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The Construction of Researcher Positionality Through Language Practices in Multilingual Contexts

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Abstract

Ethnographers immerse themselves in the lifeworlds of their participants—including their language practices—through participant observation. In this process, researchers' linguistic repertoires, along with the language choices and practices they enable, play a central role in co-constructing positionality within emergent interactions. These interactions both shape and are shaped by locally situated meaning-making, reflecting the dynamics of the research context. This article examines the dynamic construction of positionality in multilingual research contexts. Drawing on four linguistic ethnographies conducted at a metal foundry, a preschool, a secondary school, and dairy farms, the analysis identifies four key dimensions through which researcher positionality is constructed via language practices: attuning to, engaging in, translating, and recognizing participants' linguistic practices. Multilingual research contexts, we argue, introduce additional layers of complexity to the construction of positionality and call for critical reflection on the language practices of both ethnographers and participants.

Keywords

linguistic ethnography; multilingual practices; outsider–insider continuum; researcher positionality

1. Introduction

"What is going on here?" This question is a common starting point for ethnographers as they begin data collection (Anderson-Levitt, 2012). To find out, ethnographers immerse themselves in the lifeworlds of their

participants through participant observation, becoming part of the research site themselves. One aspect that is always "going on here" is some form of language variation: Participants may use different languages—or choose not to—they may shift registers, employ multimodal resources, or speak with different accents, to name just a few examples. These language practices do not occur in a vacuum; they carry social meaning, shaped by language ideologies and intertwined with broader social practices such as positioning oneself and relating to others (Heller, 2007).

When engaging with research participants in multilingual contexts, ethnographers inevitably become part of these linguacultural dynamics. During participant observation, they are far from being "flies on the wall." Rather, they are always visible and audible, bringing their own linguistic repertoires into the field and using them to co-construct relationships with participants (Costley & Reilly, 2021). This process of relationship-building is inherently complex, and language variation adds yet another layer: Ethnographers must navigate decisions about which language(s) to use, how to use them, and how to proceed when their linguistic resources do not align with those of the participants (Van Hest & Jacobs, 2022). Given the language-ideological dimension, these decisions can influence access to the field, shape interactional dynamics, and affect how the ethnographer is perceived. In other words, they contribute to the construction of the researcher's positionality.

In this light, it is worth extending the question "what is going on here?" to consider how researcher positionality unfolds specifically in the context of multilingualism. In the following, we explore researcher positionality through the lens of multilingual practices, approaching it not only as a methodological concern, but also as a potential opportunity to gain insight into the social realities we aim to study. Our examples from four different linguistic ethnographic research projects will highlight four different dimensions of positionality construction in multilingual research settings: attuning to, engaging in, translating, and recognizing participants' language practices.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Notion of Positionality

In ethnographic research, the notion of positionality—how researchers situate themselves and are situated in relation to the communities and contexts they study—has long been recognized as central to the research process (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Davies, 2012). As such, reflecting on one's own positionality, and on how it is constructed through language practices, is a crucial aspect of ethnographic research, particularly when employing participant observation (Pritzker & Perrino, 2021). Traditionally, this reflection focused on relatively stable aspects such as age, gender, nationality, or biographical background (England, 1994). More recently, researchers call for a more nuanced, situational approach to positionality, highlighting that positionality is not stable but dynamically constituted throughout research (Folkes, 2022; Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015; Lønsmann, 2016).

Whereas positions of "insider" and "outsider" are classically seen as rather static membership statuses, critical scholarship reconceptualized these as multifaceted and fluid, shifting on a continuum (Merriam et al., 2001). Recognizing this dynamic character of researcher positionality, Kohl and McCutcheon (2015) prominently made a case for "kitchen table reflexivity," an approach to positionality rooted in everyday talk that is always

embedded in wider power dynamics, in their case specifically regarding race. In their original conceptualization, Kohl and McCutcheon (2015) argue for an understanding of positionality as shaped in talk with academic colleagues. Building on this, Folkes (2022) extended the idea to include informal talk with participants in the field, further moving the perspective from fixed roles toward an understanding of positionality as "situational and relational, adapting over the course of the research" (p. 1318).

As a concrete illustration of such a self-reflective understanding, Lønsmann (2016) discusses how she variably positioned herself as an independent researcher, a consultant, and a (PhD) student, among other positionings, influencing which people and places she could get access to as an ethnographer. Similarly, Rickert and Platzgummer (2025) emphasize the co-construction of positionality in local contexts, showing how researchers and participants jointly shape their positions through interaction. Drawing on two linguistic ethnographies in early childhood education and care, they illustrate how participants collaboratively define emergent situations, co-constructing "frames" (e.g., research, educational, or play frames; see Goffman, 1974). In their study, these frames were often laminated, leading to layered and sometimes ambiguous positionalities that the researchers and other participants dynamically constructed.

