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Language, Power, and Multilingualism in Migration Research: Reflections From the Documentary Method

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Abstract

In two research projects conducted in Austria and Germany in the field of forced migration, we found similar challenges and potentials, namely, the methodological challenges of addressing multilingualism in a methodically controlled way and the potential of systematically analysing power dynamics within multilingual interviews using the documentary method. In this article, we illustrate the intertwining of language and power in multilingual qualitative research. Discussing two empirical examples in depth, we show that different data (with and without interpreters) are embedded in different power hierarchies, which need to be recognized. We also discuss the lessons we learned, as well as the limitations that we encountered, and conclude with a call to navigate through the ambiguities of migration societies that are reflected in multilingual research realities.

Keywords

documentary method; forced migration; interviews; migration societies; multilingualism; power dynamics; qualitative research; second language interview research; social inequalities; translation

1. Introduction

In the exchange about two dissertation projects examining forced migration, linking multilingualism and the documentary method, exploratory endeavours, uncertainties, and questions arose that are addressed in this article. The main focus lies on two questions and their relation to each other. On the one hand, we dealt with the topic of power relations and language hierarchies in multilingual research settings. The complexities

of this issue have not been sufficiently discussed, according to Holmes et al. (2022), but have been fostered especially through forced migration research in recent years (Treiber & Kazzazi, 2024). On the other hand, we addressed the question of how to apply the documentary method to multilingual interview data. While the documentary method is widely used for the analysis of different data, such as group discussions, interviews, images, or movies (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014), only a few researchers have applied the method to multilingual data (e.g., Masek & Mattig, 2024; Schittenhelm, 2017; Weller, 2010). It soon became apparent to us that these two questions guiding our research cannot be thought through separately, as they are entangled in a multidimensional way. Thus, in this article, we systematically combine both issues by addressing the following question: To what extent can power dynamics be appropriately uncovered in multilingual interview material using the documentary method?

If language is understood as an instrument of power, as we elaborate in Section 2, we cannot deal with multilingualism (e.g., translation techniques) solely on a technical linguistic level. Rather, in the context of power dynamics in the academic field (and we both position ourselves as white individuals without lived experiences of forced migration beyond our research and service provision), it is essential to reflect on how powerfully language influences the entire migration research process. In this article, we focus on the process of analysis and reflect on the handling of multilingualism for the documentary method, which is especially explored in Section 3. As such, we assert that precisely because the documentary method reconstructs the speakers' practical actions, which in interviews are conveyed exclusively through verbal statements and do not merely reflect the content of what is said (and is, therefore, suitable for the migration context), we believe that a reflective approach to multilingualism is necessary.

After having debated the entanglements of language, (postcolonial) power structures, and methodological issues in the context of the documentary method, we illustrate these reflections by presenting empirical examples of different interviews that were conducted in Austria and in Germany in Section 4, which we then discuss in Section 5. Finally, we conclude that the imperfection of translating processes mirrors the hybridity of migration societies. Paying attention to ambiguities and systematically incorporating them into the research process offers insights into the realities of migration societies. Consequently, researchers are challenged to navigate through those imperfections and ambiguities.

2. Interrogating Power Dynamics Within Multilingual Research Contexts

According to Schittenhelm (2017), research processes can be defined as multilingual if data collection, interpretation, and presentation are conducted in more than one language. Further, "constellations in which researchers and participants do not share the same first language(s)" can be defined as multilingual (Berg et al., 2025). Researching in migration societies, we propose that a multilingual research context is the norm rather than the exception. As many nation-states still insist on being monolingual states, other languages may seem unusual, even though multiple languages are spoken in migration societies. Mecheril (2010, p. 17) coined the term "migration others," referring to a perspective that focuses on the production of "others" in migration societies. Not paying attention to the interrelations of migration, language, and institutions entails the risk of reproducing exclusionary classification systems. However, the role of language has received relatively little attention (Canagarajah, 2017). For example, Scheibelhofer et al. (2021) examined how the Austrian Public Employment Service addresses linguistic diversity. They found a lack of institutional strategies as well as a "shift of language management-related responsibilities onto individuals"

(Scheibelhofer et al., 2021, p. 24). This illustrates the entanglement of political, economic, and social processes leading to inequalities through linguistic differences (Brubaker, 2014).

The reasons for focusing on multilingualism vary. Multilingualism results from political reasons (e.g., colonization, globalization), socioeconomic reasons (e.g., migration), or personal reasons (e.g., multilingual family constellations; Malechová, 2018). It can be seen as a resource (e.g., in global working environments), but has also been problematized, for example, during the recruitment of migrant workers in the 20th century in various European countries (Malechová, 2018). Duchêne (2020) emphasizes that sociolinguists have contributed to an acknowledgment of multilingualism, often promoting social justice through deconstructing monolingual mindsets. Yet, he warns not to be too enthusiastic about these achievements and rather examine "the power relations and conditions that shape the idea of multilingualism as a desirable good" (Duchêne, 2020, p. 93). By solely focusing on multilingualism as a resource or emancipatory, the (re)production of exploitation and domination through multilingualism is neglected. An example of this complexity is the recruitment of staff in Austrian refugee shelters based on language skills. The lack of minimum standards for employees and the need for different language skills on the ground led to cases of hiring people solely based on the ability to speak a certain language. Simultaneously, there is a lack of promoting extra-occupational training, which leads to lateral entrants remaining in low-skilled and low-paid working positions (Füchslbauer & Hofer, 2021).

