Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 10849
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10849

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Open Access Journal

Navigating Power and Language: Methodological Reflections on Biographical Research in Transnational Contexts

Gwendolyn Gilliéron [1] and **Marie Hoppe** [2]

[1] School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences of Paris (EHESS), Institute of Political Anthropology, France
[2] Department of Educational Sciences, University of Bremen, Germany

Correspondence: Marie Hoppe (marie.hoppe@uni-bremen.de)

Submitted: 27 June 2025 **Accepted:** 20 October 2025 **Published:** 14 January 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Multilingual Challenges: Empirical Social Research in Migration Societies, Transnational Spaces, and International Contexts" edited by Clara Holzinger (University of Vienna) and Anna-Katharina Draxl (University of Vienna), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i435

Abstract

Transnational research settings create shared linguistic spaces between researchers and participants that are framed by global power relations, postcolonial constellations, and unequal access to resources. Against this backdrop, our article highlights methodological, ethical, and practical research issues in biographical research in multilingual settings, arguing for power-sensitive perspectives in all stages of the research process. We discuss methodological decisions and research dynamics from two transnational research projects in which biographical narrative interviews were conducted by native German speakers in the national contexts of Morocco and Turkey. The interview languages—French and English in Morocco and Turkish in Turkey—were learned by the researchers as foreign languages, while some of the interviewees' first language was Arabic or Kurdish. We argue that in this transnational and multilingual context, biographical research can have specific potentials to reflect on (hidden) aspects of social power relations that might be inherent in the designs of our projects. We therefore propose to understand multilingual research settings not as a burden for knowledge production but rather as an opportunity to engage more deeply with how meaning is produced in interview settings and with contextual complexities.

Keywords

biographical research; language; methodology; multilingual research; power relations

1. Introduction: Language, Global Inequalities, and Knowledge Production

Transnational knowledge production promises a range of benefits: Not only does it break with latent or sometimes even open methodological nationalism that has been criticized since the early 1990s (Amelina &

Faist, 2012; Wimmer & Schiller, 2002), it can also demonstrate the border-crossing nature of social phenomena as well as enable comparisons between various local contexts. Researching in a transnational space may also include moving between and navigating different languages. This becomes particularly challenging in qualitative biographical research based on the production and interpretation of narrative data (Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2018). Focusing on two studies in sociology and educational sciences based on biographical narrative interviews, we will discuss two different transnational and multilingual research projects. In the first study, eight interviews were conducted in Morocco with young adults of binational origin. They were carried out in French and English—both foreign languages for the interviewer—while the participants' binational backgrounds meant that they spoke a wide range of languages and were usually fluent in French. The second study is based on nine interviews in Turkey conducted in Turkish, also learned as a foreign language by the researcher. The interviewees being Kurdish women in this case, some of them, too, had acquired Turkish only as a second language.

Transnational research constellations like those sketched above do not erase the power of national constructs and the hierarchies they imply. As "the national is not the opposite of transnational" (Keßler & Szakács-Behling, 2020, p. 187), such settings urge us to critically reflect on our research agendas as to how they are structured and possibly enabled by the categorization of the world according to national boundaries. This spans from overarching questions of the global politics of knowledge (production) in a postcolonial world to concrete questions of conducting interviews in multilingual research settings, entailing questions of language and power.

Interpretive and constructivist approaches argue that the positioning of the researcher influences the way data is collected, analyzed, and presented (Devereux, 1967/1998). As a consequence, language choices made during the research process inevitably influence its outcome. While the use of language has been predominantly researched in the field of linguistics, findings are hardly transferred to interpretative approaches in the social sciences (Resch & Enzenhofer, 2018; Schembri & Jahić Jašić, 2022). A multilingual context raises some concerns for a language-oriented research method such as biographical research (Schembri & Jahić Jašić, 2022; Temple, 2006).

Drawing on specific examples from two transnational research projects in which biographical narrative interviews were conducted by native German speakers in the national contexts of Morocco and Turkey, we discuss how the linguistic constellation influences power relations between interviewer and interviewee, how it frames the biographical narratives produced in a multilingual setting, and which methodological issues gain relevance in the process of interpreting and communicating the data. To this end, we first address challenges of understanding in transnational multilingual research from a postcolonial perspective. Secondly, we link these issues to the biographical research approach. Thirdly, we present our two specific research contexts in order to zoom in on three methodological issues encountered during our research process: navigating language during the narrative interview, producing understanding in the interpretation process, and addressing challenges in translation related to representation. We argue that biographical research holds specific potential for considering social power relations inherent in transnational and multilingual research settings. While working across multiple languages can present challenges for biographical research, we suggest viewing them not as obstacles but rather as opportunities to engage more deeply with contextual complexities and the ways in which meaning is co-constructed in interviews.

2. Understanding Transnational Multilingual Research as Powerful Knowledge Production

The fact that Western-positioned researchers generate and circulate supposedly "true" knowledge about non-Western regions of the world must be understood as an expression of the geopolitics of knowledge that has its origins in European colonialism (Hall, 1992; Said, 1978/2003). This violent exploitation of entire parts of the world was accompanied and facilitated by a production of knowledge that constructed non-European people and regions as backward and uncivilized. As such, they could legitimately be subjugated, while "the West" was able to produce itself as developed and progressive (Hall, 1992). The role of science, in particular, is of central importance for the production of valid knowledge due to its socially recognized position.