2.2. The Notion of Multilingualism: Insights From Linguistic Ethnography and Related Fields

Linguistic ethnography brings together the methodological strengths of ethnography and linguistics, allowing researchers to "tie down" broad ethnographic observations using linguistic tools, while also "opening up" linguistic analysis through attention to social and contextual dynamics (Maybin & Tusting, 2011, p. 437). Multilingualism is a prominently explored phenomenon within linguistic ethnography, examined both as a lived reality and an interactional practice (Gardner & Martin-Jones, 2012; Martin-Jones & Martin, 2016). Multilingualism, however, is not only a research focus, but it also shapes the research process itself. Notably, it may be part of data generation and impact on researcher-participant dynamics, amongst other research facets (Costley & Reilly, 2021).

This is demonstrated, for example, by Ganassin and Holmes (2013). They describe a community-based research project involving a multilingual research team and multilingual refugee women as participants. The use of "flexible multilingualism" during interviews yielded data that represented participants' funds of knowledge. However, especially in institutional settings, researchers may also be exposed to local language policies restricting "flexible multilingualism" to some degree. This was the case in Gallego-Balsà's (2020) ethnography of an international university in Catalonia. While she often accommodated her conversation partners, using Spanish or a lingua franca, university staff asked her to only use Catalan during university activities. She reflects that resorting to other languages, despite speaking Catalan as an L1, contributed to positive research relations with the students while setting up tensions in research relations with teachers.

Sharing a language can impact—and at times situationally mitigate—power dynamics during data collection, but researchers' and participants' languages do not always align (Holmes et al., 2013). From Giampapa's (2011) ethnography with Italian-Canadian youth in Toronto, it becomes clear that participants have their own ideas about what counts as alignment: Giampapa, herself identifying as Italian-Canadian, born in Canada but raised in Australia, experienced that her research participants did not see her as Italian-Canadian, partly because of her Australian accent and her Standard Italian which was marked in relation to participants' regional varieties. In the context of ethnographic research among the Grecanici in Southern Italy, anthropologist Pipyrou learned

the minority language Grecanico to build rapport with the local community, many of whom were initially reluctant to admit to an "outsider" that they spoke a language often regarded as inferior on both societal and political levels (Pipyrou, 2016). In these instances, multilingual abilities functioned as a resource within the research process, not with a fixed meaning, but one that required local negotiation (see also Blackledge & Creese, 2010, p. 105).

Recognizing the affordances of multilingual research practices, Holmes et al. (2013, 2016) developed the researching multilingually (RMly) framework. This framework emphasizes the cultivation of researcher awareness regarding the possibilities and challenges of multilingualism, as well as deliberate, reflective decision-making across all stages of the research process. These considerations span two dimensions: research spaces (e.g., field sites, universities) and research relationships (e.g., with participants, collaborators, and academic audiences). This call for methodological attentiveness has been recently echoed in the field of linguistic ethnography. Costley and Reilly (2021, p. 1035) argue that "more attention must be given to how multilingualism affects each aspect of the process of actually doing linguistic ethnography," underscoring the need for considerations of multilingual language practices and their meanings in linguistic ethnographic research processes.

By including multi-species interaction in this article, we extend the concept of multilingualism into a broader framework of meaning-making in contexts where a fully shared linguistic code is absent. Drawing on both multilingualism research (e.g., Gumperz, 1964; Pennycook, 2017) and multispecies studies (e.g., Haraway, 2007; Meijer, 2019), we argue that both contexts require participants to negotiate interaction through semiotic repertoires such as speech, gesture, gaze, facial expression, posture, touch, proxemics, objects, and so forth (Kusters, 2021), embodied practices (Keevallik, 2018), and situated co-construction of meaning (Mondada & Meguerditchian, 2022). Insights from multispecies encounters—particularly the focus on attentional alignment, responsiveness, and multimodal coordination—are directly applicable to understanding how meaning is produced in multilingual research contexts with high asymmetries in language proficiency (Jacquemet, 2005). As such, multilingual and multispecies interactions are part of the same broader communicative ecology.

3. Method: Drawing the Lines Between Different Ethnographic Projects

The present study synthesizes insights regarding the construction of researcher positionality from four linguistic ethnographic projects conducted in multilingual settings: Marie Rickert conducted research in a pre-school in the region of Limburg in the Netherlands. Limburg is a multilingual region where approximately 48% of the population speaks the regional minority language, Limburgish, alongside the national language, Dutch (Schmeets & Cornips, 2022). Other languages are also present, amongst others linked to migration and the geographical location in the borderland (Hovens, 2021a). Connecting to educational institutions, Pomme van de Weerd draws on insights from her ethnographic research in a secondary school in Limburg where pupils engaged in social categorization through multilingual interactional practices and banter. Daan Hovens' project, in turn, focused on linguistic diversity and power dynamics within a highly mechanized metal foundry in Limburg. Lastly, we take a look beyond human-human interactions to a farm in Limburg, based on Leonie Cornips' insights from her research with cows on farms. In her project, she investigates how cows engage in meaning-making, drawing on diverse semiotic resources.

