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Of Stumbling Blocks and Stepping Stones: Navigating Multilingual Challenges in Reconstructive Forced Migration Research

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Abstract

Reflexive migration research emphasizes the critical examination of knowledge production—particularly concerning researchers' positionalities, the categories they employ, and the institutional contexts in which they operate. We aim to extend this research stream by systematically engaging with linguistic positioning, which remains an underexplored feature in migration studies. Hence, our article critically engages with the multilingual challenges encountered in a sub-study of our project, The Art of Arriving, which reconstructively examined the experiences of individuals who fled Ukraine to Austria during the early months of Russia's war of aggression. Our contribution pursues two main objectives. First, we highlight the linguistic challenges that arose at various stages of the research process—including material collection, field access, data collection, translation, and reconstructive data analysis—and critically reflect on the strategies we adopted to address them. The active involvement of researchers with both cultural and linguistic expertise, combined with a reflexive and continuous dialogue within the entire research team, was crucial for navigating the multilingual research landscape. Second, we argue that translation processes in such projects should not merely be viewed as obstacles to overcome. Instead, these processes should be recognized as integral to the research itself. When critically reflected upon and facilitated through dialogue with culturally and linguistically familiar researchers, multilingualism can even enable deeper and more nuanced reconstructive analyses.

Keywords

forced migration; multilingualism; reflexivity; reconstructive research; translation

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1. Introduction

When the news of the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine reached us on February 24, 2022, which was followed by the movement of people seeking refuge in Europe and Austria in the subsequent weeks, we—authors 1 and 4—were in the midst of a research project focused on the "arrival" of displaced people in Austria. The first phase of this transdisciplinary project had just concluded: Artists, both with and without refugee experience, had been invited to translate their experiences of arrival into works of art. At that point, the second phase was about to begin, with plans to initiate group discussions on the topic of arrival after forced migration that used these artworks as prompts.

The group discussions were initially designed to include people with diverse refugee experiences, giving special attention to those who had been living in Vienna for at least five years (primarily individuals who arrived from the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, as well as those who fled from Syria around 2015). The onset of forced migration from Ukraine made it imperative to also incorporate the perspectives and experiences of this most recently displaced group. At this point, however, we encountered fundamental challenges related to the language of our fieldwork. Some of these challenges were similar to those we faced with other groups; for instance, the risk that discussions conducted in German or English privileged better-educated participants with prior exposure to foreign languages. Regarding the displaced Ukrainians, this became even more pressing since, unlike groups whose forced migration had occurred over five years ago, these Ukrainian individuals were still processing the very recent experience of displacement and loss. This made the language issue all the more pressing: How could they truly be given a voice if their research participation required them to speak in a foreign language about their very recent and potentially traumatic experiences? This stood out as being ethically problematic. Furthermore, this material for our project would have had limited analytical value, especially since our reconstructive approach aims to explore latent levels of meaning by reconstructing *how* people talk about specific issues rather than merely gathering *what* they are talking about. The project's original budget did not cover interpreters or personnel expansion because we could not anticipate the specific circumstances created by the war in Ukraine. However, a timely call from our funding agency made additional resources available to projects that included Ukrainian researchers. Our successful application allowed us to hire two researchers with Ukrainian backgrounds, i.e., authors 2 and 3. Their linguistic competencies and familiarity with the cultural backgrounds and experiences of recently arrived Ukrainians in Austria were instrumental in making it possible to include these individuals in the research process in an ethically appropriate and methodologically sound way.

In this article, we critically examine how we, as a cross-cultural and cross-linguistic team of four researchers, navigated the multilinguistic challenges encountered in this sub-study on displacement from Ukraine against the backdrop of reflexive migration studies. The focus will be on exploring the interrelation between multilingualism, researcher positionality, and the reflexive production of knowledge—based on the understanding that the multilingualism inherent to our research and the different positionalities within our research team had an impact on its findings (Havlin, 2022, para. 17). Reflecting calls for a more sociologically informed reflexivity grounded in empirical studies and concrete research practices (Krause, 2021), our contribution advances reflexive migration studies by critically reflecting on the challenges and strategies of a multilingual research project. We understand reflexivity as a critical and ongoing process of self-reflection that recognizes how researchers' positionalities, assumptions, and social locations shape knowledge production. It constitutes a methodological stance that treats knowledge as situated and contingent, aiming

to make research practices transparent, accountable, and attentive to power relations (Dahinden et al., 2021; Hadj Abdou, 2024).

In recent years, the academic literature has shown increasing engagement with the complexities of multilingual research. Scholars from various disciplines have explored the methodological, ethical, and practical challenges associated with translation and linguistic diversity (Caretta, 2015; Goitom, 2020; Havlin, 2022; Holmes et al., 2013, 2016, 2022; Inhetveen, 2012; Resch & Enzenhofer, 2018; Schembri & Jahić Jašić, 2022; Schittenhelm, 2017; Uçan, 2019; Zhao et al., 2024). Additionally, textbooks and handbooks have begun to sporadically address this topic (Bading et al., 2025; Berger, 2023; El-Menouar, 2022; Roslon & Bettmann, 2019). Havlin points out that unreflexive language use in the study of social processes risks reproducing the very systems of domination that are embedded within language itself. This becomes evident, for example, in the privileging of standard language over dialects, language "mixing," and written over spoken language (Havlin, 2022, p. 22). A reflexive sociology of migration must recognize and critically engage with these implicit hierarchies to *de-naturalize* language, challenging the assumption that language is neutral or given. Havlin further emphasizes that critical awareness of language hierarchies in knowledge production and mitigating language dominance by embracing multilingualism in its varied forms are key strategies in this process (Havlin, 2022, p. 28). This highlights that language use and reflecting on language practices are not peripheral concerns, but rather fundamental aspects of a critical, power-sensitive sociology of migration. Other scholars (Goitom, 2020; Inhetveen, 2012; Svensson, 2024; Uçan, 2019) have similarly argued that language itself constitutes a social field in which inequalities are inscribed and reproduced—making its critical examination essential to any reflexive engagement with migration and knowledge production.