On an individual level, language is generally considered a function that creates identity. "Language is proving to be very central in the formation of social identity since it is both a symbol and resource of forming group identity" (Mukhtar & Tanveer, 2024, p. 163). Language thus serves as an expression of social identities, which are particularly important in the context of migration, when people move between different linguistic and cultural contexts. People move not only through other (linguistic) worlds in a lexical sense, but also in terms of identities (Mukhtar & Tanveer, 2024). However, these aspects cannot be discussed only on an individual level when considering the influence of power dynamics. Thus, Busch (2013) offers an alternative perspective, critically reflecting on the relationship between the individual and society. She suggests a subject-oriented approach that focuses on three main angles: the speaking and acting subject; the discourses that position the subject; and the spaces where subjects and discourses meet. Thus, speakers are highly influenced by language ideological debates and discourses about language and linguistic coherence. Foucault (1977, p. 25), for example, used the term "discursive police" to describe the unwritten rules that speakers reactivate in every discourse.

Therefore, language can be a highly political subject, indicating attitudes towards migrant societies. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the discourse on language and politics has focused on "integration through language," implying that learning the language of the nation-state is essential for migrants to integrate (Busch, 2013). Instead of acknowledging the reality of societal multilingualism and acting accordingly, the insistence on monolingual nation-states can be seen as a reaction to the perceived loss of national sovereignty due to globalization (Hogan-Brun et al., 2009). Capstick (2020) emphasizes that migrants often face social pressure to learn the dominant language of their host country. This expectation is not only functional, in the sense of better opportunities on the labour market, but also goes hand in hand with expectations of belonging and civic identity. "Successful" migrants are those who have a very good command of the dominant language in their countries of arrival (Capstick, 2020, pp. 92–93). Thus, the language of the state functions as a form of gatekeeping.

These perspectives demonstrate the interplay of power dynamics in language, discourse, and positioning. In postcolonial studies, language is often discussed as a means of power, considering the "systematic imposition of colonial languages" (Shakib, 2011, p. 117). Because language carries culture, beliefs, myths, and history as well as serving as a tool for communication, it became a powerful tool for cultural change during the colonial process (Fanon, 1961/1967). These practices played an instrumental role in assigning low prestige to non-European languages and cultures and in establishing the superiority of the colonizer's language and culture (Migge & Léglise, 2007, p. 297). Busch (2013) shows that this hierarchical ranking of languages is still highly influential. She illustrates that Austrian population statistics listed languages until 2001 in categories according to status, migration history, and ideologies. For example, the distinction between "English/French/Italian" and "other European languages," as well as the classification of Spanish as a European language and Arabic as an African language, illustrates historically influenced worldviews (Busch, 2013, pp. 98–99).

These power relations also go for academia, as there are specific academic orders in which certain languages, practices, and forms of knowledge are privileged over others. These power dynamics within the academic system have a direct impact on research practices. That might explain why (a) power imbalances and language hierarchies in research (Holmes et al., 2022) and (b) the analysis of multilingual data with the documentary method have only been addressed more recently. Especially, empirical forced migration research contributed to a broader discussion of these topics (Treiber & Kazzazi, 2024), which are eventually important for every qualitative research project in migration societies.

3. Analysing Multilingual Interviews With the documentary method

Understanding foreign realities is the basic challenge of all qualitative research methods (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014, p. 314). Not only do languages differ, but the way people express themselves also varies between generations, social groups, and regions. These dynamics affect both, research participants and the researchers themselves. Working with material in foreign languages presents an even greater challenge (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014). This applies to the analysis of data but also to ethical considerations, elicitation, transcription, and publication. As the term "interpreting" already implies, neither spoken nor written words can be translated literally; both need to be interpreted from one language system into the other (Müller, 1989). Thus, every translation produces ambiguity (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014). Additionally, "what is said, what is being narrated, is shaped by socio-economic status, level of education, experiences" (Treiber & Kazzazi, 2024, p. 3). In migration research, interactions between the different participants are embedded "in migration-political dispositifs (foreigner, integration, control, security, etc.)" (Treiber & Kazzazi, 2024, p. 3). Using institutionalized and codified terms as immigrant or refugee "makes speaking a performative act of social inequality" (Treiber & Kazzazi, 2024, p. 4). Thus, a sensitive and (self-)reflective stance must be taken by the researcher.

It becomes evident that understanding interviews in multilingual settings, including participants who do not have the same shared knowledge and interact in contexts of social inequality, is a complicated process. Not only do languages have to be interpreted, but also contexts, positions, and dominant discourses must be critically reflected throughout the process. This requires an act of translating foreign realities and consequently a processual "de-self-understanding" (Breuer, 2009). Bhabha (2000) sees self-alienation as a necessary part of "cultural translation" in order to create a space in-between. Researchers are challenged to

balance between empathic participation, distanced observation, and critical self-reflection in order to translate the context of research within the different positions of all participants. According to Nohl (2024, p. 7), the multidimensional comparison that comes with the documentary method is well-suited to understand intersectional inequalities as it sheds light on "how postcolonial conditions are experienced in the context of certain gender, class, or educational position."

3.1. The Documentary Method in a Nutshell

The documentary method is grounded in the sociology of knowledge (Mannheim, 1929/1952), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967/2004), and, especially in later discussions, habitus theory (Bourdieu, 1976). It aims to reconstruct "atheoretical" knowledge in everyday practices that is based on "conjunctive spaces of experience" (Mannheim, 1922–1926/1980, p. 219). Garfinkel (1967/2004, p. vii) viewed social reality as an "ongoing accomplishment" and thus emphasized a constructivist approach to analysis. He described the documentary method as "ethnomethodology," which focuses on the formal mechanisms that produce order by analysing the implicit rules and structures of everyday actions (Meuser, 2007, p. 217). According to Garfinkel (1967/2004, p. 78, as cited in Meuser, 2007, p. 217), the documentary method as an "ethnomethod" is "recognizable for the everyday necessities of recognizing what a person is 'talking about' given that he does not say exactly what he means." The meaning can be analysed by considering the context of the utterance. Focusing on "*how* something is said or done" reveals the "modus operandi" (Wagener, 2022, p. 191, emphasis in original). This, in turn, reveals information about the actors' habitus, which implies internalized patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting (Bourdieu, 1982). "One central strategy of the documentary method is to analyze the multidimensionality of habitus or milieus by comparing different cases" (Wagener, 2022, p. 192).

