to me when both of them dared to address sensitive and very intimate family issues in the interview (transcript Halime and Farah, Pos. 430–464).

Being able to understand and communicate in Arabic mitigated some of the sense of unfamiliarity I experienced during the interview context (El-Qasem, 2025; Hoppe, 2018). As outlined above, I was unable to hide my outsider status. However, potential reservations toward me may have been mitigated by my ability to speak Arabic and by my prior experience living and conducting research in the Middle East. Particularly amidst the charged discourses surrounding the events in Gaza, following October 7, 2023, my proficiency in Arabic, as a German researcher, facilitated conversations about emotionally sensitive topics and, consequently, the development of trust-based relationships. Specifically, this meant that I was often confronted with accusations about Germany supporting Israel's war in Gaza, and I was asked, in a very direct manner, to distance myself from this topic. Distancing myself from German politics verbally was one part of building relationships of trust, especially in the interviews with mothers, with whom the reference to seeing children suffering—as a mother myself—made for a more powerful shared moment than simply making a point.

It is crucial to acknowledge, however, that although I felt that my ability to speak Arabic helped build trust, this dynamic is deeply entangled with racialized linguistic hierarchies, often referred to as linguistic racism (May, 2023). Although Arabic is a global language spoken by several hundred million people, it is not commonly learned as a second language by individuals in the Global North, a pattern shaped by enduring colonial legacies.

Whereas, for example, in Germany, people are expected to learn and speak German when living in the country, this expectation is different for Western people in Arab countries. Here, the ability to speak Arabic is seen as an effort worth acknowledging and not as self-evident. This serves as a compelling illustration of how linguistic hierarchies and colonial continuities shape the dynamics of the research encounter, even as both research participants experienced the trust-building impact of communicating in Arabic.

Openly acknowledging my limited proficiency in Arabic had an additional trust-enhancing effect: It placed me in a linguistically subordinate position relative to my research participants. This asymmetry influenced the power dynamics between us (Temple & Young, 2004; Treiber & Kazzazi, 2020). In light of Spivak's inquiries into "who speaks" and "who listens," this positioning rendered me more inclined to listen, as my receptive language skills surpassed my productive abilities. Consequently, the interview setting shifted away from the artificial framework of an encounter orchestrated, initiated, and moderated by me as a White European researcher, towards a more reciprocal dynamic in which both parties exercised agency: I, in shaping the initial thematic framework, and my interlocutors in the (linguistic) enactment and leadership of the interview. I deeply valued this shift, as it appeared to foster more engaged participation and a shared commitment to mutual understanding. The following excerpt is drawn from a family interview with Hassan, a Sudanese truck driver, and his wife Rania. In this passage from the beginning of the interview, I asked them in which parts of their daily life they experience difficulties due to the lack of citizenship:

> Rania: And education. And the schools….For the A-levels. When they are sons of Jordanian women, they don't have to buy books.
>
> Hassan: Stop it. That's not a school issue.
>
> Rania: Do you understand us?
>
> Interviewer: Yes
>
> Hassan: Oh yes, she understands. (Transcript Hassan, Pos. 23–28)

This passage illustrates how Rania and her husband Hassan took care of my linguistic understanding throughout the interview, both worrying about and valuing my language skills. An opposing interpretation might be that what I perceived as taking care of me was influenced, on the one hand, by Arab norms of politeness and, on the other, by my position of power, me being the one asking questions and coming from an academic institution. Of course, these three possible interpretations cannot be clearly separated from one another, and it is important to keep them all in mind when it comes to analysis.

4.2. Comprehension Issues

The second challenge I encountered was linguistic comprehension. For a mutual understanding, a shared language is crucial. However, when both parties do not speak the same language equally well, a process of translation at some point in the research process is necessary to facilitate understanding (Schittenhelm, 2017). In my research, I decided against using an interpreter, choosing instead to rely on my own understanding and the willingness of my research partners to ensure mutual comprehension. Building on

Haraway's notion of situated knowledges, my own social positioning as a White European researcher was central to this decision. I was concerned about how this positionality might be reframed or refracted by the presence of an interpreter, particularly one with a different social position, such as a Jordanian interpreter. My intention was not to hide my outsider status, but rather to acknowledge it transparently and potentially leverage it to hold space for questions that a "native" interviewer might not (dare to) ask (Juschkat et al., 2025, p. 294). Here, I was not just interested in cultural issues that I would have wanted to ask about as an outsider. I also wanted to make sure that any reservations people might have had about me, i.e., as an unveiled woman (in terms of religiosity or lifestyle) or as a German (in terms of my assumed position on Gaza), would be expressed directly to me.