Our reflections are grounded in this body of literature, which provides the conceptual and methodological framework for a transparent examination of the multilingual challenges encountered during our project. Studies on translanguaging are particularly insightful for our research. These address the fluid and dynamic use of language by multilingual speakers that transcends the basic separation of distinct linguistic codes. Thus, besides referring to linguistic differences between (some of) the researchers and participants, multilingualism also refers to the bilingualism in our project, including cases of translanguaging practices of our participants, who speak both Russian and Ukrainian. Crucially, this bilingualism carries a deeply political dimension, especially in light of the war. A key insight from this literature is that it is vital to continuously and reflexively engage with language use throughout all stages of the research process in order to ensure the rigor and depth of qualitative inquiry; equally essential are reflections on the researchers' language-specific positionalities. We contribute to this body of literature by critically reflecting upon our research practices across different project phases, situating these reflections in relation to existing literature, and showing how multilingualism in a highly sensitive and politically charged context requires an especially nuanced and reflexive methodological approach. Furthermore, we engage with scholarship that goes beyond identifying the challenges of multilingual research alone. These perspectives do not solely frame multilingualism as a potential *stumbling block*, but rather also as a resource—as *stepping stones*—that can enhance the validity of findings in reconstructive research settings. Nemouchi and Holmes (2022), for example, demonstrate how translanguaging as a method can foster reflexivity and thus strengthen the credibility of qualitative research. Zhao et al. (2024) also address validity in multilingual research projects by challenging the traditional notion of "equivalence" in translation. They argue that the uncertainties and discrepancies that emerge during translation processes should not be seen as threats to validity, but rather as opportunities for deeper reflection.

To sum up, the key insight from the above literature is that, within the framework of reflexive migration research, multilingualism must be thoroughly considered as a central phenomenon. It is crucial to reflect on the multilingual nature of societies and specific research contexts, take the associated challenges seriously, and develop effective mitigation strategies. Moreover, multilingualism and related processes of translation should be understood as processes that can enhance reflexivity. Embracing these linguistic dynamics thoughtfully allows researchers to deepen their critical awareness and improve the rigor and sensitivity of their work. Consequently, our article makes two key contributions to these discussions: First, we highlight the challenges that emerged at different stages of our research and reflect on the strategies we developed as a multilingual team in light of the existing literature to address these *stumbling blocks*. In doing so, we also draw attention to the roles and positionalities of individual team members. The reflexivity of our knowledge production is especially evident in the negotiation processes between languages (particularly in the translanguaging between Russian and Ukrainian) and in our sensitivity to the political meanings embedded in these practices. Second, we outline why translation processes in such projects should not merely be viewed as obstacles to overcome. Instead, these processes must be recognized as integral to the research itself. When critically reflected upon and facilitated through dialogue with culturally and linguistically familiar researchers, multilingualism can even enable deeper and more nuanced analyses, thus serving as *stepping stones*.

Before we proceed with our reflections on the challenges encountered and the strategies developed during our research, we first address two key aspects: the transparency of our positionalities and our understanding of "cultural familiarity." These provide essential context for the discussion that follows.

In light of ongoing debates around insider–outsider positions in qualitative research, it is important to make our positionalities within the project transparent before delving into our reflections. While we recognize that positionalities are inherently fluid and shaped by context (Carling, 2014; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), it remains analytically useful to reflect on how our differing backgrounds have influenced the research process. The team consists of two senior researchers who, while being insiders in the field of migration studies and reconstructive methodology, are linguistic and experiential outsiders with regard to the specific context of forced migration from Ukraine. By contrast, two junior researchers—Ukrainian nationals who share aspects of the interlocutors' lived experience—are newcomers to the project and its specific methodological approach. To illustrate these distinctions, we differentiate between the specific positionalities where necessary, using the third person to either specifically refer to the linguistically and culturally unfamiliar senior researchers or the culturally and linguistically familiar junior researchers, while speaking in the first-person plural ("we") in sections written from the collective perspective of all four authors. In terms of disciplinary background, author 2 was trained as a translator and international relations specialist, while author 3 is a gender researcher with an extensive background in journalism.