Since poststructuralist and postcolonial theorists have drawn attention to the fact that language does not primarily depict the social world, but rather powerfully produces it in a specific way (Foucault, 1969/2002; Said, 1978/2003), an understanding of social and cultural scientific practice has been established that particularly emphasizes the constructive, i.e., reality-creating character of science. This insight, known as the "crisis of representation," also points to the involvement of researchers in creating the social reality that they investigate.

Taking this seriously means asking the question who speaks about whom and how, and who can speak—and be heard (Spivak, 1988)—within global relations of inequality. It points to the fact that, depending on their social position, speakers can assume different positions of power: While it is possible for subjects in privileged positions to speak for themselves and about others and to be heard, subjects in less privileged speaking positions cannot effectively represent themselves—and are thus described, explained, analyzed, in short: re-presented by those in privileged positions. With Spivak, we can understand the problem of representation as rooted in its dual nature: Representation inevitably involves representing (as in "speaking for") as well as re-presenting (as in "speaking about"; see Spivak, 1988, p. 275). In this sense, representing something does not only mean depicting what is represented, but first and foremost bringing it forth and reifying it: Representation creates the object or the person to be represented.

While the question of powerful representations produced through research concerns general questions of scientific knowledge production, it becomes relevant in a specific way in the context of transnational multilingual research constellations. For example, conducting and interpreting interviews as Western researchers in a non-Western country in a local language that is not the researchers' first language raises the question of what they can "understand" and make "understandable" from the interview data. What are the language abilities and cultural concepts available to them to represent those to whom they have spoken? How are they able to make sense of what has been said and where are their limits of understanding? How are those limits in turn linked to their (privileged) position in a postcolonial world? Thus, the transnational, multilingual interview setting makes visible what is often invisible, albeit valid for all data interpretation: Processes of supposed "understanding" should be understood as processes of situated interpretations. As Haraway (1988, p. 583) points out, knowledge and knowledge production have to be understood as "situated and embodied knowledges," i.e., every interpretation takes place from a specific standpoint. Applied to transnational multilingual research, this means that we can only make the articulations of our interviewees—in the concrete research situation in the field as well as in the scientific analysis of their interview texts—intelligible with constructs and interpretations that are available to us in our linguistic, cultural, biographical, scientific, etc. situatedness. A power-reflexive research strategy that breaks with

colonial continuities of producing quasi-neutral knowledge about "non-Western Others" thus aims to render visible how this precise situatedness structures the whole research process.

Understanding knowledge and interpretations as situated and not universal also means casting doubt on the scientific category of "understanding" what somebody "means." Again, we know from poststructuralist thinkers that meaning can never be fixed, but is constantly in motion (Derrida, 1982). This means that a statement (whether in the first language or a foreign language) can never be completely understood, grasped, fixated. While this can also be regarded as fundamentally true for any research operating with language, the problem becomes obvious in transnational multilingual interview research: The illusion of being able to "understand" each other (seemingly without difficulty; see Kruse & Schmieder, 2012) becomes apparent. In consequence, Kruse and Schmieder (2012) argue that multilingual research settings are particularly conducive to reconstructive social research, so that "making it strange" is an important methodological principle.

Against the background of the complexity of postcolonial entanglements, research designs are needed that allow for the possibility to critically question relationships of dominance. While it is impossible to resolve the tensions associated with transnational research in postcolonial power constellations, we argue that the biographical research approach has the potential to ease this asymmetry to some extent.

3. What Questions Does a Multilingual Setting Raise for Biographical Research?

The biographical approach is generally traced to the Chicago School, notably the groundbreaking study on Polish migrants by Thomas and Znaniecki (1918–1920/2007) that employed a mixed-method approach of narrative interviews, ethnographic observations, archival research, and analysis of letters and diaries. Subsequently, biographical research developed in the 1970s as a new paradigm in different national contexts, always in contrast to other research traditions (Bertaux, 1997; Neyzi, 2016; Nurse & O'Neill, 2018; Pape, 2018). In the German-speaking context, it has been shaped by various epistemological lines such as ethnomethodology, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and grounded theory (Apitzsch & Inowlocki, 2000). At the core of the narrative-qualitative approach of German biography research is the reconstruction of the subject's biography and its inherent subjective realities. In this context, biography is understood as a reconstruction of the processual and active engagement of the subject with societal and social conditions (cf. Apitzsch & Inowlocki, 2000; Gilliéron et al., 2018). On the one hand, biography refers to the individual historicity (Schütze, 1983/2016) of a person's life. On the other hand, the individual life story is always a positioning in the social space over a lifetime and embedded in collective-historical processes (Rosenthal, 2005). A biography, therefore, reflects one's own biographical interweaving in a specific social space that is structured by social contexts of power and domination (Gilliéron et al., 2018).