This decision, by default, created room for both communicative success and failure (Mijic, 2013). Two patterns emerged consistently across the interview encounters. First, the pauses I took before asking questions were notably longer than in English-language interviews, as it took me additional time to formulate questions appropriately. In retrospect, I found this delay to be beneficial, as it allowed for more spontaneous contributions from my interview partners, which I might otherwise have interrupted with a new question. Second, in several situations, interviewees adapted their language to accommodate my comprehension level. Temple and Young (2004), in their discussion of translated research involving American Sign Language users, reflect on this kind of adaptation. Drawing on Harris (2002), they weigh the benefits of direct communication, where both interlocutors must actively work toward mutual understanding, against the potential burden of the added cognitive and emotional effort this requires from participants. Based on my field experience, both within and outside formal research encounters, I would underscore the advantages of such direct engagement. I experienced this mutual effort toward understanding as generative, not only for building a relationship of trust but also for deepening the substance of the conversations.

Throughout the fourteen interviews, the most frequent instances of communicative difficulty arose from misunderstandings or an unfamiliarity with specific phrases, words, or idiomatic expressions, on either my part, that of the interviewee, or both. One such instance occurred during a conversation with Mahmood, a middle-aged man whose family had migrated from Gaza to Jordan, as we discussed his experiences as a Gaza Camp resident interacting with Jordanian institutions. At one point in the interview, I was unable to recall the Arabic word for 'contact' and instead used the English term, which Mahmood did not understand:

> Interviewer: You have experience with the Jordanian government, I mean in….I forgot the word for contact with the government.
>
> Mahmood: Problems with the government, you mean?
>
> Interviewer: Problems or I don't know… (Transcript Kareem and Mahmood, Pos. 231–234)

This passage illustrates how, as the interviewer, I was unable to articulate my question in the neutral and precise manner I had intended, due to my inability to recall the Arabic term for "contact." Mahmood, not understanding the English substitute, independently rephrased the question, shifting the focus toward "problems" with the government. On one level, this could be interpreted as a loss of control over the direction of the interview, as I, the researcher, momentarily relinquished my role of steering the conversation. However, Mahmood's rephrasing, centering the discussion on problems, also offers valuable insight into the associations and connotations he brings to discussions of governmental institutions.

Conversely, a comprehension issue also emerged when my interlocutors used words or idioms unfamiliar to me. In such instances, I typically responded with follow-up questions, initiating a collaborative effort to find an alternative wording, provide clarification, or rely on gestures and facial expressions to bridge the communicative gap. The following excerpt illustrates such a moment: The interview was conducted with Farah and her mother Halime. While Farah primarily spoke English and Halime Arabic, both understood English. In this segment, Halime described in Arabic her experience of renewing her children's passports. The verb she emphasized, marked in bold, was the term she sought to clarify:

> Halime: The Secret Service for the passports, I really had to fix things…fixing things, how do you call it? [laughing] What is fixing things?
>
> Farah: I can't actually say. There is no specific word [all laughing, gesturing "a lot of work"].
>
> Halime: That's it. That's another addition. They have a big problem because they are here [laughing]. (Transcript Halime and Farah, Pos. 163–168)

None of the three of us was able to find an English equivalent for the Arabic verb *marmatet* (loosely translated as "I fixed things") during the interview. However, through the use of gestures and contextual cues, this moment did not mark a breakdown in communication; rather, it became a shared experience of mutual understanding despite linguistic limitations.

In another interview, we did not manage to solve a communication problem, first of all because I did not catch the misunderstanding during the interview, but only when I listened to the audio. In the family interview with Joumana and her daughter Nour, communication was challenging due to various factors. Joumana did not hear very well and was also blind in one eye. Therefore, during the interview, her daughter Nour repeatedly rephrased things for her mother. I was very grateful for this support, and apparently, I therefore missed the moment in which, somehow, both agreed that I was a journalist writing for an international newspaper:

> Interviewer: What do you think would be the best way to change the situation? What would be the way to change?
>
> Joumana: You, you are writing for an international newspaper, not here. International. (Transcript Joumana and Nour, Pos. 304–306)

This quote shows how serious this misunderstanding is, as Joumana expresses subsequently that nowadays the social movement she was active in has become very silent and that now, she is placing her hope primarily on external pressure. Unfortunately, due to my lack of understanding at the time, I was unable to clarify that, as a scientist, my role is very different from that of a journalist when it comes to quickly bringing her story to the public's attention.