Building on Reckwitz's (2004) notion of culture as meaning- and knowledge-oriented, we do not conceptualize "cultural expertise" or "cultural familiarity" as static sets of traditions or practices, but as the capacity to recognize and engage with meaning-making processes that are locally and socially situated. Such processes often rely on implicit, taken-for-granted knowledge that is not readily accessible to individuals less familiar with the context. In our project, the two junior researchers exemplified precisely this kind of cultural expertise: By having grown up in Ukraine and having personal experiences of displacement, they were able to access and resonate with the participants' shared experiential horizons. This proximity was crucial during

data collection, because participants themselves experienced it as a form of "cultural closeness," while during data analysis, it also helped to make participants' meaning-making processes visible through reconstructive analysis.

The structure of the article is as follows: The next section introduces our research project and outlines the methodology. Section three is divided into four subsections, focusing on the respective preparation for and actual access to the field (3.1), data collection (3.2), data preparation and processing (3.3), as well as data analysis and interpretation (3.4). The insights gained will be discussed in the concluding fourth section.

2. Research Context and Methodology

2.1. The Potential of Art for the Sociology of Migration

Our research on the experiences of displaced persons from Ukraine forms part of the larger project, The Art of Arriving, which explored the transformative potential of arts within the sociology of migration and integration. Our project did not focus on how the "established" respond to displaced people or how displaced people adapt to existing structures, but on the experiences of "arriving" in the context of displacement. Building on Ludger Pries' conceptualization, "arrival" is understood as extending beyond mere physical relocation—it is deeply embedded in a migrant's inner world; shaped by perceptions, emotions, and lived experiences, as well as external social contexts and the negotiations they entail:

> [It is] as much a migrant's mental concept, experience and feeling as it is an outcome of [their] social environment and corresponding negotiations. Arrival refers to the individual's ability to navigate their way to socio-cultural and physical resources. Arrival also deals with cognitive frames and negotiated belongings as group constructions of "us" and "them." (Masadeh & Pries, 2022, p. 3891)

To deepen our understanding of how displaced individuals navigate the multifaceted processes of arrival and to strengthen the reflexivity of our research, we drew on insights from reflexive migration research (Dahinden, 2016; Dahinden et al., 2021; Dieterich & Nieswand, 2020) as well as postmigrant approaches (Foroutan, 2019; Foroutan et al., 2018; Hill & Yıldız, 2018; Yildiz, 2018). These perspectives call for a critical examination of how knowledge about migration is produced, emphasizing the positionality of researchers, the categories they deploy, and the institutional settings in which research is embedded. Adopting this lens enabled us to engage with the research process with heightened sensitivity to the underlying power dynamics and the co-construction of meaning between researchers and participants. In this context, we integrated artistic practices as a complementary lens to our genuinely reconstructive methodology. Drawing on insights from arts-based methods in qualitative research (Leavy, 2020), we explored the potential of integrating art as a "decentring" strategy (Dahinden et al., 2021), that is, distancing one's research from well-established ideas while developing alternative perspectives. Decentering through art can be best achieved through the multiple meanings that artworks may hold, as well as their potential to evoke emotional responses. In the first phase of the project, we invited artists with and without experiences of forced migration to express their experiences and knowledge of arrival through aesthetic forms. This collaboration resulted in a series of artworks (https://artofarriving.univie.ac.at/en/artworks), which later became central to group discussions involving participants both with and without displacement backgrounds. In these discussions, the artworks were not only interpreted, but also served as catalysts,

encouraging and enabling participants to express their often difficult and hard-to-articulate personal experiences of arriving after displacement.

We conducted 23 group discussions with a total of 58 participants from diverse backgrounds, including Afghanistan, Iran, Cameroon, Nigeria, Pakistan, Syria, the former Yugoslavia, and Ukraine. These group discussions all took place in 2022—the year that began with Russia's war of aggression, which displaced many Ukrainians from their homeland. While the forced migrants from other countries had already spent between five and 30 years in Austria and generally possessed good to very good German language skills, we initially questioned whether it would be pragmatically and ethically feasible to include the newly arrived Ukrainian individuals in our study. At the same time, their perspectives struck us as particularly compelling—both in their own right and as a contrasting case to other refugee experiences. Additional financial support from the funding agency allowed us to expand our project team and hire two new members, both originally from Ukraine and bilingual in Ukrainian and Russian. In line with the principles of the documentary method, the group discussions with displaced Ukrainians were then conducted separately in order to ensure homogeneous group compositions. These discussions also took place later in the research process, which led to the emergence of a distinct sub-project that we refer to in this article. In total, 19 Ukrainian participants took part in eight group discussions. Most of these participants were women (15) with academic backgrounds, which reflects the broader sociodemographic composition of displaced Ukrainians currently living in Austria and across Europe. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 59. Our reconstructive analysis of these group discussions revealed the challenges associated with arrival, which encompassed issues of self-identity, navigating between past experiences and uncertain futures, and adapting to an unfamiliar environment. While the broader findings have been reported elsewhere (Mijić et al., 2024; Mijić & Parzer, 2023; Parzer et al., 2024), this article focuses on multilingualism-specific challenges (in our reflexive framework). Before delving into these themes in detail, including the role of our multilingual research team, it is important to first outline the central methodological framework that underpins our analysis, as some of the multilingual challenges can be attributed to the specific methodology employed.

2.2. Reconstructive Social Research Methods

Our analysis draws on the documentary method, which has been established as a key approach within the broader framework of reconstructive methods in qualitative social research. Reconstructive methods aim to uncover implicit and often tacit forms of knowledge and meaning that underlie social practices. Rather than focusing solely on what people say or do, these methods seek to understand how social reality is produced and interpreted through shared orientations shaped by experience and social positioning.