Table 1. Overview of research projects.

	Marie Rickert	Pomme van de Weerd	Daan Hovens	Leonie Cornips
Location	Preschool	Secondary School	Metal Foundry	Farms
Time	Between autumn 2020 and spring 2021	Between January 2017 and March 2018	Between July and October 2017	Ongoing since 2018
Participants	23 children between 2 and 4 years of age and their 2 teachers	27 students between 14 and 17 years of age	Around 300 production workers and around 200 other workers	Cows on about 16 dairy farms, a cow sanctuary, a petting zoo, and a small herd wandering outside all year round
Research methods	Participant observation; audio recordings; video recordings	Participant observation; audio recordings	Participant observation; audio recordings; video recordings	Participant observation; video recordings; artistic methods
Research focus	Children's participatory language practices	Multilingual practices and social categorization in interaction	Language policy, power dynamics, human–machine interaction	Meaning-making of (dairy) cows

All of the projects are of a linguistic-ethnographic nature, meaning that we each engaged in long-term data collection (at least three and a half months and up to several years), where we employed participant observation and conducted audio or video recordings (see Table 1). We each documented our process and observations through fieldnotes, which include our own reflections.

In each individual project, ethical aspects were carefully considered before and during data collection. Importantly, all projects discussed in this article have received ethical approval by academic institutions in the Netherlands (PvdW, MR, DH: Ethics Review Committee Inner City faculties/Maastricht University; LC: Academy's Ethics Review Committee/KNAW). All participant names below are pseudonyms. Given the amount of ethnographic studies discussed in this article, a detailed description of ethical research procedures for each project is out of the scope of this article. Please see Rickert (2024), van de Weerd (2020), Hovens (2021b), and Cornips (2025a) for details of the specific projects.

For the study at hand, we engaged in joint discussions about the construction of researcher positionality in our multilingual research projects. To ground these discussions empirically, we each reviewed the linguistic ethnographic data of our own project, identifying pieces of data that illustrate the ways in which we as researchers engage in diverse language practices with participants when constructing researcher positionality. For the study at hand, we selected two vignettes and two transcripts of audio recordings. While vignettes lend themselves to capture the researchers' lived experience (Creese & Takhi, 2016), transcripts foreground naturalistic interaction, two important dimensions of linguistic ethnography that we aim to include in our study.

The selected data all concern "key incidents" in our research journey (Emerson, 2004). Key incidents raise researchers' immediate interest in the dynamics of a situation that could appear ordinary to participants.

According to Emerson (2004, p. 439), "this 'interest' is not a full-blown, clearly articulated theoretical claim, but a more intuitive, theoretically sensitive conviction that something intriguing has just taken place," which requires subsequent analytical unpacking. Our selected key incidents are context-sensitive, i.e., they uniquely occurred locally and temporally embedded in each individual research project, representing pivotal moments of the dynamic construction of researcher positionality in a multilingual research context.

Joint discussions of our analyses yielded four central dimensions of constructing researcher positionality through language practices in multilingual research contexts: attuning to, engaging in, translating, and recognizing participants' language practices. In the following results section, we will introduce these dimensions based on the relevant ethnographic data.

4. Empirical Examples of the Construction of Researcher Positionality in Multilingual Research

4.1. Attuning to Participants' Language Practices as Positionality

As described above, Marie Rickert's research is set in a preschool in Limburg, the Netherlands, focusing on children's participation in and through language practices in early childhood education and care. Marie herself speaks German as a first language and entered the field site with a solid command of Dutch and a "good enough" passive understanding of Limburgish, mainly due to its shared roots with German and Dutch.

Vignette 1 demonstrates how Marie, as she was becoming part of the field, also became part of the prevalent language dynamics there through attuning to participants' language practices.

Vignette 1. First day of Marie's fieldwork—Lunch break at the preschool:

> The children have gone home and I sit down together with the two teachers for lunch and a chat. Teacher Helena turns to me: "*Dan zal je vast ook je Nederlands gaan verbeteren als je hier zo lang rondloopt*" ["You'll probably improve your Dutch if you're here for quite a while," in Dutch]. I agree with her, saying that I hope to do so. Shortly after, the conversation shifts to the teachers' private plans for the afternoon and just as seamlessly, the language shifts from Dutch to Limburgish. I let the teachers talk and quietly focus on my cheese sandwich again.