The patterns of meaning and orientations, which can be reconstructed with the documentary method, are part of a "collective stock of knowledge in such a way that they [the research participants] actually do not know what they know" (Bohnsack, 2010, p. 110). Finding such patterns requires a sequential and comparative approach. Mannheim (1929/1952) coined the terms "existential determination" and "context dependency" to describe types of everyday knowledge that shape reality perception. A researcher's interpretation of interviews is strongly influenced by their own existential determination and context dependency (Nohl, 2006). Therefore, comparing different sequences within and between cases, as well as using interpretation groups, is highly relevant.

The documentary method takes a praxeological stance (Bourdieu, 1976): Rather than differentiating between subjective and objective approaches, the documentary method distinguishes between practice-based knowledge and communicative generalized knowledge (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014). Generalized knowledge is usually conscious and can be made explicit through communication. However, practice-based knowledge refers to experience-based knowledge that is incorporated and acquired through practice.

Interpreting interviews with the documentary method involves three main steps: formulating interpretation, reflecting interpretation, and generating types (Nohl, 2006). The starting point is the formulating interpretation. First, the interview is topically structured using a differentiation of paramount topics, subordinated topics, subsubordinated topics, and sometimes subsubsubordinated topics (Bohnsack, 2010).

Next, the transcribed sequences are interpreted thematically by summarizing the content using the researcher's words. These reformulations of the thematic content help alienate the researcher from the text (Nohl, 2006). The interrogative pronoun for this step is "what?" with a "focus on the explicit and immanent meaning" (Wagener, 2022, p. 198).

"For the *reflecting interpretation*, on the other hand, it is essential to transcend the explicit meaning of an expression to reach its implicit meaning" (Wagener, 2022, p. 198, emphasis in original). The focus shifts from the question of "what" is being expressed to "how" it is being said (Nohl, 2006, p. 31): How is the topic being explored, and in which frames of orientation is it being dealt with? In this step of the documentary method, the context in which the participants operate is strongly incorporated into the analysis, which can reveal the influence of postcolonial discourse on the modus operandi (Nohl, 2024, pp. 9–10).

"The empirically controlled analysis of the frame of orientation or the habitus, respectively, is based on comparison with other cases" (Wagener, 2022, p. 198). For the basis of comparison, it is thus important to have minimum and maximum contrasts to identify the different orientations. Considering colonial power dynamics, it becomes crucial to include "previously unheard voices" for comparison, which help to "uncover contexts of utterance and actions that would be overlooked" otherwise (Nohl, 2024, p. 6). Due to "narrative compulsions," narrations are especially close to the experiences of the narrator (Kallmeyer & Schütze, 1977, p. 188). Therefore, such passages are of particular interest for analysis.

3.2. Analysing Different Types of Multilingual Interview Material

As illustrated in Section 2, multilingualism in research must be considered within its political, economic, and social dynamics. Generally, "attention must be given to the hidden and tacit contexts of research participants' utterance" (Scheurich, 2023, as cited in Nohl, 2024, p. 4). Thus, it is not enough to simply include different languages in a research process to enable marginalized and oppressed groups to participate in discussions without requiring knowledge of the researcher's language. Rather, a reflexive multidimensional analysis that pays attention to the contexts of utterance, the position of the researcher, as well as the limitations of decolonizing attempts in research, must be taken into consideration.

As Berg et al. (2025) show by comparing two research projects in multilingual settings, "there is no one-size-fits-all approach to multilingual research." By critically reflecting upon questions of inclusion and exclusion, positions and power relations, as well as data quality, they argue for "project-specific solutions." The corresponding decisions lead to different kinds of material, of which we will now discuss interviews with people who do not speak in their native language and interviews that involve interpreters. Another scenario, that will not be discussed in this article, is when the researcher and interviewee both do not speak their native language and use a lingua franca. This situation must be examined from a postcolonial perspective, as shown in Section 2.

3.2.1. When Speaking in Another Language

Interviewing someone who does not speak their native language might come with a lack of fluency in the spoken language, which may limit one's ability to express oneself. However, the terminological repertoire demonstrated is highly interesting because it indicates the speaker's social positioning (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 61; Schittenhelm, 2017, p. 103).

Bourdieu, whose theory of habitus influenced Bohnsack's further development of the documentary method, assumes that linguistic habitus is shaped by one's own socialization. Every person has a "certain tendency to speak and to say certain things" (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 41). Bourdieu assumes a hierarchical classification of social groups that is negotiated along linguistic lines. He uses the term "legitimate language," which is spoken by the "ruling class" and excludes people who do not speak this language (pp. 56–57). It thus becomes clear how much language influences social positioning and the level of action that is to be reconstructed using the documentary method. Capstick (2020) discusses Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital in the context of migration, concluding that migrants are often unable to use their linguistic capital in their migrant life situation or convert it into cultural capital.

As described in Section 2, language influences social identity and thus affects the level of action. The question arises as to how migrants can be enabled to represent themselves with their linguistic capital in the interview situation, simultaneously bearing in mind that power dynamics may prevent the full presentation of themselves. For us, it seems to be of fundamental importance, especially concerning the documentary method, to let the interviewees themselves decide in which language they want to talk about their social world and their actions. For example, the decision to conduct the interview without an interpreter, even if the interviewee has only a limited knowledge of the dominant language, can be interpreted as an action. A positive horizon for this decision could possibly be to position oneself as capable of speaking the language of the nation state, or it could represent the interviewee's desire to show their migrant reality. Simultaneously, this choice might also demonstrate a self-presentation as a "successful migrant" in terms of the dominant European discourse on integration through language (Busch, 2013).