The documentary method, developed by Ralf Bohnsack (Bohnsack, 2010; Bohnsack et al., 2010), builds on this epistemological foundation by distinguishing between communicative (explicit) and conjunctive (implicit) knowledge. It assumes that individuals' shared experiences, often based on similar social positions, give rise to "collective orientations" that structure how they interpret the world. These orientations are rarely articulated directly; however, they can be reconstructed by analyzing how people talk and act in specific contexts (Bohnsack, 2010; Bohnsack et al., 2010). The method is particularly well-suited to group discussions, where it differentiates between two levels of analysis: formulating interpretation, which summarizes explicit content, and reflecting interpretation, which reveals underlying conjunctive knowledge by reconstructing the "documentary meaning" of participants' actions and expressions. This second level

emphasizes the modus operandi—how something is done—rather than simply its objective or subjective meaning (Bohnsack, 2010, p. 103). As Reischl and Plotz (2020, p. 49) note, the focus is less on "what is happening" and more on how practices are socially generated and structured. In other words, such reconstructive analyses do not merely aim to capture the spoken content but rather seek to uncover the meaning embedded within it. Researchers employing this approach must therefore engage both with the literal definitions of terms and with their nuanced meanings and context-specific implications (Mijić, 2025). This becomes particularly complex in intercultural or multilingual research settings, where interpreting beyond the lexical level poses significant challenges—an issue that will be explored in more detail in the following chapter, which addresses the multilingual dimensions of our project.

3. Challenges in the Research Process

Our research faced challenges associated with multilingualism on various levels: During the fieldwork preparation, we had to develop a context-sensitive approach to recruit participants and engage with them in a setting that was ethically and methodologically sound. The main data collection challenge involved creating a safe, inclusive, and culturally sensitive space as well as anticipating the role of different languages and their sociopolitical implications for the participants. Further challenges arose during the transcription process and the subsequent transcript translations, as well as during the reconstructive analysis of the data. Addressing these challenges—covering ethical, methodological, and substantive dimensions—required tailoring a set of carefully considered strategies to the multilingual nature of our research. First, we brought in additional team members with linguistic and cultural expertise to ensure a nuanced understanding of the research context. We introduced the junior researchers to the project's methodological and theoretical foundations. This emphasized the fieldwork approach and the group discussion procedure developed by Ralf Bohnsack, since they were expected to carry out a substantial part of the data collection independently, although with guidance from the senior researchers. They were also trained in the documentary method of data analysis, which enabled them to participate as co-interpreters in the analysis of the collected data. In line with Temple and Edwards (2002) and Temple and Young (2004), we are convinced that this approach of involving linguistically and culturally familiar team members throughout the research process provides greater methodological rigor and enhances the analytical depth of the study compared to relying on interpreters for short-term data collection or working with translations unreflexively.

Furthermore, we emphasized reflexivity and open dialogue as core methodological principles, fostering a continuous critical examination of our research process. Given the assumption that researchers' positionalities should be viewed as relative and shift between insider and outsider perspectives (Carling, 2014; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), reflecting on one's positionality and its impact on knowledge production in this context also involves considering how the researcher's own linguistic background shapes their "language strategies" within the entire course of their inquiries (Havlin, 2022, para. 38). Finally, we critically engaged with translation processes to manage the challenges of working across languages and cultural contexts. In the following sections, we will explore the challenges and strategies in greater detail, drawing on insights from our concrete project work, while building on and referencing the existing literature.

3.1. Preparation of Data Collection and Access to the Field

The linguo-cultural expertise was particularly significant at key stages of gaining access to the field, specifically in adapting the written materials (e.g., informed consent, info sheets), establishing contact, and creating comfortable conditions that enabled trust (Edwards et al., 2006), while reducing hierarchical barriers between researchers and participants. These considerations are especially compelling in the context of working with a uniquely vulnerable group of people who experienced very recent, violence-induced displacement. Importantly, the Ukrainian researchers were not "integrated" into the Austrian and German-language context and had only arrived in Austria shortly before the research started, which placed them in a position similar to that of the participants.

In the following, we address the multilingual challenges of preparing materials for field access and data collection. We reflect upon the process of initiating contact, the importance of a context-sensitive approach to engaging with (potential) participants, and the role of culturally familiar researchers in this process.

3.1.1. Preparing the Materials with Linguistic and Cultural Sensitivity

After introducing the new members to the theoretical and methodological foundations of the project, the first task was to prepare the written materials. These included an information sheet with an invitation to participate in a group discussion, an informed consent form, a short questionnaire for socio-demographic data collection, and a guide for the group discussions that outlined its main questions. Although Ukrainian and Russian were later both used during the group discussions, the written materials were only provided in Ukrainian. This decision aligned with the administrative norms in Ukraine, where Ukrainian is the official language for formal documents. While Russian has been, and continues to be, widely used in oral and informal written communication among Ukrainian nationals, the exclusive use of Ukrainian in official contexts is the norm (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2024).