Importantly, such attuning interrelates with recognizing the language practices and engaging with them throughout participant observation. As had been reported in the literature (Cornips, 2018; Morillo Morales & Cornips, 2023), and as Marie would experience more and more in the upcoming months of the project, the national language, Dutch, is prioritized in preschools in Limburg. From a language-ideological perspective, Dutch is linked to institutional language practices and education, while Limburgish is commonly seen as pertaining to the emotional, more private domain (Cornips, 2018). In the situation at hand, Marie's own language background became relevant. Interestingly, Helena commented on Marie's emergent Dutch while her lack of Limburgish was met with indifference. This fits with broader language ideologies that regard Limburg "locals" as the only "authentic" speakers of Limburgish and restrict new speakers in their use (Cornips, 2025b). In the course of the interaction, Marie co-constructed this language hierarchy by attuning to the teacher's sole focus on Dutch and leaving Limburgish out of the picture as a language of interest.

Her situational positioning was multidimensional: While the focus on her ongoing learning of Dutch might suggest that she was still somewhat of an outsider in the field, looking at the vignette from a practice perspective demonstrates that Marie's learner status did not stand in the way of a meaningful conversation between teachers and researcher. Marie attuned to participants' language practices by co-creating the focus on Dutch as a societally meaningful language.

In this light, the languages in which the interaction at lunch unfolded also deserve a closer look: The teacher interacted with Marie in Dutch. In the discussion of afternoon plans, the two colleagues switched to Limburgish and Marie focused on her lunch again, momentarily taking a less active part in the conversation. Marie's positionality situationally shifted towards the "outsider"-side of the dynamic insider-outsider continuum, not being a speaker of Limburgish and not choosing to actively engage with, e.g., a lingua receptiva approach and take part in the conversation in Dutch while the teachers speak Limburgish (cf. ten Thije, 2013). As Marie would later observe, similar dynamics emerged during fruit breaks with the children: Joint group interaction between teachers and children occurred in Dutch while teachers co-constructed personal conversational frames among colleagues in Limburgish. In these situations, the children continued their own interactions, focusing less on what the teachers were doing (Rickert, 2023). In this way, Marie, as a newcomer in the field, experienced a similar language socialization that children attending the preschool experience, and attuned to the ways in which the teachers' constructed their interaction as more intimate through the use of Limburgish. During her research, her experience of becoming part of the language dynamics herself, and the accompanying reflections in the field diary, drew her attention to the intimization of the teachers' interaction through the use of Limburgish in front of the children, which became a relevant focus of her ethnographic inquiry later on (Rickert, 2023). Consequently, she focused more on teachers' switches from Dutch to Limburgish in teacher talk in front of the children during subsequent data collection.

In this case, attuning to participants' language practices enabled the positioning of the researcher as a learner of the institutionally relevant language, Dutch (in contrast to the regional minority language), as well as that of a bystander when the teachers use the regional minority language in their more "private" talk. While Marie aligned with the teachers by attuning to local language dynamics, this simultaneously meant exclusion from more "intimized" parts of the interaction that took place in Limburgish. Attuning to participants' language practices was thus the basis of emerging positioning practices together with participants, which contributed to the researchers' becoming part of the pre-school in compliance with the logic of local lingacultural dynamics. The next example shows a case in which the researcher engages much more actively in participants' language practices by participating in their banter through borrowing resources from "their" linguistic repertoire.

4.2. Engaging in Participants' Language Practices as Positionality

Extract 1 below comes from the research project by Pomme van de Weerd in a secondary school. The researcher conducted ethnographic research with a single secondary school class (students aged 14–17). During the interaction, the researcher was sitting at a table with three students, who were leafing through magazines to search for photos for an assignment. There was a light atmosphere with lots of chatting and laughter. Five minutes before the transcribed interaction, one student (Amira) had said the word *hachouma*, meaning something like "shame on you" in Moroccan Arabic, and explained its meaning to the researcher. Minutes later, another student (Dounia) encountered a photo in her magazine which showed

a woman with jeans where the back pockets were missing, showing her bare backside through the pants. That is when the interaction below took place. The first line shows the original, the bold-faced line below the English translation. Further marks are explained below.

Extract 1. Hachouma—23 January 2018 (participants: Dounia, Amira, and researcher):

Unmarked = associated with Dutch

Italics underlined = associated with Moroccan Arabic

WORD = Emphasis

[word] = Additional information provided by transcriber

1	Dounia	[wijst naar foto] kijk, Amira over een jaartje
		[points to photo] look, this is Amira in about a year
2		**[Dounia and researcher laugh]**
3	Amira	Eh wollah qoran schaam je, dat gaat te ver
		Eh *I swear to God by the Quran*, shame on you, that's going too far
4		**[Dounia and researcher laugh more]**
5	Amira	[lachend] wollah je krijgt echt klappen
		[laughing] *I swear to God* you will get beaten
6	Researcher	*hachouma*!
		***hachouma*!**
7		**[Dounia and Amira start laughing more]**
8	Dounia	[lachend] ik ga stuk, u bent gestoord
		[laughing] I am dying, you [formal pronoun] are crazy
9	Researcher	IK ben gestoord?
		I am crazy?
10	Amira	[tegen Dounia] JIJ bent gestoord
		[to Dounia] YOU are crazy
11	Researcher	ik leer het alleen maar van jullie hoor!
		I am just learning from you, you know!