Schittenhelm (2017, p. 108), who has conducted multilingual research and worked with the documentary method recommends specifically marking language switching. The "alternating use of two or more languages or dialects within a single conversation or utterance" is referred to as code switching and can signify resistance, solidarity, or assimilation in migrant and postcolonial life situations (Rojas, 2025, p. 13). In interpretation using the documentary method, this means analysing the situations in which code switching occurs by reconstructing the practice of action. According to Rojas (2025), postcolonial influences on linguistic practice must be taken into account. The documentary method succeeds in mapping this level with the step of reflective interpretation. In this step, the context in which the participants operate is strongly incorporated into the analysis, which can reveal the influence of postcolonial discourse on the modus operandi (Nohl, 2024, pp. 9–10).

3.2.2. When Involving Interpreters

The use of interpreters enables the participants in the interview to articulate their own relevant content in their native language (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014, p. 17) and reduces power imbalances in the interview situation (Uçan, 2019, p. 118). Three different levels must be examined here: the interview situation, in which interpreters are used; the transcription of the recorded interview; and the translation of the transcription by translators.

When both interpreters and translators are brought in to assist with research using the documentary method in order to create a space in which the linguistic capital of the interviewees can be made visible, other methodological questions arise: Who is addressed by the interviewees (at the action level in the

interview situation) and how? Does linguistic and/or cultural proximity create a conjunctive space of experience? What are the tasks of the interpreter and translator? How can linguistic capital be successfully reconstructed as part of the habitus when interpreters are involved in the interview situation and the researcher has no access to the language of the interview?

Enzenhofer and Resch (2011) problematize the handling of multilingualism in German-language migration research, which, for a long time, did not transparently present the challenges of multilingualism in the research process in studies, or swept them under the carpet. They developed very specific recommendations for the use of interpreters, such as separating the roles of interviewer and interpreter and transcribing in the original language. Both also call for different translation suggestions to be disclosed and for insights to be gained from comparing translation alternatives. According to the same authors, the decision as to who should be employed as an interpreter should also be made in a considered and conscious manner, especially if political or religious attitudes could play a role in the interaction between the interviewee and the interpreter (Enzenhofer & Resch, 2013).

Schittenhelm emphasizes that it is not only the content level of an interview that is important, but also the question of "how a topic is brought up" (Schittenhelm, 2017, p. 103), which can be influenced by the selection of interpreters, as demonstrated by the empirical example in Section 4.3.

Within the context of the documentary method, the focus is therefore not only on how to conduct and interpret interviews successfully in multilingual settings. Considering that language and linguistic expressions themselves can provide insight into social experiences (Schittenhelm, 2017, p. 104), the question must be asked how this social experience can be made accessible for interpretation by researchers who do not speak the same languages as the interviewees. Schittenhelm (2017) has developed guidelines for the use of external translators (who are not involved in the research) in the context of the documentary method, who transcribe the audio recording and translate it into writing in order to prepare it for interpretation. These are now discussed in connection with the above-mentioned questions.

In addition to recommending that translators be informed of the objectives, Schittenhelm emphasizes that the character of the interview situation and the narrative should be preserved in the written transcription (Schittenhelm, 2017, p. 108). Particularly in reflective interpretation, which addresses the question of "how" a topic is dealt with, it is very important whether a topic is dealt with many pauses, quickly, or thoughtfully, or when and how approving comments are made by other people. For researchers who do not understand the language of the interview, this can only be understood if it is translated accurately in writing.

Another recommendation is to disclose ambiguities in translation and to indicate alternative translation options, which also involves including words or notes from the translator in the original language (Schittenhelm, 2017, p. 108). In an article about a research project in which interviews with Japanese students were evaluated in a documentary style, Masek and Mattig (2024) criticize Schittenhelm's approach of involving third parties in the translation process. They suggest that the researchers themselves should carry out the translation, following a multi-step procedure. The original Japanese text was transcribed, translated step by step, and grammatically adapted. While the fourth version is "clear" English, the first three intermediate stages reveal linguistic peculiarities and make the foreign language experience visible. These transitions are central to the empirical analysis (Masek & Mattig, 2024). Such a step-by-step translation, as

proposed by Masek and Mattig, is crucial for reconstructing the action-guiding orientation frameworks, depending on the context of the translation. Although this procedure is understandable on a theoretical level, the question of feasibility arises, especially for researchers who are working alone on a doctoral project, for example, or for teams in which not all languages relevant to the research are represented.

Schittenhelm recommends accurate labeling of language-specific proverbs and metaphors in translation (Schittenhelm, 2017, p. 108), which are collectively and culturally influenced (Bittner & Günther, 2013, pp. 186–189). This is particularly important in the context of the documentary method, as the use of metaphors has an impact on the methodological approach. Among other things, Bohnsack (2021) describes metaphorical density as a criterion for selecting passages for reflective interpretation (pp. 138–139). The use of metaphors is therefore of fundamental importance for the entire interpretation. Language is context-bound and must be placed in its historical context (Mannheim, 1922–1926/1980, p. 220), which makes the question of the interpretation of specific proverbs, also with regard to linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 2005), all the more urgent in a multilingual context.

4. Empirical Examples

As we have shown so far, multilingual data is by no means less valid in terms of interpretation—rather, it makes the processes of understanding and interpretation more clearly visible. Researchers are therefore called upon to show openness to ambiguities, to tolerate them, and to understand language as a social practice. This also requires acceptance of flexibility in interpretation and in different readings. Those who seriously engage with multilingual migrant societies, the diverse facets of language, and methodologically controlled research can develop a keen eye for boundaries, ambiguities, and divergent interpretations through multilingualism. In our view, the documentary method offers a very suitable methodological framework, which we now illustrate with examples from our research.

4.1. Project Descriptions

The research of Tamara Tries is based on recent discussions in social work, which consider refugee camps as places of precariousness and exclusion (Devlin et al., 2021). In contrast to the circumstances in refugee camps, the global definition of social work emphasizes the promotion of empowerment and liberation of people and an orientation on human rights (International Federation of Social Workers, 2018). On the one hand, social work discourses reflect on and discuss their own entanglement in problematic selection mechanisms of refugee policies (Scherr, 2018), the risk of unconscious involvement in structural discrimination (Prasad, 2021), positioning in the field, and the further development of social work approaches to action (Lang, 2021). This tension can be summarized as "striving for inclusion while managing exclusion" (Spindler, 2018, p. 575).

On the other hand, a lack of minimum standards for qualifications and requirements for employees in refugee camps (Österreichischer Städtebund, 2023) creates opportunities for lateral entry into these positions. Additionally, there is a lack of promotion of extracurricular training, so lateral entrants often remain in low-skilled, low-paying positions (Füchslbauer & Hofer, 2021, p. 68). Thus, people working in camps to accompany and counsel refugees form a highly heterogeneous group. Given these circumstances, this study explores different understandings of the professional role and action-guiding orientations. To gain

broad insights, episodic interviews were conducted with ten employees and ten inhabitants of refugee camps in five different states of Austria. Additionally, ethnographic observations were made in the camps.

Victoria Mehringer addresses the intersection of forced migration and disability, an area that has largely been overlooked in research thus far (Lätzsch et al., 2021). The focus of this research is on the subjective experiences of parents who are confronted with changed living conditions and new social contexts in Germany as a result of forced migration and must cope with the disability of a child in this new situation. The study examines their everyday practices and routines and the interactions resulting from the convergence of the social categories "migration background" and "disability." Five interviews were conducted with parents from Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Ukraine as part of the dissertation project. Four interviews were conducted with the help of non-professional interpreters who were informed about the objectives of the interview in advance and received training in conducting interviews in the context of qualitative social research (e.g., conversation techniques, principles of qualitative research). Care was taken to ensure that all interpreters had learned the foreign language as their mother tongue and had a C1 level of German. The recorded interviews were then transcribed by certified translators in the original language, and the foreign language sections were translated into German. The translated interview material was interpreted using the documentary method.

While the research questions and theories of the projects differ, they are similar in that they both focus on multilingual research contexts of migration societies and employ similar methodological approaches.

Analysing the interviews using the documentary method provides insight into two forms of knowledge: generalized and practice-based. In Tries' research project, an understanding of professional roles can be found by analysing generalized knowledge using the formulating interpretation. Employees and inhabitants of refugee camps consciously express how they understand the role of someone working in a camp. Assuming that this understanding is reflected in daily actions would overlook the complexity of social realities and fail on basic principles of qualitative social research. To understand how employees actually act and on which orientations their actions are based, the reflective interpretation reconstructs practice-based knowledge. Contemplating the entire data set reveals conjunctive spaces of experience.

This is also the main aim of Mehringer's research: to reconstruct behavioral patterns that significantly determine how people navigate new realities and that are not readily apparent to outsiders at first glance. New realities arise from the fact that families are geographically located in a new country context. On the other hand, navigating reality as a family with a child who has a disability or chronic illness is also a "new world," i.e., a reality in which previous courses of action may no longer apply. In this context, the documentary method has the potential to reveal social realities and the logic of individuals who, in a sense, are forced to find their way in two new worlds. This is interesting because they are exposed to "double" othering processes in social contexts, as both people with a migration background and parents of a person with disabilities.

4.2. Example 1: Code Switching as Acting

In Tries' research, several interviewees opted to conduct the interview in German, even though it was not their native language. Some interviewees explained that it was a welcome opportunity to practice their

language skills. As described in Section 3.2.1, this choice can also be analysed within the dominant discourse on integration through language (Busch, 2013) and thus indicates a form of positioning. Research partners sometimes used their smartphones, most often Google Translate, when struggling to find a word or expression. During the interviews, it became clear that stories can be told in an understandable way, even with a limited vocabulary.

As already mentioned, using institutionalized terms "makes speaking a performative act of social inequality" (Treiber & Kazzazi, 2024, p. 4). The aim was to avoid certain terms during the interview, waiting for the interviewee to introduce terminology, to then pick up on the terms suggested by them. The following excerpt shows the endeavour to avoid institutional terminology for the place of interest: the refugee camp. In camp studies, there is a debate over which term to use for refugee camps, as terms such as "home," "shelter," or "centre" trivialize the underlying aim of control, as well as the precarious living conditions (Pieper, 2008). In German, the term *Lager* (camp) is heavily associated with the former Nazi regime (concentration camps), making it difficult to find adequate terminology. This shows that the different terms in different languages transport very different connotations, which cannot be fully translated in multilingual research.

In most camps, it was possible to talk to both employees and inhabitants. Usually, the employees were interviewed first. Most of them referred to the camp as "home" (*Heim*), an indication of the institutional use of language. It was then interesting to see which terms inhabitants would use. The following interview with the young man Km (pseudonym), who was living in a refugee camp in Austria, was conducted in German and is translated into English for this article (Table 1). The translation follows Schittenhelm's (2017) recommendation to preserve the character of the interview situation and the narrative in the transcription.

Table 1. Interview with Km (pseudonym).