We paid particular attention to translating and formulating the information sheet and informed consent form, which are crucial for ensuring that participants fully understand the study's nature, purpose, and their rights. The German- and English-language documents from the larger project served as templates, which were then adapted to fit the specific context of the sub-study. From an ethical perspective, it was essential that all participants clearly grasped how their data would be used, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw from the discussion at any time without any negative consequences. Furthermore, the documents explicitly communicated that the group discussions would be anonymized in the analysis and that participants were expected to respect the confidentiality of their fellow participants, thereby contributing to a safe and trustworthy discussion environment. The information sheet's language was carefully tailored to be clear, culturally sensitive, and inviting, so as not to discourage potential participants from taking part. Likewise, the short questionnaire was adapted to fit the specific socio-political and linguistic context, ensuring relevance and appropriateness. Additionally, we placed a significant focus on adjusting the discussion guide, which was used by the Ukrainian researchers to facilitate the group discussions and to ensure coherence across sessions. Although this guide was only translated into Ukrainian, we made preparations to adapt the project's special terminology into Russian to reflect how the group discussions would take place in Ukrainian, Russian, or both languages. Despite a generally high level of coordinated bilingualism among Ukrainians, this may be more difficult when dealing with unfamiliar terms and concepts.

This approach to creating Russian-language adaptations is visible in the following example: The concept of "arrival," central to the project, was intended to play a key role in the group discussions. The participants were asked to share their experiences of arriving in Austria and reflect on what "arrival" means to them personally. Originally coined in German by Ludger Pries to critically engage with contemporary discussions on migration and asylum (Pries, 2018), adapting "arrival" into Ukrainian and Russian was a challenge, since the researchers without German language competency had no access to all the connotations of the original term. To achieve equivalence in Ukrainian and Russian, the Ukrainian researchers created a linguistic commentary, exploring the term's different meanings and possible adaptations into both languages. The main challenge was that the original German-language term *Ankommen*, as noted above, does not only mean reaching a place, but also resonating with it or being well received; to affect someone (in a certain way), to touch someone, or to be important or meaningful to someone (Pries, 2016). By contrast, the term lacks such social implications in Ukrainian. The researchers used the equivalent of прибуття (*prybuttia*), which means the actual process or action of arriving. In Russian, the term was translated as прибывание (*pribyvanie*), which also means the process of arriving, and consonant with this word пребывание (*prebyvanie*), which means to stay or be in a certain place. However, the Ukrainian and Russian terms hardly correspond to either the original German version or its English adaptation. The team ultimately settled with words прибуття (*prybuttia*) and прибывание (*pribyvanie*) in Ukrainian and Russian, respectively. The English version was also provided to the participants who were fluent in English during the discussion. However, while conducting group discussions, it became apparent that a lack of semantic overlaps meant that employing these terms offered no analytical value to the research subject. Using these terms as a frame in the discussions proved fruitless—shifting the focus to speaking through experiences instead of terms—which exemplified the challenges of multilingualism.

3.1.2. Tailored and Considerate Participant Recruitment

Group discussion participants were recruited through social media as well as in-person contacts in public places. The initial strategy advertised the call for participation on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram. Additionally, printed advertisements were placed at universities, in refugee centers, and at several public events organized by Ukrainians in Vienna. In-person contacts were most effective for attracting participants with specific shared traits, for instance, men who were significantly less likely to leave Ukraine due to martial law or people with an artistic background. This recruitment was done through personal connections, mostly through the university network, through artists' Instagram pages, or by striking up a conversation with musicians after a performance. Inviting participants to the discussion in their native language offered a key advantage: It enabled the clear communication of the project's research objectives and participation conditions, while also signaling that participants could expect a deep understanding of their contributions, both linguistically and in terms of lived experiences of war, displacement, and arrival.

3.2. Data Collection: The Group Discussions

In addition to methodological considerations, there were ethical and emotional dimensions to the data collection process, especially the need to create a safe, inclusive, and culturally sensitive space. The researchers' own backgrounds, the shared languages, and the sociopolitical implications of language choice played a central role in shaping the discussions. These reflections underlie the following two sections, which first address our efforts to create a welcoming atmosphere and then examine the participants' complex linguistic realities.

3.2.1. Before the Discussion: Fostering a Safe Space through Cultural Sensitivity

Conversations on sensitive topics such as armed conflict and forced displacement required a comfortable and safe environment, especially given the recent shock caused by the war. Schembri and Jahić Jašić (2022) discuss how language choice in interviews can shape both data quality and the power dynamics between researchers and participants. For our project, language was highly illustrative of how researchers and potential participants with common backgrounds are likely to understand the challenging context of arrival after forced migration. During the discussions, several participants emphasized the value of these shared backgrounds and contrasted them to interactions with individuals who had no experience of forced displacement, noting that the Ukrainian researchers' own backgrounds greatly facilitated the exchange. The researchers made strong efforts to establish a safe environment for the participants: by creating a welcoming atmosphere in the university rooms where the discussions took place, organizing small tea breaks, and reminding participants that their involvement was voluntary and that they could stop the interview at any time. The informal conversations that preceded the interview were vital in this regard. Here, the researchers briefly introduced themselves, reiterated the purpose of the project, and outlined the plan for the next few hours. While participants received project details and were encouraged to ask questions beforehand, the brief oral presentation addressed outstanding questions and set the structure of the discussion group. Additionally, the participants introduced themselves to the group before the formal discussion, which was intended to foster familiarity and create a trustful environment among the participants. During the introductions, participants typically shared their names, occupations, Ukrainian hometown, and their date of arrival in Austria.