In social science, biography is generally understood as a social and linguistic construction (Alheit & Dausien, 2009, p. 298) because it relies on the biographical narrative produced by the subject in a specific situational context. The aim of biographical research is to analyze the subjective meanings individuals attach to particular courses of experiences. A key element is the elicitation of a spontaneous and autonomous narration of personally lived experiences (Schütze, 2008)—an interview form that refrains from interrupting or directive questioning (e.g., semi-structured interviews). The methodological principles of communication and openness require the interviewer to engage with the interviewee, enabling the latter to develop their

own perspectives on their lives (Schütze, 2008). This allows the interviewer to analyze which areas of life are relevant to the interviewee in relation to the research question.

However, a life story is not a random sequence of events; rather, it follows a recognizable *Gestalt* (Rosenthal, 1995) or process structure (Schütze, 1981) that can be analytically reconstructed. The sociolinguist Schütze discovered that in a trustful environment, where the interviewees can surrender to their narrative, so-called narrative constraints (*Zugzwänge)* of extempore storytelling (*Stegreiferzählung*) shape both the content and form of what is recounted. These constraints are based on the rules of everyday communication and serve to present narrative contexts in an understandable and comprehensible way (Schütze, 1983/2016, p. 79). Schütze (2008) distinguishes between four forms of narrative constraints: the constraint of closing the textual form, the constraint of condensing, the constraint of grading the events, and the constraint of going into detail: "[They] serve…as a device to recapitulate only the central knots of the experienced life history and its biographical process structures" (Schütze, 2008, p. 43). These narrative constraints have the epistemic power to reveal socio-biographical processes that may stay unnoticed in semi-structured interviews because they enable the interviewee to address events that usually are avoided in conventional conversational situations.

At the same time, the narrative is always shaped by the present context of its production. Biography emerges in the situated interaction between narrator and listener and is influenced by their respective interests and roles (Dausien, 2006; Rosenthal, 1995). Told at another time, in a different setting, or to a different listener, the same life story may emphasize different aspects. Moreover, what is narrated is always shaped by considerations of social desirability—by prevailing social norms, expectations, and the boundaries of what can be said within a given interactional framework (Dausien & Mecheril, 2006).

This reconstructive understanding of biography leads to a sequential analysis that simultaneously considers past events, the individual's meaning-making processes, and the influence of the present situation on the narration. The analysis focuses on how the narrative is constructed, with particular attention to word choice and textual structure (Schütze, 2008). As we will demonstrate, transnational research can pose challenges to this analytical approach.

While Schütze stresses that biographical narrating follows universal principles, biographical studies looking at non-Western contexts (Hangartner, 2012; Matthes, 1984) argue that biography as a concept relies on Western (as well as bourgeois) ideas of structuring one's life. Accordingly, the assumption that people "have" an individual biography can be understood as a cultural assumption, because "narrative traditions, patterns of interpretation and images on which biographical narratives are based…have not emerged in a 'vacuum' but have developed from a specific cultural context" (Lutz, 2010, p. 122, authors' translation). As such, Ndhlovu's critique of Western mainstream methodologies also applies to the German biographical research: It is not a neutral approach but deeply embedded in "specific contextual and cultural conditions in the Global North" (Ndhlovu, 2021, p. 194).

Building on these insights, we observe several challenges for transnational biographical research: conducting narrative interviews in a non-native language (either for the interviewee or the interviewer), interpreting multilingual or foreign-language interviews, and translating theories and transcripts for analysis or publication. In the first case, it can be argued that individuals may struggle to develop an autonomous narrative that reflects their own system of relevance when speaking in a foreign language, as they might be

unable to recount their experiences in an authentic and nuanced way (Brandmaier, 2015; Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2018). The analysis of multilingual interviews can also be constrained by the researcher's language proficiency, which can lead to misunderstandings or an unawareness of cultural and socio-historical references embedded in the narrative (Brandmaier, 2015; Jukschat et al., 2025; Kruse & Schmieder, 2012). Moreover, transposing Western theories in non-Western contexts carries the risk of reproducing Eurocentric assumptions rather than capturing participants' lived realities (Goodnight, 2017). And finally, translating transcripts into another language may result in a loss of information, as linguistic subtleties and context-specific nuances might disappear—with consequences both for the analytical process and for the eventual reader (Küsters, 2009; Riemann, 2003; Tuider, 2009).

At the same time, the biographical approach holds significant potential for research in multilingual settings. In their study on foreign language use in qualitative research, Kruse and Schmieder (2012) emphasize that multilingual research contexts require "linguistic-pragmatic reconstructive approaches" in order to "truly understand the foreign linguistic meaning" (p. 251, authors' translation). According to the authors, content-analytic methods are problematic in foreign-language contexts because they treat language as an objective vehicle of information rather than a system of meaning. As a result, meanings tend to be translated into the researcher's own system of relevance without being adequately reconstructed in their specific societal and linguistic context (see also Janusch, 2011).

In contrast, the language-sensitive and heuristic nature of biographical research shifts the analytical focus to both *how* something is said and *what* is said within a particular situational and interactional framework. It acknowledges that meaning is co-constructed through language and shaped by the context in which narratives are produced.

From this perspective, working with multilingual data not only poses methodological challenges but can also enrich the analytical process. It compels researchers to adopt multiple interpretive positions and to engage more consciously with the interplay of language, culture, and subjectivity. The necessity of navigating diverse linguistic, cultural, and narrative codes fosters a heightened reflexivity regarding one's own interpretive position. By referring to our two research contexts in Turkey and Morocco, we will show in the following how the biographical approach helped us to navigate our multilingual contexts.