This process of negotiating meaning was not confined to the interviews themselves. Throughout my four-month research stay, I attended Arabic language classes twice a week and participated in a weekly language tandem session. These occasions provided opportunities to reflect on interview encounters, discuss linguistic challenges, and acquire new vocabulary in preparation for subsequent interviews. As a

result, I observed a marked improvement in my language skills over time, with a noticeable difference between my first and last interview, a developmental trajectory similarly noted by El-Qasem (2025, p. 352) in his own Arabic-language research.

5. Transcribing, Translating, and Interpreting Between Languages

This second empirical chapter focuses on methodological challenges in post-interview phases of multilingual research. First, I offer insights into my reflections and decision-making processes regarding the transcription and translation of the interview audio recordings. Second, I examine the (linguistic) difficulties encountered during the data interpretation phase, highlighting how language-related complexities continued to shape the analytical process.

5.1. Making an (English) Text out of an Interview

Typically, transcription marks the initial data interpretation state, as nearly all qualitative research methodologies require a (partly) written transcript of the recorded audio material. These transcripts later form the foundation for developing codes and, consequently, for making sense of the insights shared by research participants (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In a multilingual research context such as mine, transcription also plays a pivotal role, yet its execution is fraught with specific challenges. On one hand, transcribing colloquial Arabic in the Jordanian dialect is uncommon, since the dialect is primarily spoken and seldom written (El-Qasem, 2025, p. 353). Consequently, transcribing audio with the support of artificial intelligence tools and the assistance of a native speaker would have required substantial time and financial resources. On the other hand, I was unable to transcribe the interviews entirely on my own, because I frequently encountered words I did not understand or was uncertain how to spell them, particularly given that the written form of Arabic words cannot always be readily inferred from their pronunciation.

For these reasons, I decided to combine the transcription and translation processes. Since the beginning of the research, I was aware that publication in English-language journals would require translating the interviews into English in order to utilize the empirical material in my scholarly work (Mijic, 2013; Schittenhelm, 2025; Stockemer & Wigginton, 2019). Translation was needed not only for the purposes of academic publication, but also because there were passages in each interview I had not fully understood during the live conversation. Jacobs and van Hest (2022, 2025) call these moments spaces of linguistic non-understanding. In their work on these spaces, they encourage researchers to openly analyze these spaces as constitutive parts of reflexive research and not to hide them (Jacobs & van Hest, 2022, pp. 14–15). In my research, I often did not recognize spaces of linguistic non-understanding until I listened to the recordings. It was in that context that I realized I had missed a word or idiomatic expression, such as the bolded term in the following excerpt from my interview with Hamza:

> Hamza: I have been suffering from tachycardia since, not last Ramadan but the one before, I applied for the exemption, but I have not received it since last Ramadan, although I have a report and everything. (Transcript Hamza, Pos. 117–119)

Hamza is the father of a family residing in a closed camp in the north of Jordan. In this excerpt, he discusses the inadequacy of the healthcare he has access to due to his citizenship status as a so-called "son of the Gaza

Strip" living in a camp. While the precise meaning of his illness was not critical for the overall understanding of the interview, an accurate translation was necessary for the transcript (Iacono et al., 2024). To address this issue, I relied on the parallel transcription and translation process I had developed. I listened to the audio and translated everything I understood directly into English. Reflecting on my decision to translate the interviews myself, I drew on the insights of Qoyyimah (2023) and Temple and Young (2004). All of them advocate for researchers to translate their own interview data. Epistemologically, they argue that translation is not merely a technical step but an integral part of engaging with the data, emphasizing that the social positioning of the translator inevitably shapes the translation process.

At the same time, I recognized the need for help in certain areas of translation, first, because I knew there were passages that I could not adequately translate on my own, even with the assistance of dictionaries. Second, because collaborative translation helps uncover errors, misunderstandings, and ambiguities, thereby allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the data and accommodating possible variations in meaning (Holzinger & Draxl, 2024, p. 285; Temple & Young, 2004, p. 171). I transcribed (when possible) in Arabic all the words, phrases, or idiomatic expressions I was unsure of, or could not understand at all, and later discussed and translated them into English with two Jordanians who assisted my research. Both individuals signed confidentiality agreements and were compensated for their work, which significantly contributed to the success of my research. These translations were not solely based on my Arabic transcript but were also cross-checked with the original audio recordings. This process seemed to be an effective strategy for ensuring high-quality translations (Al-Amer et al., 2015; McKenna, 2022) as well as a pragmatic solution to the practical challenges posed by limited resources (Brandmeier, 2025, p. 277), my language proficiency, and the need to publish in English. This invaluable translation support was a crucial reminder of the embeddedness of research and the dependence on individuals with different social positions within the field (Burger et al., 2024).

5.2. Making Sense of an Interview

This section focuses on data interpretation and the linguistic and socio-cultural challenges inherent in understanding this interpretation. Once again, my approach was guided by reflexivity and the belief that interpretation cannot be a search for a singular truth (Lutz & Tuider, 2018; Temple & Young, 2004). The fact that I am critical of an objective understanding of truth did not imply the abandonment of quality criteria in qualitative research, which was especially important to me as I navigated the interpretation process. Regardless of the specific evaluation methods employed, two key aspects were central to my analysis to ensure quality and make my interpretation process transparent.

First, I always analyzed both the content of the interview and the interview situation, including its power dynamics, together. Rather than focusing solely on what my research participants said, I broadened my inquiry to consider how and in response to what my interlocutors constructed their narratives and stories (Nohl, 2017; Schittenhelm, 2017). For this interpretive process, I used both the English transcript and the recorded Arabic audio to ensure I did not overlook linguistic nuances, variations in language use, or specific idiomatic expressions. Conducting the interviews myself was particularly beneficial in this regard (Juschkat et al., 2025). On the one hand, it allowed me to recall the atmosphere and nuances of the interview situation. On the other hand, it enabled me to continue reflecting on how my own socio-cultural positioning influenced the interview process, and, by extension, the realities my research partners chose to share, or not share, with me.

The following quote from the interview with Tarek shows a striking moment in the conversation where Tarek asks me to stop the recording when being asked about his thoughts about why the Jordanian government is maintaining the patrilineal citizenship law:

> Tarek: Yeah. It's really sad, like, how still government's acting in that way, especially Arabs to each other, as Muslims to each other. Like, we are Muslims, bro, never mind the law. That's Islam, how it tell you to treat your brother?
>
> Interviewer: Why do you think the government is doing this?
>
> Tarek: [laughing] shut down the/ (Transcript Tarek, Pos. 270–275, conducted in English)

The interview with Tarek took place in a public café, with recording equipment. Prior to the interview, we were strangers to one another, and at various points before and during the conversation, he expressed reservations about my German nationality, particularly regarding my supposed stance on Palestine. When I analyzed the interview, it was essential for me to keep this context in mind, reflecting on how, perhaps, he may have struggled with discussing topics like the war in Gaza with a German interviewer. His reticence was tangible in the interview. I assume that, because Tarek presents himself as a very political man and is married to a German woman, he was particularly aware of the German public, often pro-Israeli-discourse, and wanted to protect himself by stopping the audio or only briefly answering questions. I interpret these actions as a means to counter my position of power, me being the one asking the questions and using the interview passages for my research.

As Matsuda (1991) suggests, "asking the other question" in this context meant for me to explore the conversation from perspectives beyond our social positioning. This led me to consider additional factors that may have influenced the power dynamics of our exchange. In Jordan, there is no freedom of expression, and especially criticism of the government is met with violent reprisals. The public setting of the interview, therefore, might have shaped his responses to my question about his experiences with the authorities.

Second, I actively sought discussions with others to critically engage with my interpretive approaches. Framing my interpretations as approximations, potentially more or less accurate, opened the door for valuable conversations with individuals both familiar and less familiar with the Jordanian context (Folkes, 2023). One such exchange took place with my friend Asma, who was born and raised in Jordan. We discussed a particular quote from Kareem, where he was asked whether his wife's family could support him and his wife. This conversation became central to one of our reflections on the complexities of interpretation within the context of my research:

> Kareem: Eh, the first thing with aid support, we as an oriental society, we have a shame that your wife's family sends you money or sends you something, I don't accept it, I don't accept it from my wife's parents if they sent me aid….And, as a custom, for example, it's their daughter. They bring her something, they bring vegetables, things like that. It's not like it's an obligation to send you something. No. Either he wants to visit his daughter and get something for his daughter, or he wants to visit her and check on her and get her something like a cup set….It's a normal thing, it means that he's going to visit his daughter and check on her. (Transcript Kareem and Mahmood, Pos. 311–321)

Following this portion of the interview, Asma and I engaged in an enlightening discussion about the appropriateness of (financial) support from extended family members. She suggested that for Kareem, accepting financial support might be perceived as humiliating, as it could point to his inability to provide for his family. This analysis seemed very plausible to me during my conversation with Asma. Looking back, I also wondered how Kareem and his family perceived my question about family support and how inappropriate Kareem, in particular, might have found this question. For linguistic reasons, I would not have been able to address this issue effectively, either in the interview situation itself or afterwards. This clearly shows how linguistic barriers and cultural differences can intertwine in certain critical situations, making relationships and communication more difficult.