The researchers also used the informal sessions to determine which language—Ukrainian or Russian—the participants preferred to use for the discussion. Because of how the war politicized language use, this decision required a sensitive approach that would not have been necessary for English- or German-language discussions. In practice, the participant characteristics like region of origin, social class, and age helped support selecting the language of discussion, which is further reflected upon in the following section.

3.2.2. The Question of (First) Language

As described in the introduction, reconstructive research requires creating an environment where individuals can express themselves freely and without language barriers, which allows them to share their experiences as fully and in as much detail as possible. When participants are asked to speak about difficult topics—such as, in our case, war and displacement—language choice is not only a practical concern, but an ethical one. Thus, it was essential that discussion participants could share their experiences in their first language. However, in the case of the forced migrants from Ukraine, the notion of "first language" is marked by certain complexities. Thinking of this group solely in terms of the Ukrainian language overlooks the multilingual realities they often embody (Havlin, 2022, para. 13). Ukraine's linguistic landscape is largely characterized by diverse forms of bilingualism, where Ukrainian and Russian are used interchangeably, including via code-switching, language interference, and code-mixing (Surzhyk; Havlin, 2022; Masenko, 2019, pp. 63, 74). Code-switching occurs in coordinated bilingualism, where the speaker consciously switches between two languages. By contrast, interference is characterized by the partial overlap of codes and sometimes less intentionality, but still obeys the respective grammatical, phonetic, and syntactic norms of both languages in single speech acts. Code-mixing, in turn, describes non-standard language varieties that dissolve the

language boundary (Masenko, 2019; Vogel & García, 2017). The cultural and ideological perception of each of these language modes is highly contextual (Bernsand, 2001; Bilaniuk, 2003, 2004; Masenko, 2019). However, the war caused the Ukrainian language to become increasingly prevalent within the country, especially in the public sphere (Homon & Biletska, 2024; Renchka, 2023). According to the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (2023), by 2022, about half of Ukrainians spoke Ukrainian at home, a quarter Russian, and a quarter both. After Russia's invasion, the number of people who spoke only Ukrainian at home increased by ten percent. The most significant changes occurred in the public sphere. Before 2022, 43 percent of people used Ukrainian at work or school; after the war began, this number rose to 68 percent. Similarly, only 22 percent used Ukrainian on the internet before the war, but this increased to 52 percent afterwards (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2023). These changes formed the cultural context that Ukrainian researchers were not only aware of but also equipped to navigate effectively.

Our project allowed participants to choose the discussion language in which they currently felt most comfortable, and the researchers emphasized that their language choice would be completely respected. Most participants chose to use their first language. However, some, for whom Russian was their family's language of communication before the war, switched to Ukrainian (as a matter of principle) after the war started, and consequently, they also participated in the Ukrainian-language group discussions. There were also instances where participants spoke the Surzhyk dialect and alternated between languages, or where one spoke Russian and the other Ukrainian. This alternation mirrors the typical bilingual reality in Ukraine. However, in times of war, it also carries the potential for conflict. Speaking Ukrainian can instantly signal political loyalty to Ukraine, while using Russian may prompt suspicion, requiring speakers to assert their stance through other means, such as speech content, clothing, or accessories. Still, even when such implicit labeling exists, tensions around language choice can be mitigated. In some cases, participants adjusted their language to that of the other participants: For example, during a discussion between two artists—a young woman who had switched to Ukrainian after the war began, and a middle-aged Russian-speaking man from a city that had been completely destroyed by the Russian army—the woman decided to speak Russian to him. Given that she made a conscious decision, from a political standpoint, not to use Russian in her daily life after the outbreak of the war, her co-participant's continued use of Russian could have led to a conflict. While gender and age imbalances may have also influenced these group dynamics here, it is highly plausible that the woman wanted to offer this man, who shared his experience of being in a besieged city and the horrors of war, the opportunity to express himself in the language he felt most comfortable with, regardless of it being Russian. This example clearly demonstrates that, just as the researchers were "scanning" for appropriate linguistic behavior in each group, the participants were doing the same and frequently adjusted their communication in response to the circumstances.

The concept of translanguaging clarifies this flexible and seemingly contradictory use of several languages. Although originally coined in the sphere of bilingual education during the 1980s (Baker, 2011; Vogel & García, 2017), this perspective on language and cross-cultural interaction has started to enter discussions on research in social sciences, especially migration studies (Darvin, 2019; Havlin, 2022). Translanguaging views all people as having a singular linguistic repertoire, regardless of the number of externally categorized languages they possess. Emphasizing pragmatics (Masaeed, 2023) over form, the translanguaging approach suggests that people deploy the multimodal features of this (multi-)linguistic singularity under different circumstances, depending on the communicative and expressive ends. It highlights how people "'go beyond' use of state-endorsed named language systems" (Vogel & García, 2017, p. 4) and

simultaneously highlights the complexity of multilingual environments and language use in post-colonial and globalized contexts. As Havlin points out (2022), translanguaging is a by-product of immigration and transnationalism, which was also evident in the discussions. Although most of the participants had only recently arrived in Austria, some had already started using German-language terms such as *Termin* (appointment), *Ausweis* (ID), or *Asyl*. Notably, these words were relevant to the specific situation of being displaced (Havlin, 2022, para. 35) and reflect the participants' key concerns: looking for international protection, ensuring a legal stay in the country, and following the rules of the local bureaucratic structures.