4. Navigating Transnational Research Contexts

In the following we present our respective research context and how we navigated the ambivalences arising from the multilingual research context. Gwendolyn Gilliéron did research with young adults of binational origin in Morocco, while Marie Hoppe did research with Kurdish-positioned women in Turkey. While for both researchers the first language is German, it was not a shared language in our respective research fields. We therefore learned one language of our research contexts—French for Gwendolyn and Turkish for Marie. Moreover, both researchers were confronted with a context that is multilingual in itself.

To facilitate readability, the excerpts below follow a simplified transcription system (see also Table 1) indicating paralinguistic and interactional features such as emphasis, interruptions, or laughter.

Table 1. Transcription guideline.

(Comment)	Paralinguistic elements like laughter, hesitation, emotions or others
(.) or (3)	Short or longer pause
CAPITAL LETTERS	Indicate emphasis on a word or syllable
/	Marks a sentence interruption or unfinished utterance
[word]	Word retained in the original language when the translation is uncertain or contextually significant

4.1. The Research Contexts

4.1.1. Morocco—Gwendolyn Gilliéron

I, Gwendolyn Gilliéron, conducted research on the identity negotiations of young adults of binational origin in Switzerland and Morocco (Gilliéron, 2022a). Between 2014 and 2018, 23 biographical narrative interviews were conducted (15 in Switzerland and eight in Morocco) with young adults between 16 and 28 years and analyzed using Schütze's (1983/2016) narrative analysis. Language emerged as an important layer of identity construction and a key element in how young adults navigate processes of othering (Gilliéron, 2022b).

In Switzerland, language use is territorialized and, as I did my research in the German part, the participants and I shared the same first language, Swiss German. In Morocco, by contrast, Standard Arabic, Tamazight, Moroccan Arabic (Darija), Hassani, and the colonial languages French and Spanish coexist in everyday life. The colonial rule during the French protectorate (1912–1956) profoundly shaped the social hierarchy in postcolonial Morocco (Wyrtzen, 2016). Unlike in Algeria, France did not follow a policy of assimilation in Morocco but instead established social divisions along ethnic and religious lines (Varro, 2003; Wyrtzen, 2016). After independence in 1956, the nationalist movement sought to reunite the population under the *umma*—the Muslim community—yet these colonial hierarchies remain present in the social imaginary today (Wyrtzen, 2016). As a result, adopting a Western-oriented lifestyle is associated with social prestige, with French serving as a key language for educational, social, and professional mobility. Given this background and the binational origins of my participants, I met young adults with multilingual repertoires—speaking Bahasa, English, French, German, Hassani, Italian, Moroccan Arabic, Russian, Spanish, and Pulaar. A striking particularity of this setting is that not all of my interviewees were proficient in Arabic, nor was I, as the researcher.

Consequently, most interviews took place in French, with one in English and another in German. While I myself had to conduct the interviews in a second language, most of my interviewees in Morocco attended a French private school or had a parent who was French-speaking and were therefore more fluent in the respective interview language than I was. Moreover, the interview language was not just any language, but one of the languages they speak in their everyday lives (see Riemann, 2003, §7).

4.1.2. Turkey—Marie Hoppe

In my dissertation project, I, Marie Hoppe, analyzed the schooling experiences of Kurdish students in the national context of Turkey from the perspective of racism theory (Hoppe, 2023). Between 2016 and 2017,

I conducted nine narrative-biographical interviews (Schütze, 1983/2016) with young women in Istanbul who positioned themselves as Kurdish and interpreted them using grounded theory methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). I conducted these interviews in Turkish, which I had learned as a foreign language both in formal and informal settings in both Turkey and Germany, and in which I had developed solid everyday language skills. However, I do not speak Kurdish (Kirmanci) apart from very few expressions and was therefore not able to communicate with my interviewees in the language some of them had acquired first. Thus, while with Turkish we certainly shared a language, my interview partners were able to use the interview language with much greater ease.

Although Turkey, strictly speaking, does not look back at a history of colonization, it nevertheless stands in a hierarchical relationship to the "West." Critical analyses have shown Turkey's complex and ambivalent relationship with the "West," which, on the one hand, functioned as a role-model for modernization, and was, on the other hand, rejected due to orientalist stereotypical representations of Turks in Western discourses (Ahıska, 2010; Ergin, 2017). At the same time, internal colonial dynamics have been part of developing and securing a modern identity in Turkey, historically including "civilizing missions on a supposedly backward and traditional Anatolian society enslaved by the retrograde influence of Islam" (Zeydanlıoğlu, 2008, p. 158) and racialized productions of "white Turks" and "Kurdish others" (Ergin, 2017). In the nation-state context of Turkey, Turkish is the hegemonic language and has been a powerful tool of nation-building and cultural homogenization since the founding of the republic in 1923 (Coşkun et al., 2011). The systematic exclusion of other languages from all areas of society is also reflected in the monolingual education system. For some of my interviewees, Turkish was their first language, while others acquired it as a second language after the family language, Kurdish. It became clear in the interviews that my interviewees perceived language skills in Kurdish as an important part of their self-understanding as Kurds.