Original transcript	Translated transcript
Y: ähm dieses Haus in dem du jetzt wohnst für was ist das da? Warum gibt's dieses Haus?	Y: ahm this house you are currently living in what is it there for? Why does this house exist?
Km: ah (1) im *Camp*?	Km: ah (1) in *camp*?
Y: Genau	Y: Exactly
Km: (5) ich verstehe nicht was ist deine Frage	Km: (5) I don't understand what is your question
Y: Du wohnst in einem *Camp* sagst du?	Y: You are saying you are living in a *camp*?
Km: ja	Km: yes
Y: warum gibt's diese *Camps*? (1) F-Für was sind die gut äh (1) warum sind die überhaupt da?	Y: why are those *camps* there? (1) w-what are they good for ah (1) why do they even exist?
Km: äh (1) weil es gibt äh (1) Menschen? (2) äh in Österreich gekommen (1) äh sie möchten (1) äh hier (1) sie möchten äh (1) warten Interview und äh Be-Bescheid bekommen (1) ja das ist gut dass Österreichische machen Idee das das ist gut	Km: ah (1) because there are ah (1) humans? (2) ah came to Austria (1) ah they want (1) ah here (1) they want ah (1) to wait interview and ah get de-decision (1) yes it is good that Austrians make idea it it is good

Note: (1) indicates a pause; the number refers to the length of the pause in seconds.

In what follows, we will break down the first two steps that are involved in interpreting interviews with the documentary method.

4.2.1. Formulating Interpretation

The interviewer asks about the purpose of the house, Km is currently living in. Km asks for clarification if she means the camp, which she affirms. As Km does not understand the question, the interviewer reformulates the question. Km then replies that camps are there for people who come to Austria and want to wait for their asylum interviews and decisions, which is a good idea made by Austrians.

4.2.2. Reflecting Interpretation

By asking for the place the interviewee is currently staying in, the interviewer reveals the shared knowledge that this is not a permanent residence, but a station for a limited period of time. She then invites the interviewee to debate the purpose of the building. Km introduces a term for the house: the camp. By switching to the English term, he rejects the institutional language that suggests calling the place "home." This code switching can be seen as a form of resistance. Reformulating the initial question, Y picks up on the term "camp" and thus validates Km's choice of terminology. She then continues in a plural form. Initially, having asked about the camp in which Km is staying, she now takes the question to a more general level by asking about the purpose of "such camps." By using the word "such," she also demonstrates a distanced stance to the places in question. Asking "what are they good for" directs the conversation to a valuation of camps in a positive manner. This is then weakened with the next question, why they even exist, putting the existence of camps into question. Km's answer includes eight breaks ((1) and (2)) as well as seven "ahs". If he were a native speaker, this would clearly indicate an explorative movement towards the content of his answer. Not being a native speaker, this can just as well show his search for specific words in a foreign language. Both interpretations show that this is not a question he is usually confronted with in his current living conditions; whether this refers to the content of the question or the need to answer it in a foreign language cannot be answered at this point. By expressing that "humans come to Austria," Km again resists the institutional language, which was demonstrated by many other interviewees who referred to "refugees." This becomes particularly evident in comparison to other interviews, which cannot be displayed here. Saying that they "want to wait" on the one hand implies the will and commitment of humans towards the waiting process. On the other hand, the purpose of camps is classified as a waiting area, which indicates a certain level of passiveness created by the circumstances that the camps stand for. This passiveness ends when the asylum interview and the asylum decision have been carried out. He concludes by evaluating that this system is a "good idea" made by Austrians. With this statement, he points at the actors in power of decision-making: Austrians, a group he is not part of. Assessing the idea as "good," he possibly refers to the proposition of Y asking what the camps are "good" for. Also, he might address Y, who can be read as part of the group "Austrians": the group in power of decision-making Km is dependent on.

4.2.3. Discussion of the Analysis

The interpretation of this excerpt illustrates various aspects that have been discussed on a theoretical level in this article. First, it shows that a high proficiency in the language of the interview is not a valid requirement for participation. Even though this passage is not a dense narration (hence especially close to the experience of Km), it uncovers the context of utterance (Nohl, 2024) in a very rich way. Clarification processes that seem to be rooted in language barriers at first sight offer negotiations of terminology and thus insights into the positioning of the participants (Bourdieu, 2005; Schittenhelm, 2017). By critically reflecting upon the position

of the interviewee as well as the position of the interviewer, power dynamics and social inequalities that shape the setting of the interview can be identified. In this sequence, Km expresses those dynamics and dependencies by introducing the group "Austrians" that is in control of power over institutions and asylum procedures, while he has to submit to this authority. This clearly demonstrates the hierarchical classification of social groups (Bourdieu, 2005). It is thus crucial to acknowledge that the interviewer Y is most likely perceived as part of this group in power, which influences the dynamic and thus the conversation between Y and Km.

Yet, Km demonstrates forms of resistance to the asylum regime through code switching ("camp") and rejection of institutional language ("refugee"). By using the term camp instead of *Heim* (home), he demonstrates resistance (Rojas, 2025) in a situation of strong power imbalance. By referring to humans instead of refugees, he positions himself on an equal human level and resists the hierarchical subordination of the social group called "refugees." At the same time, he critically acknowledges his precarious living conditions by using the term camp, refusing to call this place a home, which would have been suggested by the institutional language. This implies that Km's living reality is not reflected in the institutional language.

Two passages also show the necessity of openness to ambiguity while interpreting: Due to the multilingual setting, the pauses in Km's answer can indicate a search for the content of the answer and/or the search for specific words in a foreign language. Km's evaluation of camps as "a good idea" might target the proposition of the interviewer, but also Y's position of power in which she is being addressed. While some ambiguities can be dissolved by a multilevel comparison with different cases, other ambiguities will remain and must be acknowledged in their imperfections and as an expression of the research design.

4.3. Example 2: The Power of an Interpreter

The following interview excerpt is from an interview with a mother who fled Ukraine with her son, who is on the autism spectrum, to Germany. The mother was asked in advance whether an interpreter should be arranged and, if so, for which language, given that Russian is often rejected as the language of Ukrainians because of the war (Kulyk, 2024). However, as the mother explicitly requested that the interview be conducted in Russian, an interpreter who is a native Russian speaker with C1 level German and a background in social sciences was called in. However, it was not possible to organize an interpreter who also comes from Ukraine. The interpreter who was called in comes from Russia but has been living in Germany for a long time. The following passage is taken from this interview and describes a situation during the flight (Table 2).

Table 2. Excerpt from the interview with the Ukrainian mother.

Translated Transcript from Russian to German	Translation into English
Dann setzten wir uns in den Zug und fuhren nach...Ah, dort kam es zu noch einer komplizierten Situation. Wir wurden zusammen mit unseren Freunden in zwei Autos zum Bahnhof gebracht. Das Auto, in dem ich mit meiner Mutter saß, verspätete sich. Mein Mann war mit dem Kind aber in einem anderen Auto. Sie stiegen in Stadt x am Bahnhof aus. Dort waren zehn Warteschlangen so lang wie am Leninmausoleum. Alle wollten zum Bahnhof.	Then we got on the train and travelled to city x. Ah, there was another complicated situation there. We were taken to the train station in two cars together with our friends. The car I was in with my mother was delayed. My husband was in another car with the child. They got out at the train station in city x. There were ten queues as long as the one at Lenin's mausoleum. Everyone wanted to get to the train station.

This passage was selected for reflective interpretation in the research project because it was part of a narratively dense passage and has a high metaphorical density. In the context of this article, it illustrates how multilingualism can be illuminated through the documentary method, with a focus on power dynamics.

Initially, the comparison of the Ukrainian mother in the queue at the train station with a cultural memorial in Russia caused uncertainty for the researcher: Is this formulation a proverb? Does the geographical location of the memorial in Russia, which is waging a war of aggression against Ukraine, have any significance? What is the political dimension of the comparison in relation to Lenin as a person? Is there a biographical component from the interviewed mother, who may have been there before?

These uncertainties should not be ignored, but rather made transparent (Enzenhofer & Resch, 2011), as articulated both in the research project and in this article.

Due to the length of the mother's narratives (up to 30 minutes), it was not possible for the researcher to ask direct questions during the interview. Because of these long sections of conversation, there was no literal translation of what was said in the interview situation, but only a summary of the content so that the researcher could ask questions about the content. Since the documentary method, as described above, moves from the "what" level to the question of how action is produced and in what context it is narrated, this level will now be examined. When examining this "how" level, one (of many) possible interpretation is to consider the action in the interview in the context of power. The interpreter was involved in the interpretation of the passage in order to question the meaning of this formulation (it was not possible to consult another Russian-speaking interpreter for practical research reasons). She concluded that, from the interpreter's perspective, this comparison can be classified as part of the collective knowledge base, as the images of the long queue in front of Lenin's mausoleum are well known.

With this explanation, the passage or comparison of the mother can be read as a code intended to illustrate familiarity and closeness to a cultural frame of reference. This also makes it clear who is addressed as the conversation partner in this passage (and who is not): It is not the German researcher who is addressed in the narrative, but the interpreter from Russia. With the (presumed) shared knowledge of queues at Lenin's mausoleum, which can be read as a symbol of Soviet power, the drama of the escape situation is described, and the intensity of this experience is conveyed to the Russian interpreter with clarity through the metaphor. In this passage, the frame of reference in which the narrative is set is adapted to the interpreter's knowledge. The situation can also be interpreted using Bourdieu's concept of "legitimate language." In this context, this phrase is considered acceptable or socially desirable.

This example shows that the (subjective) position of interpreters influences (Nowak & Hornberg, 2024) or decisively shapes the interview situation. As this interpreter was also involved in the interpretation of this passage, it was not only the interview situation that was influenced by the interpreter; the interpreter also had the "authority to interpret," which was based on her experience and knowledge. The selection of the interpreter by the researcher, who belongs to the majority society, can be interpreted as a powerful act in itself.

This makes it apparent that the selection of interpreters must be reflected upon in the overall situation and in the evaluation of the data, especially when the selection is limited, which corresponds to the reality in a multilingual research context.

The example also clearly shows that the use of language is context-dependent (Mannheim, 1922–1926/1980, p. 220) and that linguistic representation is shaped by power dynamics. The Ukrainian mother's articulation to the Russian interpreter shows that language must be understood as a (social) index of the experiential space and must be described at the level of interaction (Schittenhelm, 2017, p. 104). Limiting oneself to questions of lexical transfer into another language, even if this is done in very small steps, as in the case of Masek and Mattig (2024), for example, would be insufficient in this example.

5. Discussion

The two empirical examples presented in this article show the relevance of including research partners who do not speak the same language(s) as the researchers in their respective research projects. Both projects benefited immensely from the decision to take the multilingual realities of the research topics seriously, as very relevant perspectives would have been neglected otherwise. Language is always embedded in specific contexts of action, in which its function and meaning unfold (Busse, 1987). This paradigm is deeply rooted in the documentary method, which seeks to reconstruct the speaker's practices of action by answering the question of "How" something is expressed. Simultaneously acknowledging power dynamics, positions, and inequalities throughout the research process, the horizons of comparison are broadened and blind spots in the researchers' methodology are, thus, controlled (Nohl, 2024, pp. 9–10). Nevertheless, adopting a multilingual approach with a special focus on power asymmetries presents significant challenges that we have encountered in our projects.

Our main insight is that language, power, and multilingualism cannot be addressed separately in research. Systematically incorporating multilingualism and power relations in our research processes broadened the insights we could gain and made even clearer that language must be understood as a (social) index of the experiential space and thus be described at the level of interaction (Schittenhelm, 2017, p. 104). Taking multilingual realities seriously worked for us like a magnifying glass that uncovered positions, power dynamics, and contexts of utterance. It became clear that not only languages have to be interpreted, but also contexts, positions, and dominant discourses must be critically reflected throughout the process.

Including research partners who are not fluent in the language of the interview offers insights through the demonstrated terminological repertoire and the positions within certain power dynamics of the interviewee, as well as the interviewer. Paying attention to language-related practices like code-switching leads to the identification of forms of resistance and asymmetrical relationships between individuals, social groups, and institutions. Yet, there are also challenges: As shown in the first example of this article, pauses and hesitations in the answer of Km could not simply be analysed as an exploratory movement towards his answer to the question. It could just as well be a search for specific words in a foreign language. Also, his evaluation of camps as "a good idea" might not necessarily reflect his opinion, but might as well be a reaction to the power imbalances between him and the researcher.

On the other hand, including interpreters in the research allows research partners to articulate themselves in their first language. Thus, they can express themselves in more detail, and power imbalances are reduced. The subjective position of interpreters can also be an additional benefit to the research, as it might be closer to the conjunctive spaces of experience of the interviewee. At the same time, the interpreter constitutes a third party in the interview as well as in the analysis. As shown in the second example of the article,

interpreters simply can't translate literally in situations of dense narrations and thus influence the whole interview with their way of summarizing. Including interpreters in the analysis whenever uncertainties arise is crucial, yet this must also be critically reflected from a perspective on power dynamics in regard to the authority of interpretation.

This shows that there is no one right way to go when researching in multilingual settings charged with power imbalances. Reconstructive methods, such as the documentary method, acknowledge that language meaning is embedded in different contexts (Kruse & Schmieder, 2012). Yet, there will always be parts that are "untranslatable," revealing the imperfection of translation processes, the hybridity, and the necessity to critically reflect upon "role expectations and role requirements, norms and values as well as modes of perception and expectations" (Treiber & Kazzazi, 2024, p. 6). Openness towards ambiguity becomes an essential part of the process.

Lastly, many of the power dynamics addressed in this article were rooted in colonial patterns of thinking. Critically reflecting upon our own positions as well as the heritage of Western sciences, we must acknowledge that (a) there is "no way to jump outside one's historically located sociocultural set of semiotic and linguistic (named) categories" (Scheurich, 2023, p. 142), and (b) also the documentary method cannot be delinked from its colonial legacy of Western sciences. Yet, the critical reflection of positions within the comparative and multilevel approach of analysis of the documentary method bears a high potential to uncover power dynamics and inequalities: It enables the conjunctive knowledge to be captured in a multidimensional way (El-Maafalani et al., 2016) and offers a nuanced perspective on social reality, reflecting knowledge from diverse layers of experience (Schondelmayer, 2019). By contrasting cases within and across cases during the evaluation process, the interpretation becomes less dependent on the researcher's positioning. Thus, the horizon of comparison is determined by the material itself and not by the researcher's perspective. This enables ethnocentric and culturalist interpretations to be methodically controlled (El-Maafalani et al., 2016).

6. Conclusion

We have shown that language, especially but not only in the context of migration-related research, is deeply embedded in hierarchies and powerful practices. Language functions as both a means of communication and a social practice that determines participation, exclusion, belonging, and alienation. Therefore, conscious, sensitive, and continuous reflection on these power relations is essential, particularly in research projects involving people in contexts of exclusion and othering. Asymmetrical structures also permeate the research process itself and must be identified, questioned, and methodically addressed. Such research conditions call for a reflexive multidimensional analysis that pays attention to the contexts of utterance, the position of the researcher, as well as the limitations of decolonizing attempts. The entanglements of language, power, and methodological issues require interpreting and translating processes not only in regard to multilingualism but also to the multi-layered contexts of research.

Every research project might require different approaches and decisions, yet researching in migration societies demands critical reflections upon questions of inclusion and exclusion, positions, and power dynamics. The documentary method offers one solution to systematically address those questions. Yet, there are several limitations associated with the choice of methods and theories. Working with the documentary method, practices of action can be reconstructed. Results offer insights into orientations of

daily actions, but cannot explain the motifs behind them. In contexts of severe power imbalance, it also becomes more challenging to reconstruct the modus operandi as the conjunctive spaces of experiences are highly influenced by the positioning of interviewees and interpreted from very different positions of the researchers. The necessary process of self-alienation can only be implemented up to a certain degree. Further, the power dynamics of the academic field hierarchically structure languages, practices, and forms of knowledge, which leads to logistical constraints in research designs (e.g., due to the costs for interpreters and translators).

In conclusion, we argue that a high level of ambiguity tolerance is necessary to navigate through the entanglements of language, power, and multilingualism in qualitative research projects. Migration societies are characterized by hybridity and ambiguity. Those aspects also become more apparent in research processes. Embracing the imperfection of translation processes, indissoluble ambivalences, logistical constraints, and impossibilities to fully think outside the box of one's own positioning opens a research journey that reveals at least parts of social realities. Eventually, this implies that some ambiguities that occurred in the research will remain as they are in the results: inconclusive, versatile, and imperfect.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability
Due to the sensitive nature of the data and the confidentiality commitments made to participants, the data cannot be shared.

LLMs Disclosure
Only Grammarly was used for grammar and style improvement; no generative AI or LLM tools contributed to the content.

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