6. Research Guided by Gaps in Understanding

Anna Mijic's observations on understanding in transcultural research contexts will serve as the foundation for my concluding reflections on qualitative research in translation:

> For example, you should never be under the illusion that you can easily *understand* your counterpart just because he or she supposedly speaks the same language. (Mijic, 2013, p. 95, author's translation, italics in original)

The illusion of effortless understanding seems less apparent to me in multilingual research, particularly in situations where one speaks, writes, and translates languages that are not one's first tongue. Below, I will explain why I consider feminist multilingual research to be a valuable research approach from both an epistemological and a methodological-practical standpoint. Clearly, these reflections are not self-evident when engaging in multilingual research; they require conscious and ongoing decision-making. However, rather than avoiding research in contexts where the researcher is not fluent in the language(s), I hope this article can offer potential pathways and reflections on how meaningful research can be conducted under such conditions.

Epistemologically, I argue that feminist multilingual qualitative research encourages researchers to confront their own limitations in understanding. Acknowledging these limitations does not necessarily require multilingual research. However, the fundamental assumption that full understanding is rarely immediate in multilingual research is hard to dismiss when the researcher is not perfectly fluent in every field language. In my experience, the intrinsic motivation to try to understand, nonetheless, and to make sense of the surroundings remains present in multilingual research. I argue that this tension between recognizing the limits of understanding and the drive to understand can serve as a productive foundation for reflexive and power-critical qualitative research. Reflecting on one's own difficulties to understand and interpret the environment can help acknowledge the positionality of knowledges (Haraway, 1988) and their entanglement with power, as well as the interwoven nature of data collection, analysis, and the standpoint of the people conducting these processes.

Methodologically, situations involving non-understanding clearly influence the research process. The acts of questioning, understanding, and translating impact every multilingual research step. Being fully aware of this fact can serve as a reminder that our own approach to the world is neither the only nor the objectively correct approach. During the interview phase, the courage to speak the language of the interviewees, even

with mistakes, can transform the relationship between researcher and research participants into a more mutual, "caring" dynamic, thereby influencing the power relations inherent to the situation. At the same time, it also means risking lacks of understanding and misinterpretations, which can lead to halting conversations, the heaviness or inappropriateness of which may only become apparent when the interview is subsequently translated. In the transcription and translation phases, linguistic challenges often prompt further investigation and analysis of linguistic varieties. Seeking support from individuals positioned differently within the (linguistic) field can also broaden the researcher's understanding (Baumann & Rehbein, 2025), as it was in my case with two Jordanian friends. This can also challenge the assumption of the "lone wolf" researcher, emphasizing the need for collaboration and support from others (Burger et al., 2024). When analyzing data, the examination of (non-)understanding, languages, and the associated realities can add an entirely new layer to the interpretation (Aloudah, 2022). The process of writing up insights for publication purposes can confront the researcher with the "non-translatability" of data into scientific English. Being attuned to how languages shape different realities can further refine the researcher's awareness during this process (Baumann & Rehbein, 2025).

Ultimately, this article is intended to be an invitation to engage in qualitative, feminist research that is guided by the gaps in understanding. This guidance does not entail an expectation of completely filling these gaps, but rather encourages moving forward with, and despite, these gaps in understanding.

7. Conclusion

In this article, I examine the methodological and epistemological consequences of conducting qualitative research in a language that is not the researcher's native tongue. I build upon the considerations and practices developed by feminist theorists, who center the reflection on power and the positionality of knowledge. I explore how these principles influence various multilingual qualitative research steps, from interviewing to data interpretation. Drawing on my own research in Arabic on mixed-status families in Jordan, I argue that reflexive research conducted outside the researcher's linguistic comfort zone can serve as a continual methodological and epistemological reminder of the presence of non-understanding and power hierarchies in research. Consequently, I emphasize the significance and potential value of gaps in understanding throughout the entire research process.

As the focus on the steps of translation and understanding in qualitative research remains underexplored, this article contributes a profound reflection on these practices within multilingual research. By elaborating on the challenges of conducting research outside the researcher's linguistic comfort zone, this article seeks to encourage reflexive research beyond the Global North, where the majority of global research funding is concentrated. Future research could investigate the extent to which multilingual research without interpretation can or cannot be applied to different research methods. Additionally, comparisons and reflections on various modes of translation offer another potential direction for extending my methodological and epistemological insights into multilingual qualitative research.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data cannot be shared publicly due to a confidential agreement with all the interviewees. Access requests must be sent to the author.

LLMs Disclosure

The author used GPT-5 for polishing English grammar. All content was verified by the author.

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