The multilingual setting of both research projects framed every step during the research process, from finding interview partners, data collection and preparation, analysis, theory choices, and presentation/publication of the research. Focusing in turn on the interview situation, interpretation of interviews, and translation, we will now give insights into our strategies and decisions with which we navigated our biographical studies in our respective transnational and multilingual research settings, Morocco and Turkey. All examples that we present in the following use pseudonymized names for the interviewees.

4.2. Negotiating Language During the Interview

When conducting narrative interviews in a non-native language (either for the interviewee or the interviewer), one could argue that linguistic nuances are not accessible to the researcher, or that interviewees may be less able to express themselves in a nuanced way if they cannot speak in their native language. A valid reason could be to collaborate with interpreters, but it also brings up a whole new set of questions (Holzinger & Draxl, 2024; Resch & Enzenhofer, 2018). Due to pragmatic choices such as the high financial cost of interpreters, we chose to rely on our and the interviewees' language competences in our respective studies.

First of all, the decision to have the interviewees speak in a language they are familiar with is closely linked to the biographical research approach. Especially in biographical research (in German-speaking countries), the proportion of speech of the interviewee and interviewer is highly asymmetrical: While the interviewer sets a narrative impulse at the beginning of the interview, the interviewees ideally unfold their detailed

self-presentations afterwards, talking about past experiences and different phases of life (Schütze, 2008), so that their share of speech is much greater than that of the interviewer. Our decision to speak with the interviewees in a language they are very familiar with was therefore also based on the idea that they should be able to express themselves as naturally as possible. Furthermore, at this stage of the research, it is not a problem if we do not immediately grasp everything in all its facets, as we may understand it later on, during the interpretation process (see also Section 4.3). The biographical method explicitly requires the researcher to set aside their own assumptions and be open to the perspectives and interpretations of the interviewee. The aim is to reconstruct their reality.

In our specific projects, however, it is also important to reflect that the assumption that our interviewees would move effortlessly and without conflict through French or Turkish cannot be generalized in the context of powerful language relations. It is important to notice, for example, that French is a colonial language in the context of Morocco, and that Turkish is an instrument of linguistic and cultural homogenization in Turkey. In both projects, the interviews were conducted in a language that the interviewees had learned through the state education system, if not earlier, but which in many cases was not their first language. Especially in the context of political struggles of Kurds in Turkey for visibility and recognition, language (both Kurdish and Turkish) is an emotional category associated with biographical experiences of othering and invisibility. The reinstallation of the linguistic hegemonic norm via Turkish can also put the interviewees under pressure. For example, Dilan Sezer, who was interviewed by Marie in Istanbul, interjects almost apologetically at one point in the interview:

> *D: Şu an çok cümlede Türkçe olarak bozuk kuruyorum bu arada (gülüyor) Çünkü*
>
> *I: sıkıntı yok (gülüyor)*
>
> *D: ben de sizin gibi Türkçeyi SONRADAN öğrenmiş bir insanım.*
>
> D: By the way, I'm forming broken Turkish in many sentences right now (laughs) because
>
> I: no problem (laughs)
>
> D: like you, I am a person who learned Turkish AFTERwards.

Here, Dilan both articulates an apology for her linguistic "mistakes" as well as parallels herself with the interviewer. Although the reasons and processes of learning Turkish in the case of Dilan and the interviewer cannot be compared in any way, the parallel drawn by Dilan creates a shared in-between space and can be read as an element connecting the interviewee and the interviewer in a linguistic "between." It becomes clear that both are part of the creation of an "interlinguality" (Haverkamp, 1997, p. 12, authors' translation) that enables their communication.

Although our interviewees generally had a high level of language proficiency in French and Turkish respectively, we were often able to observe that the transnational framing and multilingual setting of our research acted as a connecting and trust-building element in the interview situation. Establishing an atmosphere of trust is crucial, especially for the narrative interview, where quite personal and intimate information is shared, and it

is even more important when the life stories include experiences of discrimination or violence. In our projects, the fact that we, as the interviewers, had learned French (Gwendolyn) or Turkish (Marie) as foreign languages, also stressed our outsider position to the national orders of belonging: It highlighted the fact that we were (just like our interviewees) not part of the national majority, something which was perceived as mostly positive by our interviewees.

Besides the challenges for mutual understanding that may arise from this setting, we also observed that the subjective meaning of the narrative must be more explicitly articulated in foreign language contexts, as we can rely less on common-sense constructions (Kruse & Schmieder, 2012; Riemann, 2003). Thus, understanding in a multilingual context should be seen as a double process, because the interviewees must also think about how they can tell things to the interviewers in a way that they can understand. As such, multilingual interviews lead to a "bilingual-hermeneutic interpretation process" (Wettemann, 2012, p. 112, authors' translation) that can ultimately support a deeper overall understanding of the material (see also Enzenhofer & Resch, 2011; Resch & Enzenhofer, 2018; Riemann, 2003).