Extract 1 shows how the researcher used a word (*hachouma*, line 6) she had just learned from the research participant, in a playful banter situation. Coming from Moroccan Arabic, this word was previously not part of the researcher's linguistic repertoire. As such, she was engaging in a language practice that research participants did not consider hers (nor did she, herself).

At the beginning of the research project, students had asked Pomme "what she was," referring to whether she had a migration background. Finding out she had no (known) migration background, she was categorized as a "Dutch person." In the class, about half of the students had a migration background, and all students in the interaction did as well. Almost all these students had been born in the Netherlands, but they commonly referred to themselves as "foreigners" and to peers without migration backgrounds as "Dutch people." Use of these social categories in interaction had several functions (see van de Weerd, 2019), but relevant here is that they were also associated with multilingual practices. Although elements of Turkish, Moroccan Arabic, and Berber were used widely by all students, including those without migration backgrounds, these forms were not

neutral. Students with migration backgrounds sometimes mocked their peers without migration background for misusing them, signaling that these linguistic practices were socially marked and (semi-) exclusive to those categorized as "foreigners." So, the researcher's use of the word *hachouma*—her engagement in their language practices—could have been interpreted as a transgression as it was not considered to be part of her repertoire as a "Dutch person."

Pomme's use of *hachouma* was furthermore delicate because it connoted her active participation in a playful banter situation. As with the use of "other" languages, students associated the use of banter with social categories. Banter, in this context, is closely tied to forms of jocular language play—instances where language is used humorously or creatively, often through teasing, and interpreted as amusing by those involved (Haugh, 2017). This frequently took the shape of a rapid back-and-forth of teasing and playful provocation. This practice, while lighthearted, was not socially neutral. Students with migration backgrounds constructed the practice as a category-bound activity, pointing out that they enjoyed "joking about each other," which they said they could not do with students without migration backgrounds. In the extract, the researcher—a "Dutch person" and an adult—engages in this practice.

Despite the delicacy of the researcher's engagement in the interaction, her contribution was taken up positively by the participants. Their reactions show surprise (lines 7 and 8), but the laughter also shows alignment. In line 8, Dounia laughs and calls the researcher "crazy," albeit using the formal pronoun u instead of the more informal *jij* ("you"). This can be seen as a sort of transgression-in-return: The participants did not usually call the researcher, or any adult in this context, for that matter, crazy. Paired with the laughter, this continues the play frame established throughout the interaction. After the transcribed exchange, the conversation shifted to other topics.

In this interaction, Pomme engaged in (what is associated with) her participants' language practices, borrowing elements of Moroccan Arabic and adopting their style of banter. However, this was not something she usually did during the project. The light atmosphere, co-construction of humor in that specific moment, and the rapport that they had built up in the year prior to this exchange, allowed for this interaction to take place. It affirmed and strengthened researcher-participant relations within this project. This example, then, shows how positionality is not fixed but continually renegotiated in and through interaction, where engaging in participants' (multilingual) interactional styles can be a resource to relate to the participants.

4.3. Translating Participants' Language Practices as Positionality

Extract 2 shows an example of a daily work interaction in the Finishing Department of a metal foundry in the Dutch province of Limburg, near the Dutch-German border. The researcher, Daan Hovens, conducted linguistic-ethnographic research in the foundry for 3.5 months in 2017. Over 300 people worked in the foundry's production departments at the time, the majority of them on a temporary basis. Many of these workers were cross-border commuters living in Germany, and many were first-generation migrants with a different first language than Dutch, German, or the regional minority language Limburgish, such as Arabic, Polish, Russian, and Turkish.

Extract 2. Work interaction in a multilingual metal foundry in the Dutch-German borderland in Limburg, 15 August 2017 (participants: Kamil, Maxim, and researcher):

Unmarked = associated with German

Underlined = associated with Dutch

Italics underlined = associated with Limburgish

(xxx) = Unintelligible speech

(word) = Transcriber unsure

WORD = Emphasis

[word] = Additional information provided by transcriber

1	(Kamil)	(xxx)
		(xxx)
2	Maxim	bitte?
		pardon?
3	Researcher	huh?
		huh?
4	Maxim	was bitte?
		pardon, what?
5	Researcher	uh weiß ich auch *neet*, ich hab es nicht verstanden
		uh I don't know *either*, I haven't understood it
6	Maxim	hehe (du muss ihm)
		hehe (you must him)
7	Kamil	(xxx)
		(xxx)
8	Researcher	huh? wat zei je?
		huh? what did you say?
9	Kamil	(jij spreekt) nederlands jij spreekt nederlands
		(you speak) dutch you speak dutch
10	Maxim	ja dat kan AUCH
		yes that is possible TOO
11	Kamil	ja
		yes
12	Researcher	hehehe
		[hehehe]
13	Kamil	ik zeg van hem, ik zeg, ben jij boos?
		I say of him, I say, are you angry?
14		[approximately two seconds pause]
15	Researcher	ah oké oké
		ah okay okay
16	Maxim	kannst du übersetzen?
		can you translate?

17	Researcher	eh, bist du sauer?
		eh, are you angry?
18	Maxim	nein, (xxx)
		no, (xxx)
19	Researcher	ahaha
		ahaha

Maxim was a younger (<40) but relatively experienced production worker. He belonged to a group of workers in the foundry who had migrated from Kazakhstan, and who spoke fluent Russian and German (not Kazakh). Maxim sometimes also used a few words that can be associated with Dutch (as in line 10), which he might have picked up in the foundry. Kamil was a younger (<40) and relatively inexperienced production worker. He had come to the Netherlands as a refugee from Iraq, and he had started working in the foundry only recently. His first language was a variety of Kurdish, and he had learnt some Dutch (as shown by the extract). Daan did not observe him speaking any German or any other language, such as English. One specific feature of Kamil's speech was that he tended to speak rather softly, which was challenging in a loud environment like the foundry's Finishing Department, where one could hear many sounds from tools, machines, people, and radios.

Daan was a younger (<40) researcher from the Dutch province of Limburg, who spoke Dutch and Limburgish as his first languages and German as one of his second languages. Therefore, he was in a position to act as a Dutch-German interpreter for Maxim and Kamil, but that was not in line with his research agenda. Daan wanted to find out how the linguistic diversity in the foundry was managed and experienced on a daily basis, especially in situations where there was little overlap between people's individual language repertoires (see also Hovens, 2021b). On the one hand, his participation as an extra worker (who would, for example, help people lift heavy materials) enabled Daan to capture more intimately what it was like to work and communicate in the foundry as an "insider." On the other hand, he had to maintain a somewhat unnatural "outsider" position by not involving himself too much as a translator or interpreter, as he wanted to observe what people would do in situations where he was not present. Implicitly, people might have recognized Daan's outsider status in this regard, as he was only asked to translate/interpret two or three times during the 3.5 months of his data collection. Extract 2 shows the only time that Daan agreed to do this, albeit after a brief hesitation (line 17).

Daan's data collection in the foundry also meant navigating conflicting discourses on linguistic diversity. Many production workers from the Netherlands considered this diversity a major obstacle to good working results, and they criticized the fact that the foundry hired many people who could not speak Dutch (see also Hovens, 2021a). Other production workers, especially temporary staff from Central and Eastern Europe, did not consider linguistic diversity a particularly urgent problem that required special attention (see also Hovens, 2020). They might have recognized intuitively that discourse on language problems often serves as a proxy for discriminatory practices against migrants (see, e.g., Kraft, 2019). Hence, it was not in their interest to endorse or reproduce such a discourse, and Daan did not feel like reproducing a discourse of language problems either. The fact that no "diversity critic" was present during the interactions between Kamil, Maxim, and Daan might have made it easier for all participants to acknowledge that there was a linguistic obstacle that required attention. Nevertheless, Daan could have refused to go along with the binary choice between either translating or doing nothing at all, for example, by suggesting other solutions, such as gestures. Clearly, all these options would have had consequences for his situated research

relationships in this linguistically diverse work environment, his situated position on the insider-outsider continuum, and the research data that were recorded after this. Thus, it is clear that there was no such thing as a neutral linguistic choice without consequences for the research relationships and data.

The final empirical case examines multispecies interaction, expanding the concept of multilingualism into a broader framework of meaning-making that operates without a fully shared linguistic code.

4.4. Recognizing Participants' Language Practices as Positionality

Vignette 2 reveals a nexus of positionalities that are situated and shift momentarily depending on Leonie Cornips' position as, for example, a linguistic researcher, a multispecies ethnographer, an interpreter, and a tourist. She is on holiday, away from the industrial dairy farms where she conducts most of her ethnographic observation and participation since mid-2018. However, as an ethnographer who approaches the self as a research instrument, lines between private life and research life may blur, as observations outside the official research locations can become part of ethnographic inquiry and impact on the research process (Leibing & McLean, 2007). The research question Leonie is orienting herself around is how we might reconceptualize the concept of "language" in such a way that whole-body activities including sound production by nonhuman animals are included, hence, revealing not a human multilingual but a more-than-human multilingual society. Can we, as human animals, come to understand how dairy cows, among themselves and with humans, engage in meaning-making?

Vignette 2. Mother and calf (fieldwork notes end of May 2021):

> It is the holiday season, during the height of the Covid pandemic. Fortunately, we have managed to reserve a last-minute spot at a small campsite attached to a cattle farm specializing in beef production. We arrive late in the afternoon and begin searching for a location on the property where the overpowering stench of manure is less pervasive. We do not succeed. Driven by curiosity due to my ongoing research, I walk toward the barn where the cows are housed. To reach the entrance, I have to round a corner. The inside of the barn, shielded from the harsh sunlight, appears pitch-dark and slightly elevated. As I make the turn, I hear a cow utter a brief, tense nasal sound—"mm." I immediately recognize this as a vocal prompt: a mother urging her calf to come closer or stay nearby. This mother cow has already sensed my presence before actually seeing me. What strikes me even more is the realization that such alertness likely stems from prior negative experiences with humans. I step into the barn. The air is thick with the acrid smell of manure—so intense it is difficult to breathe. In the dim light, I can just make out the mother cow and her newborn calf nestled beside her. I am overcome by a powerful emotion; for perhaps the first time, I am able to meaningfully interpret the vocalization of a cow without being present with the cow or the calf myself—that is, I can predict the meaning of the sound, who produces it and for whom it is intended in which context.
>
> It is a deep-litter barn—neglected and heavily soiled. The mother sinks to her knees in the slurry; her udders are submerged in it, and the calf is nearly swallowed by the muck. Everywhere I look, there is nothing but manure. I feel an overwhelming urge to leave, but first I speak with the woman who runs the campsite—who is also the farmer. I mention the need for a fresh layer of straw in the barn. "Too inefficient now," she replies.

Because Leonie was outside the institutional context in which she "officially" conducts research with cows, she was able to position herself differently than usual in this situation. She chose to enter the cowshed attached to the campsite. She chose to address the farmer—also the campsite manager—about the extreme filth of the deep-litter stable. And she chose to leave the campsite (and thus the barn) as quickly as possible after that conversation. This would not have been possible while doing ethnographic research within Leonie's usual field sites. She does not uninvitedly confront farmers about problems she observes; instead, she asks them in advance whether or not they are open to receiving advice, or she will try to tell stories when seeing problems, informing them of how other farmers may solve these. Without the farmer's consent, cooperation, and knowledge, it would not be possible to conduct research in the barns or to gain insight into the (limited) possibilities cows have to initiate social activities with each other. Nor would it be possible to understand which activities and material conditions are imposed upon them. Farmers consider themselves, and are societally regarded, as the owners of the cows; without the owner's permission, no research with the cows can take place. This section, therefore, focuses on Leonie's positioning vis-à-vis the farmers as gatekeepers in addition to the animal participants. Such focus is necessary because access to the private barns—and thus to the cows' lives and their interactions—depends on the farmers' consent.

In this sense, Leonie's positioning is negotiated not only through her actions but also through her linguistic choices and communicative styles. In her usual fieldwork interactions, she switches between registers, tones, and sometimes language varieties—using, for instance, local dialect features—to maintain trust and openness. These multilingual and context-sensitive practices enable her to stay attentive to farmers' sensitivities while still engaging critically with the conditions of the cows. What is required in a multispecies ethnography with production or food animals is a cautious and nuanced positioning—one that allows for advice, discussion, dialogue, storytelling, collaboration, and shifts based on rural or urban background, gender, age, living with a companion dog, love for animals, and so on, to remain possible in interactions with the farmers. These requirements of carefully positioning oneself at research sites through language and other related social practices became clear to Leonie through reflecting on this experience outside the usual research sites.

Leonie's positionality as a linguist is completely different, being shaped primarily by a profound lack of knowledge of how cows interact with each other and with humans. Early in her observing and participating, it quickly became apparent that while she was observing the activities of cows in barns, she had no sense of how to interpret what she was seeing, hearing, feeling, touching, perceiving, and smelling. The question "what is going on here" was completely impossible to answer. Gradually, however, by simply being present attentively with the cows, trying to participate in what they were doing, she began to develop some sense of awareness about their meaning-making. Through ethnographic research on farms where calves are allowed to stay with their mothers for extended periods, she learned how mother cows use the "mm" vocalization, as described in the vignette, to call their calves even closer to them. She also came to understand that humans can often approach a mother cow and her calf without the mother cow eliciting this sound—provided the relationship between human and cow is one of trust. In such cases, the mother does not produce the "mm." That is why, as Leonie turned the corner toward the barn at the campsite, she immediately knew that the mother cow perceived any approaching human as threatening.

This encounter had the effect of strengthening her confidence that the vocalizations of cows in interaction with other cows can be understood on the basis of sustained ethnographic fieldwork across a wide range of contexts, and that such fieldwork and an open mind, also outside of official research sites, truly informs

analysis. Moreover, it was at that moment that she became acutely aware of the cow's own agency, her capacity to initiate action independently of humans. In this case, the cow vocalized to call her calf towards her, away from the approaching human, underscoring the relationality of her communication. Finally, this encounter once again confronted her with the realization of how poorly cows can be cared for within human-dominated environments.

As Leonie's understanding of cows' meaning-making processes has gradually deepened, she has come to occupy a dual position as both insider and outsider. Cows undoubtedly perceive her as an outsider, with the possible exception of those with whom she has built particularly intimate relationships over the years. She is gaining what could be considered insider-knowledge in the process of trying to make sense of their linguistic practices. Interpreting the "mm" sound in the vignette is a highly (inter)subjective act. In this context, the ethnographer becomes both translator and author of the sound production being analyzed, as she ultimately decides what the cow's utterance means. This interpretive process is embedded in unequal power relations, with the human observer holding epistemic authority over how the cow's actions are understood and communicated.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

How do ethnographic researchers' language choices and practices shape research relationships in multilingual contexts? And how do they impact the kinds of data they collect and analyze? Through a juxtaposition of four cases from multilingual research contexts, we have highlighted different dimensions in the construction of positionality in multilingual research contexts: attuning to, engaging in, translating, and recognizing participants' language practices. These dimensions can interrelate: For example, engaging in participants' language practices, as Pomme did in the case of multilingual banter at school, requires prior attuning to the pupils' language practices to recognize such banter as an in-group social practice among pupils. Marie's attuning to local language dynamics leads to active engagement in one moment in Dutch, and non-engagement in the next moment, in Limburgish. Consisting of these different dimensions, researchers' linguistic choices are not merely methodological, but constitutive of the relational and epistemic possibilities of multilingual ethnographic research.

Hence, the researchers' multilingual practices are central means through which positionality is negotiated and constructed (Martin-Jones et al., 2016). When researchers attune to the meanings of participants' use of their linguistic repertoire, engage with their repertoires and styles, translate utterances, or acknowledge diverse language practices, they actively position themselves vis-à-vis their participants. These decisions are never neutral; they carry ideological weight and communicate messages about who they are as researchers, but also impact on the data that they collect, the social and linguistic patterns they can analyze, and the ways they do so. The researcher Daan, for example, when translating for Maxim and Kamil, unavoidably positioned himself vis-à-vis discourses linking multilingualism to communication barriers within the foundry. At the same time, translating allowed him to build rapport, assuming more of an insider status among the colleagues. Leonie's fieldwork has, over the years, gradually increased her understanding of dairy cow–human interaction, starting from analyses of only vocal greetings and later including more complex multimodal repertoires with gaze, bodily orientation, and material engagement.

Researchers' multilingualism, and their overlap (or lack thereof) with participants' multilingualism, can be a valuable methodological resource (see also Holmes et al., 2013). To that end, Marie's vignette demonstrated that, even when researchers do not share the same repertoires as their participants, insights can be gained from analyzing what such variation in repertoires might entail for interactions with participants. In Marie's case, she was positioned as someone adhering to local language dynamics by foregrounding the acquisition of Dutch, and therefore aligning with the teachers, while also never receiving full "insider"-status as someone speaking Limburgish. In that sense, our data underscores that participating as a linguistic ethnographer is fundamentally a situational phenomenon. Researchers continuously navigate the insider-outsider continuum, and their multilingual repertoires serve as both bridges and barriers in this navigation (Costley & Reilly, 2021).

The moments when researchers choose not to engage with participants' multilingual practices may be equally telling about local language dynamics as moments when they do engage. While Marie, for example, aligned with the teachers' language practices by foregrounding a focus on the institutionally relevant language, Pomme borrowed resources from the pupils' linguistic repertoires. Despite involving almost opposite practices, the two situations contributed to rapport-building in their own way, which highlights the context-sensitivity of the construction of researcher positionality. Importantly, the researchers' engagement with local multilingual practices might also change over time: Leonie's presence, for example, was the very reason for the cow to utter the mm-sound, and the researcher could make sense of it thanks to her accumulated ethnographic knowledge from ethnographic research with cows. Also, her long-term engagement shows how meaning is co-constructed, because her own adaptive responses become part of the interactional sequences over time. Therefore, both the research relationship and what Leonie considers as data have changed together with empirical insights.

Our empirical examples underscore that multilingualism adds layers of complexity to the construction of positionality, as researchers' language practices acquire meaning through their interplay with local dynamics. Critically reflecting on multilingual research practices in the field can therefore yield insights into local language dynamics (e.g., language policies and ideologies) as well as into the research process itself. In that function, such reflection can enhance transparency about the researchers' role in generating data—an aspect of particular relevance in linguistic ethnography.

Attuning to, engaging in, translating, and recognizing participants' language practices may all be part of ethnographic research in multilingual contexts across time and space. By embracing this complexity and making it visible in our research representations, we can develop more nuanced, reflexive, and methodologically sophisticated approaches to multilingual ethnography. Ultimately, this approach serves as a tool for unraveling the multilingual complexity of "what is going on here?"

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

To protect the participants, the research data is not publicly available.

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