Given the (multilingual) complexities outlined in this section, researchers who possessed linguistic competence but lacked familiarity with the cultural context would have had more trouble communicating appropriately in that research setting. Navigating the complexities of translanguaging, code-switching, and code-mixing not only requires a technical understanding of these linguistic phenomena but also a deep sensitivity to the social, cultural, and political dynamics that shape language use in such contexts. As Havlin (2022, para. 17) stipulates, translanguaging, as a fundamental characteristic of multilingual practices, "creates [a] specific semantic field involving those who are able to decode the meaning constructed and generated in the moment." This implies that the researchers required both a knowledge of Ukrainian contexts as well as an understanding of Austrian realities in order to genuinely understand the participants during the group discussions and react appropriately, especially regarding the lived experiences of displaced individuals within that context. And of course, the participants' awareness of the researchers' multilingualism also played a role (Havlin, 2022, para. 35). For example, participants would have been unlikely to use any of the described German terms if they had perceived the researchers as being unfamiliar with the Austrian context.

At this stage, the non-Ukrainian researchers had a limited role and primarily focused on preparing the culturally and linguistically familiar team members for the group discussions and guiding them through the process. This involved regular joint reflections on how the conversations unfolded, the dynamics within the different groups, and the emotional experiences of the researchers themselves. All of these reflections became an integral part of the research.

3.3. Data Preparation and Processing: Transcribing and Translating

In this phase of data preparation and processing, the primary focus was on transcribing the discussions in the original language and translating the material. The transcription process adhered to the rules of the documentary method (Bohnsack, 2021, pp. 255–256), capturing nuances such as pauses, emphasis, and overlaps. Then, the transcripts were translated into English, the research lingua franca, with careful attention paid to preserving the markings made in the original transcript. While a direct translation of the group discussions would have been possible in principle, it was important to retain the original transcripts for analytical purposes.

The chosen translation approach balanced literal translation with cultural adaptation, while also aligning with English conventions to ensure comprehensibility for the researchers who lacked knowledge of the original discussion language. Inevitably, phrasing, word order, or expressions were occasionally adjusted. The overarching goal, however, was to achieve dynamic equivalence (sense-for-sense translation), while also applying the principle of formal equivalence (word-for-word translation; Nida, 2021) where necessary to reflect the cultural realities conveyed in the source language. This approach was intended to ensure that the

concepts in the target language carried the same emotive meaning as in the source language community, while also maintaining fidelity to lexical details and, when appropriate, grammatical structures. Where necessary, translations were supplemented with annotations and explanations. Building on the work of Zhao et al. (2024), we chose to move beyond a purely equivalence-based understanding of translation and instead adopted a reflexive approach—one that embraces uncertainty and difference as valuable resources in the context of qualitative research. We will return to this perspective in more detail later, when we discuss our analytical process. When inconsistencies emerged during the data analysis, the translations were reviewed and revised or supplemented with alternative versions as needed. Additionally, translanguaging instances were also annotated in the translations so that they could be incorporated into the interpretation process (Schittenhelm, 2017, p. 109). Havlin (2022, para. 50) similarly emphasizes this point, noting:

> Therefore, it is relevant to ask: Why it appears, under which conditions, and which meaning it communicates. It highlights the researcher-researched relations; it illustrates the communication in action in the multilingual and multicultural contexts; it reveals those elements resistant or difficult for an immediate translation. For this reason, it is paramount to preserve the incidences of translanguaging in original interview transcripts, as well as including them in further interpretation.

The translations provided the non-Ukrainian researchers with their first opportunity to engage with the material and determine how to proceed with the analysis.

3.4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis is at the heart of any research because it gives meaning to the data. This is literally true for interpretive research, which is fundamentally concerned with reconstructing meaning. This raises the question of how feasible it is to even work with translated material in such research. Existing studies suggest that it is indeed possible (Dersch & Oevermann, 1994; Mijić, 2019, 2025; Oevermann, 2001; Schröer, 2007), but requires involving culturally familiar interpreters who can, through a dialogical process, bridge the gap between "worlds" and facilitate the understanding of one within the context of the other (Mijić, 2025; Schröer, 2007).

From the project's outset, it was crucial to familiarize the culturally and linguistically familiar team members with the reconstructive approach. They were introduced to the key steps of the documentary method, which assumes that shared experiences grounded in similar social positions give rise to "collective orientations" or "conjunctive knowledge," which in turn form the basis of individual knowledge (Bohnsack, 2010, p. 105). Rather than primarily focusing on what participants say, the sequence analysis looks at how they speak about a particular topic. Accordingly, a literal translation is not sufficient; rather, the translation must grasp the broader semantic field and underlying orientations. While the core analysis was carried out by the senior researchers who have expertise in reconstructive methodology, the culturally close researchers played a crucial supporting role: They served as aides in decoding and interpreting the data relayed from another linguistic and cultural system; they assisted in moments of uncertainty and acted as a continuous point of reference by critically observing the analytical process to ensure that the interpretations remained grounded in the original material and valid. During this phase, the researchers relied heavily on each other, since they were carriers of two different types of knowledge: While the senior researchers had reconstructive analysis expertise and extensive experience, which ensured that everyone stayed within the methodological and theoretical structure of the study, the analysis would not have been possible without the junior researchers, who functioned as culturally

familiar co-interpreters. The ongoing dialogue between the junior and senior researchers was absolutely vital for developing a truly reconstructive understanding of the material.

In general, the analysis of the translated material held up well against the original. Rare cases where inconsistencies emerged were explicitly and extensively addressed through a reflexive dialogue. It was precisely at these points that it became clear that such challenges should not be seen as mere problems, but as valuable opportunities for deeper analytical insight. Juxtaposing the original material and translation made a wider range of interpretations accessible, which were then refined through a constructive process of the translation of meaning: Senior researchers, lacking direct access to the original material, guided the junior researchers in interpreting it, while continuously probing their culturally grounded knowledge with precise questions to understand why a statement seemed meaningful in one context, but not another. This process generated an exceptionally thorough and reflexive engagement with the material, pushing the analysis into depths that are rarely reached in processes without such a mutual dependence of interpretation partners in collaborative reconstructions.

4. Conclusion: (Multi)Lingual Reflexivity—Stumbling Blocks and Stepping Stones

This article reflects on the linguistic challenges we encountered in our reconstructive research about the experiences of forced migration from Ukraine to Austria in 2022. We examine the various phases of the research process—from preparing data collection, through translation, to the analysis of material—which we, as a multilingual team of two non-Russian/Ukrainian speakers and two native speakers of Russian and Ukrainian, navigated through the lens of existing literature on multilingualism. In doing so, we contribute to the growing body of reflexive migration research by systematically addressing the previously underexplored role of multilingualism in knowledge production. While reflexive migration studies have long emphasized the importance of critically examining researchers' positionalities, the categories they employ, and the institutional contexts in which they operate (Dahinden, 2016; Dieterich & Nieswand, 2020; Havlin, 2022), multilingualism has rarely been integrated into this reflection. When it is considered, the focus often remains on the language of origin and the language of arrival, while the potential multilingualism of the research participants—shaped by their often-transnational trajectories and biographies—is frequently overlooked. Our findings extend this discourse by foregrounding linguistic positionings as a central dimension of reflexivity.

In this regard, literature on *translanguaging* was especially important (Darvin, 2019; Havlin, 2022; Holmes et al., 2016; Masaeed, 2023; Vogel & García, 2017): Translanguaging describes the flexible and dynamic use of language by multilingual speakers and dissolves the strict separation between linguistic codes. In our project, multilingualism not only referred to the linguistic differences between researchers and participants, but also to their bilingualism since they spoke both Russian and Ukrainian. This bilingualism carries a deeply political dimension, especially in the context of the current war. Our work demonstrates that—particularly, though not exclusively, in politically charged contexts—a continuous and reflexive engagement with both language use and the language-specific positionalities of all project participants throughout every stage of the research process is essential. It further illustrates how such engagement can be put into practice.

Moreover, in line with literature emphasizing that linguistic diversity can enhance the validity of findings (Nemouchi & Holmes, 2022; Zhao et al., 2024), we argue that multilingualism should not only be seen as a

stumbling block but also as a stepping stone in reconstructive research. In practical terms, we observed that linguistic barriers often slowed down the interpretive process, but that this deceleration created valuable opportunities for deeper reflection. The slower engagement sharpened our focus on aspects that we might otherwise have overlooked in a faster, more everyday "routine" understanding. At the same time, the distance created by linguistic differences enabled a more deliberate and profound engagement with the material. This resonates with Ulrich Oevermann's argument that the unfamiliar can often be examined more clearly than the familiar, as it is not obscured by the "opaque layer of everyday understanding" (Oevermann, 2008, p. 147). Thus, the intuitive expertise of linguistically and culturally familiar team members was challenged by the precise and often critical questions of the "linguistic outsiders." At the same time, the outsiders depended on the insiders, guiding them methodologically to ensure that interpretations were clearly and transparently justified. The success of this multiperspective approach rested on two key conditions: First, fostering open and continuous dialogue to actively engage with and balance team dynamics; second, preventing power imbalances between junior researchers with linguistic and cultural familiarity and senior researchers with a more profound methodological expertise. Both perspectives were treated as equally indispensable and mutually enriching for the analytical process.

To summarize, this article provides two key takeaways. First, it is essential to reflexively engage with the challenges of multilingualism in order to do justice to the phenomena studied in qualitative and reconstructive migration research. Recognizing multilingualism as an integral part of the research process can foster a more reflexive and inclusive approach that captures the social and cultural dynamics of migration in a fuller sense. This insight has also fundamentally shaped our own research practice more broadly, prompting continuous reflection on language use and linguistic positionalities beyond the confines of this specific sub-project on displacement from Ukraine. Second, we argue that when such reflection is carried out consistently, researchers need not fear the challenges of multilingualism. On the contrary, systematic engagement with linguistic dynamics provides a valuable opportunity to enhance both the quality and depth of reconstructive research.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

The authors used the University of Vienna's AI tool u:ai (provided by the Vienna University Computer Centre) for language purposes only. No content, ideas, data interpretations, or conclusions were generated by AI. All scientific contributions remain solely the work of the authors.

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