The uncertainty as to whether the interviewer can understand everything that is said is also dealt with quite explicitly in Marie's interviews. Often, the interviewees include brief explanations of terms, historical developments, or political events, indicating that they are unsure how familiar Marie is with history, society, and language in Turkey. However, according to Riegel and Kaya (2002), an outsider position to a cultural context can also be seen as an advantage. The authors observe that explanations in interviews are more detailed when the interviewee and interviewer do not share the same cultural knowledge and repertoire (Riegel & Kaya, 2002), which is particularly valuable for biographical research.

While the "primacy of autonomy" (Kruse et al., 2012, p. 33, authors' translation) and its assumed positive effects on the social situation in the interview encouraged us both to conduct the interviews independently and without first-language help, we also hoped that it would potentially relativize the inevitably hierarchical relationship between researcher and interviewee in favor of the interviewees. According to our considerations, the fact that our interviewees have a much better command of French and Turkish than we do has the potential to reduce the asymmetry in the relationship between researcher and interviewee, as they are at least linguistically in a more powerful position. In this context, Marie in particular, noticed the varying speech rates among her interview partners and the gradations of linguistic complexity (syntax, vocabulary), which she understood as a reaction to the others' assessment of her linguistic competence.

4.3. "Understanding" During the Interpretation Process

Analyzing foreign-language interview material is challenging because one is constantly confronted with the limits of one's own language skills. Everyday expressions, regional variations, allusions, humor, etc., may be difficult to understand despite good foreign language skills (Brandmaier, 2015). In the biographical approach, we take a close look at what and how something is being said. Is it then possible to analyze word choices and the structure of narration when the narration may be influenced by a limited knowledge of the language? And the other way around, how can we analyze the interview in its nuances if we are not native speakers?

These challenges notwithstanding, we would like to argue here that analytical work with texts in foreign languages also holds the potential to guard oneself against hasty attributions of meaning and interpretations.

For example, Peter Stegmaier emphasizes that, while one may overlook things due to a lack of language proficiency, it is just as possible to discover things more precisely, because working with a foreign language encourages one to pay closer attention (Stegmaier, 2013, p. 248). Hence, multilingual contexts may constitute an opportunity for interpretative and reconstructive research, as they open up new ways of understanding (Jukschat et al., 2025).

Despite the need to engage (more) intensively with the interview material ourselves, it was invaluable for us to be able to discuss interview sequences in their original language with others. We turned to people in our circle of friends and colleagues who were familiar with the respective linguistic and socio-cultural contexts to discuss selected interview passages with them. The readings of friends and colleagues proved to be particularly helpful, as they were able to provide us with information about emotional meanings or specific milieu—or discourse-related connotations of individual expressions, which were not always clear to us due to our limited cultural frame of reference. Moreover, we presented our analyses at local research institutes in Rabat and Istanbul. Marie was also lucky enough to be able to discuss her empirical material in interpretation groups in which the co-interpreters had acquired Turkish, partly as a first language, partly as a second language, but with a biographical connection to Turkey, and partly, like herself, as a foreign language without a biographical connection to Turkey. It was precisely this joint discussion from different positions about certain expressions in the interviews that proved to be very valuable.

"Understanding" the interview material, however, does not only mean making sense of what is said in a language that we, the researchers, know. It also means reading the interview text by means of scientific concepts. Doing research in the dominant language without a language-sensitive approach may reinforce "perspective[s] com[ing] from another cultural orientation and a position of power and privilege" (Janusch, 2011, p. 85). As the following example will show, the analytical concepts with which we approached the material at times did not seem to fully grasp the specific local context. Rather, it unveiled the analytical tools as concepts developed in Western academia, and thus not universally applicable (Goodnight, 2017).

Unfortunately, we were both unable to include the Arabic or Turkish academic discourse in our analyses. Hence, the sociological concepts we used in our research, such as "biography," "adolescence," "othering," or "race," are concepts that were developed in and for the Western context. These theoretical frameworks cannot be transferred easily to another national context with its own specific socio-historical context (Goodnight, 2017; Reuter & Villa, 2010). The analysis of the category "race," for example, in Gwendolyn's interview with Abdoulaye of Moroccan-West African descent, proved to be a revealing moment to question the researcher's own understanding of racialization and othering processes. From the outset of the interview, "being Black" is a structuring category for Abdoulaye. He describes himself as "Black" before our meeting, indicating that this information might make it easier for Gwendolyn to find him in the crowd. Further, he narrates about how, at school, he was "the only Black kid," and how he became very turbulent in order to deal with this situation. He further explains how this label made him increasingly insecure around Moroccan girls. However, "race" does not seem to be a fixed category in the Moroccan context as the analysis of Abdoulaye's further experiences indicates:

> *A: à chaque fois que je dis un mot en arabe, même personne qui parle mal de toi et dès que tu parles un mot en arabe il il s'excuse voilà il tour/comment ? ntz il y deux choses, soit il te considère comme un étranger soit il te considère comme un Marocain.*

I: mhm

A: initialement il te considère comme un étranger mais dès que tu parles un mot en arabe hop! tu fais partie des Marocains. si tu es noir ou pas noir tu es parmi d'eux. tu vois ? donc ce qui m'arrivait.

A: Everytime I say a word in Arabic, the same person who spoke badly about you and when you speak a word in Arabic he he apologizes, you see [voilà], he tur/how? ntz there are two things, either he considers you a foreigner or he considers you a Moroccan.

I: mhm

A: initially he considers you a foreigner but as soon as you speak a word in Arabic hop! you're part of the Moroccans. if you're black or not black you're one of them. you see? so that's what happened to me.

As he has grown older, Abdoulaye has noticed that the language he uses—French or Arabic—can change the first impression that people may have of him. In the Moroccan context, language thus enables him to negotiate and cross social boundaries (Gilliéron, 2022b).

Abdoulaye's experience raises the question of whether Western European conceptions of racism can be directly 'translated' to the Moroccan context, or whether we must pay closer attention to the subjective meanings attached to terms such as "Black" and its intersection with other context-specific categories (Goodnight, 2017; Lundström, 2014). Therrien (2020) emphasizes that the term *azi* (Black) carries different connotations for Moroccan family members compared to migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. The author shows how alienation of mixed couples and their children intersects with social class, gender, accent, and name. Similarly, El Hamel (2013) cautions against simply imposing Western concepts of race onto the Moroccan context without examining how racist structures and ideologies have developed within its unique historical and social context. His socio-historical research demonstrates that, while the idea of race exists in Arab societies—despite the Islamic principle of equality—it is a flexible construct, shaped by factors such as ancestry and class. In Abdoulaye's case, both social upward mobility and his accent-free Arabic lessen the processes of racial othering. His mixedness seems to become a resource to negotiate the rigid social hierarchy (Gilliéron, 2022b; see also Sales & Carvalho, 2025; Therrien, 2020).

Disregarding this specific socio-historical background risks reinforcing dominant forms of knowledge production in our interpretations. In this regard, the biographical method offers a valuable heuristic tool, allowing us to reconstruct and understand the meaning of "Black" within its particular context and through the lens of individual experience.

4.4. Translation: The Fixing and Un-Fixing of Meaning

Translation is not an unproblematic undertaking (Asad, 2010; Temple & Young, 2004; Tuider, 2009); however, it is hardly reflected upon in biographical research (Brandmaier, 2015; Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2018). It represents a powerful operation, historically linked to colonial practice, as it was used during colonialism to represent the "New World" in hegemonic perspectives. In this sense, the act of translation constructs others and their

supposed "culture" by objectifying the "other" language and culture to be translated (Tuider, 2009, p. 179). Translation is therefore a cultural and linguistic appropriation practice in which the translator and analyzer "has final authority in determining the subject's meanings" and thus "becomes *the real author*" (Asad, 2010, p. 162, emphasis in original) of meaning. In this sense, translation is understood as a form of data processing in which meaning is always slightly shifted: "Translation, in effect, packages the data into a form that fits the tools we have for handling it" (Temple & Young, 2004, p. 166).

During the process of translation, a loss of information may be noted (Küsters, 2009, p. 189), since sentence structure and word choice are altered in translation and no longer correspond to the flow of speech of the biographical subjects. This question of equivalence is at the very heart of translation studies (Bittner & Günther, 2013), yet neither of us is a trained translator, which raises ethical issues about the adequacy of the translated citations and the interpretation process, but also bears practical challenges. Gwendolyn, for example, was not sure about the right way to translate the sentence *je suis issue d'une famille franco-marocaine*, which may be translated as "I'm from a French-Moroccan family," "I come from a French-Moroccan family," or "I was born in a French-Moroccan family." All three versions have slightly different meanings, which are crucial in a language-based interpretation.

From the problems associated with translations, we drew an important consequence for our specific research projects: We decided to work with the original language interview transcript for as long and as often as possible. Thus, the step of translating excerpts from the interviews was taken predominantly in order to make the empirical material accessible to the scientific community in our field of research, for example, for publications, conferences, or work in mostly German-language interpretation groups.

As already mentioned, we often consulted colleagues and friends who had a better command of the interview language than we did, or who had grown up and been socialized in Turkey or Morocco, when faced with linguistic uncertainties. Time and again, it became clear that there is not just one (convincing) equivalent for a linguistic phenomenon. It happened that different people suggested different translations and interpretations of the same linguistic phrase. This proved valuable in the interpretation process, as the different options allowed us to consider alternative meanings within the context of the specific terminology and to experiment with different interpretations (for a similar research strategy, see Bittner & Günther, 2013, who worked with bilingual interpretation groups). In this sense, translation becomes an integral part of the analysis.

In view of the fact that linguistic ambiguities have traditionally been smoothed out in the direction of the historically and currently hegemonic target languages (Asad, 2010, p. 158), the practical research question arises as to how the surplus and deficit in meaning can be taken into account when the foreign-language material does not fit into the German linguistic and semantic system. In short: How can untranslatability and ambiguity be represented?

In the translation, we both tried to translate as literally as possible and not to smooth out linguistic peculiarities in the direction of German. We preferred a "documentary translation" (Wettemann, 2012, p. 110, authors' translation), i.e., a word-for-word translation. The challenge here was not only to find the right choice of words, but also the accurate placement of hesitations or stresses (Riemann, 2003) or to deal with words and sentences that were broken off midway. For terms that allow for different meanings, we decided to place

further translation options in square brackets and included them in the analysis (see citation of Abdoulaye's case above).

It was particularly important to us to emphasize the "unsmoothness" and unruliness of concepts and specific expressions that would have lost some of their meaning if they had been translated into German (e.g., the case of 'Hoca,' see below). This has the effect that the translated interview text actively breaks with the illusion of seamless equivalence across languages. As can be seen in the following interview excerpt, Marie has also chosen to leave Turkish filler words (*yani*, *hani*, *işte*, *ya*, *şey*) mostly untranslated in order to repeatedly pull the reader out of an overly 'harmonious' and coherent reading experience:

> *B: Ya sınıfta öğrencilerde bir şey vardı, hani bir yabancılık, böyle bi ıı yani hoca, yani öğretmen karşısında otuz kırk tane öğrenci, hatta sınıflar çok kalabalık oluyordu, bazen, altmış yetmişe çıktığı da oluyordu, tabii hani öğretmen olmadığı dönemlerde.*
>
> B: Ya, in the class there was a thing among the students, *hani* a foreignness, like a *uuh yani* opposite the *Hoca yani* the teacher there were thirty to forty students, the classes were very crowded even, sometimes also up to sixty, seventy, of course *hani* in times when there was no teacher.

The inevitable disruptions created by untranslated words are intended to remind the audience that a translated text is, on the one hand, not capable of and, on the other hand, does not want to claim to fully represent another linguistic and cultural system. However, this translation practice and its representation in translated interview sequences come with the price that the translations produced do not necessarily and always fit in with the speaking and listening habits of a target-language audience.

Both of us decided to present both the original sequence and a translated version of it in the publication of our studies (Gilliéron, 2022a; Hoppe, 2023). This approach not only reveals the process of translation but also enables intersubjectivity. It reduces the extent to which the researcher monopolizes the process of meaning construction. Furthermore, as Schembri and Jahić Jašić (2022) and Temple (2006) note, displaying the multilingual context of the data highlights minority languages and acknowledges further that readers themselves often live in multilingual contexts. Thus, the bilingual presentation of the interview material also means making visible languages that tend to be marginalized in academic discourse. However, journals are not yet sensitive to this aspect and rarely accept citations in languages other than the dominant one.

5. Conclusion

Linguistically sensitive research approaches should not be viewed as obstacles but rather as opportunities to engage more deeply with the contextual complexities of multilingual settings. Each such setting presents specific challenges, particularly because they are embedded in broader global power relations. Issues of representation, visibility, and voice take on different meanings depending on the sociopolitical and biographical location of the participants. In this respect, biographical research offers a valuable framework for understanding how meanings are produced and negotiated in a specific context.

As Kruse and Schmieder (2012) remind us, epistemological understanding is never fully achievable in any language; it always remains an approximation of the other's relevance system. Research, particularly in

multilingual contexts, makes this ongoing negotiation of meaning especially visible, as words are not fixed or universal, but situated, shifting, and deeply contextual.

Our studies also highlight a central ethical limitation: Our interview partners were ultimately unable to access or validate our translation and hence interpretations, as these were formulated in German—a language they do not read. This underscores the asymmetries inherent in knowledge production and highlights the power dynamics inscribed in acts of translation and research production in multilingual settings. At the same time, by offering perspectives grounded in research in Morocco and Turkey, our analyses enrich discussions with contexts often not represented in German-speaking academia. By showing the potential of multilingual research for tracing and describing social phenomena across national borders, our studies specifically contribute to a deeper understanding of racism as a "travelling" concept and transnational phenomenon, taking shape in various forms in different (national) contexts (Said, 1983, pp. 226–247).

In sum, our methodological reflections underscore the necessity of negotiating language choice and embracing the fluidity of linguistic repertoires within biographical interviews. Here, the biographical approach enables us to situate individual narratives within broader sociopolitical and transnational contexts, thereby helping us to better understand how power relations are enacted and contested through language. Adopting a language—and power-sensitive approach not only enriches biographical research but also addresses the methodological and ethical complexities inherent in interpreting and communicating multilingual data. Certainly, biographical research could profit from the insights of translation studies and sociolinguistic studies, which have already addressed these issues (Busch, 2016; Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2018).

Based on our empirical experience, and in line with Jukschat et al. (2025), "we advocate for a methodical procedural knowledge that adheres—especially in multilingual and cross-cultural contexts—to the core principles of qualitative research: openness, reflexivity, and the strategic use of 'making it strange'" (p. 204, authors' translation). Only by embracing these principles can we critically navigate the tensions between language, meaning, and power in qualitative and multilingual research.

Funding

Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Bremen.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Due to the nature of the research, data sharing is not applicable to this article.

LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT, DeepL, and Perplexity were used to help with translation.

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About the Authors

Gwendolyn Gilliéron is a postdoc in the ERC project AnceStra, at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences of Paris (EHESS), and a fellow at the French Institut Convergences Migrations. Her work focuses on human remains, migration, youth, and the biographical evaluation of politics in France and Germany. She received her PhD in sociology in 2020 from Goethe University Frankfurt am Main.

Marie Hoppe works as a researcher in the field of education, subjectivation, and difference at the University of Bremen. Her research interests revolve around schooling and social inequalities, especially with regard to race and class. She received her PhD in educational science in 2021 from Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg.