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Language(s) and Translanguaging in Interpretation Groups: Reflections From a Linguistic Group Ethnography

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Abstract

This article explores how our diverse linguistic repertoires interact with one another and with ethnographic materials during group interpretation sessions. Building on research about interpretation groups, translanguaging, and reflexivity, we focus on preparing and interpreting multilingual ethnographic material for a linguistically diverse team, the role of human and AI-assisted translation, and the relationship between English and translanguaging. In doing so, we make the analytical process more transparent and adopt a critical reflexive approach that closely connects language practices to researchers' biographical experiences, encouraging biographical reflexivity and challenging methodological nationalism. Our findings illustrate how biographical and professional knowledge on language shape how data is interpreted and understood, and the need for critical reflection on language practices and the relations between linguistic repertoires in a research group. They further show that multilingualism and translanguaging are not merely objects of analysis but represent lived experiences, sites of negotiation, tension, and meaning-making. Moreover, we reconstruct how our engagement with AI-based translation and transcription tools became a hybrid communicative site where linguistic boundaries are negotiated, reconfigured, and contested. Finally, we explore how English functions as an architectural scaffolding that opened a space for translanguaging and English-specific ambivalences in the context of group communication and knowledge construction.

Keywords

AI translation; English as a lingua franca; group ethnography; interpretation groups; linguistic ethnography; multilingualism; reflexivity; researching multilingually; social research; translanguaging

1. Introduction

Interpretation groups, rooted in the tradition of the Chicago School of Sociology (Baumgartner et al., 2023; Riemann, 2011), are meaningful contexts for the process of analyzing qualitative data and for learning the art of interpretation. Many qualitative researchers work in interpretation groups, because joint interpretations enable them to go beyond individual ones and to reconstruct potential meanings through different readings. For example, engaging in and exchanging ideas about often-competing interpretations can strengthen the analytical process. Thus, interpretation groups serve as social techniques of communicatively generating knowledge about the social world (Reichertz, 2013, p. 13). They also provide a space for learning and strengthen reflexivity, trust, and professionalism (Dausien, 2007). In recent decades, there has been frequent criticism regarding the lack of research on the concrete practices within research groups (Dausien, 2007; Mey, 2021) which still represent a "terra incognita" (Reichertz, 2013, p. 16). However, research on such practices is now increasing. Researchers have investigated how interpretation groups negotiate different interpretative options (Berli, 2021), how group members' positionings relate to the data (Phoenix et al., 2016), and how joint practice is organized in the digital space (Baumgartner et al., 2023). Our research builds on these discussions by including a largely overlooked dimension: the significance of language(s) and language practices in interpretation groups. We do so by investigating the following overarching research question: How are reflexive, translingual practices used in multilingual interpretation groups? To address this question, we examine three interrelated sub-questions:

1. How do the researchers' diverse linguistic repertoires interact with one another?
2. What roles do Artificial Intelligence (AI) and human translation practices play in the process of interpretation?
3. How do researchers navigate multilingualism in interpretation groups with English as the dominant lingua franca of academia?

The structure of this article is as follows: Section 2 contextualizes our study within different concepts in order to show how a reflexive approach to language(s) and multilingualism can clarify the role of interpretation groups in research projects. Building on this, Section 3 outlines our applied methodologies, explaining both the motivations for our research design and the methods used for data collection and analysis. Section 4 describes how we prepared the empirical material and then analyzes selected excerpts from the corpus. These excerpts were chosen to illustrate and empirically substantiate the central lines of argument of our study. Section 5 critically evaluates the results within the theoretical framework and places them in the current state of research. Finally, Section 6 summarizes the most important findings and provides an outlook on possible future research directions.

2. Theoretical Background

In many contexts, although working multilingually is seen as "the norm or a 'natural' aspect of the research process" (Holmes et al., 2013, p. 294), there is still a tendency to "downplay or ignore the methodological and ethical issues connected with the languages used for gathering, generating, analyzing, and reporting data" (Holmes et al., 2013, p. 288). The complexities of researching multilingually involve, e.g., choosing which language(s) to use during fieldwork, handling multilingual interviews and fieldwork materials, analyzing and interpreting data, and communicating within and across multilingual teams. However, it

remains uncommon for research teams to openly discuss language choices (Meyer Pitton & Schedel, 2022). Instead, language-related decisions often remain tacit, implicit, or uncontested due to social, material, and linguistic dynamics (Holmes et al., 2013, 2022). Our research sees linguistic practices as connected to language ideologies (Mar-Molinero & Stevenson, 2006), and we approach multilingualism through a translanguaging perspective. This perspective embraces:

> [The] full range of linguistic performances of multilingual language users for purposes that transcend the combination of structures, the alternation between systems, the transmission of information, and the representation of values, identities, and relationships. (Wei & García, 2016, p. 6)

Translanguaging involves communicating fluidly and challenges the traditional view that "bilinguals" operate within two separate linguistic systems, instead recognizing their language practices as a unified and dynamic repertoire. Linguistic repertoires (Blommaert & Backus, 2012; Busch, 2012) change during the life course and do not only include linguistic competences, but elucidate educational trajectories in a broader sense: "the opportunities, constraints and inequalities [people] were facing, the learning environments they had access to (and those they did not have access to), their movement across physical and social space, their potential for voice in particular social arenas" (Blommaert & Backus, 2012, p. 29). We expand upon this perspective by applying it to language practices in a way that "transcends the speaker's separate codes or languages, named or not," thus conceptualizing named languages as social constructions (Otheguy & García, 2024). When contextualized by biographical starting points and trajectories (Thoma, 2022), this perspective allows us to better understand questions related to our biographical experiences, emotions, values, and identities. This aligns with recent research that considers researchers' biographical experiences and their complex relationships to the field as a meaningful source of data production and interpretation (Ploder et al., 2024; von Unger, 2021). This growing interest in reflexivity in qualitative research can be linked to a "reflexive turn" (Kuehner et al., 2016, p. 699) and to a critique of methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002), which naturalizes the nation-state and thus reduces the analytical focus to its boundaries. Moving beyond methodological nationalism, and not taking "national discourses, agendas, loyalties and histories" (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002, p. 304) and their (multiple) relations to languages for granted, enables these discourses to become objects of investigation on their own right. Following Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti (2013), we adopt "biographical reflexivity" as a theoretical and methodological concept to shed light on the role of the researcher as a participant in the (re)construction of the phenomena under investigation. Moreover, linguistic ethnography has given increasing attention to the critical reflection about "the nature and significance of the linguistic, semiotic and textual resource that traverse our research practice" (Martin-Jones & Martin, 2016, p. 200). Nevertheless, given the research gap in the linguistic dimension of reflexivity (Jacobs & van Hest, 2024), our research advances the debate on the epistemological role of reflexivity by focusing on language(s) and translanguaging in interpretation groups.

This article primarily uses the term "multilingual" to indicate the presence and use of multiple languages, whereas "translingual" denotes the practices, interactions, and fluid ways in which speakers navigate across and between languages.

3. Methods

This article is based on interpretation sessions within two multi-sited linguistic ethnographies (Copland & Creese, 2015; Marcus, 1995) that we conduct as team ethnographies (Creese & Blackledge, 2012). Both projects address multilingualism in education in officially bi- or trilingual regions of Italy and Austria and adopt a participatory approach (von Unger, 2014): The project "Educational Transitions in the Context of Linguistic Minoritization" (EduLiM) involves ethnographies in elementary schools and with families, while "Researching and Transforming Multilingual Spaces" (M-Spaces) consists of ethnographies and participatory workshops with students and teachers in vocational schools. Besides ethnographic observations and interviews, we recorded and transcribed audio files and analyzed artifacts from both fields, including books, drawings, photos, etc. As a research team consisting of one assistant professor (Nadja Thoma, PI for both projects), two postdocs (Giorgia Andreolli and Rebecca Weckenmann, co-PIs), and two PhD students (Safà El Koura and Kristina Savić), we grew up in different parts of Germany and Italy (two of us in the officially trilingual region of South Tyrol), and with different varieties of Arabic, Amazigh, German, Italian, and Serbian (and different forms of translanguaging) as family languages. We learned Ancient Greek, Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Italian, Latin, Spanish, and Turkish in educational institutions (and our differing competences in these languages are constantly shifting). We worked as teachers, researchers, educators, and trainees in different countries such as Austria, Canada, Germany, Italy, India, Jordan, Poland, Scotland, South Korea, Spain, and Syria, and acquired knowledge on language hierarchies and ideologies in different regions and institutions. Our linguistic repertoires and disciplinary backgrounds in education and linguistics shaped our field relations and those within the team. Moreover, our personal experiences and encounters with language ideologies—both our own and those of individuals around us—impacted our interpretations of social and linguistic interactions in the field. These experiences, including how we are positioned in relation to (ascribed) linguistic repertoires, informed our data analysis, both individually and collectively as a team. Previous research shows that "the history, biography, and ideology of the researcher inform the making of meaning" (Creese & Blackledge, 2012, p. 318) and that dialogical argumentation—which includes asserting, contesting, doubting, justifying, and providing evidence—leads to more differentiated analytical abstractions, contrastive comparisons, and theoretical models (Riemann, 2011, p. 413). However, the role of language(s), linguistic repertoires, and translingual practices in these argumentation processes has not yet been researched. In addition, our article is informed by research on language hierarchies that emerge in the interpretation process (Blommaert, 2010; Creese & Blackledge, 2012; Phoenix et al., 2016) and their connection to language(s) and the linguistic repertoires of the researchers.

Empirically, this article draws on transcripts from five audio-recorded interpretation sessions (12 hours and 40 minutes in total), providing "a window into the process of analysis" (Creese & Blackledge, 2012, p. 307).

3.1. Setting the Stage: Preparing Multilingual Material for the Interpretation Group

Given our linguistic repertoires, interpretation sessions are multi- and translingual both in terms of the materials and the analysis. Our field notes are predominantly written in German, Italian, and Arabic, reflecting the linguistic repertoires of both participants and researchers. However, similar to other team ethnographies (e.g., Creese et al., 2016, p. 206), English is usually the working language of our sessions. We prepare for sessions by sharing the materials in advance and providing translations to those who may need them. Preparing materials entails a form of "recipient design" (Sacks et al., 1974), which refers to how a

speaker tailors their communication to suit the recipient's linguistic competence and needs. Therefore, we adapted the data presentation so that it was oriented towards the epistemic positions of our interpretation group, adding annotations or bracketed explanations to prevent their meanings in English from being lost. As explored in Section 4.1, the data preparation process initiates negotiations of team members' linguistic repertoires, which are central before the actual analysis. These negotiations go beyond lexical choices and include the heterogeneous multilingual positioning of the research group. Translanguaging thus becomes an integral part of the preparatory process, as we interpret, recontextualize, and adapt the materials to enable shared understanding within the team. To support the complex process, we employed AI-based translation tools alongside aTrain for transcription (Haberl et al., 2024), as detailed in Section 3.2.

3.2. Working With AI tools for Translation and Transcription

To prepare the data for collaborative interpretation, we employed AI-based tools for both translation and transcription but only used the latter when audio recordings were available. We used DeepL to translate field notes and produce preliminary English versions (DeepL SE, 2025). The AI performance varied across languages: Results were more reliable for some, such as Italian and German, but less accurate for others, such as Arabic varieties. In the field notes, Arabic content was written using the Latin script to allow for smoother document management. When translation was required, the researcher transliterated the material in the Arabic alphabet before processing it with AI tools, which was time-consuming and further constrained by the limited support available for Arabic varieties, as tools do not seem prepared to adequately process them yet. In these cases, manual translation was the only viable option. For audio transcriptions, we used aTrain, which is an open-source speech recognition software that runs locally and does not store user data (Haberl et al., 2024), which was in line with our team's commitment to privacy and ethical research practices. Although aTrain supports 57 languages, it has some limitations when dealing with regional dialects, language varieties, overlapping speech, and background noise. For instance, when transcribing German dialects, the tool typically processed the speech into standard German, rather than preserving the original dialectal forms. Additionally, aTrain occasionally produced incomplete speaker separation or misidentified local terminology, such as regionally specific words and expressions. Another challenge was dealing with translanguaging present in our data, since the software is programmed to "select *a* language" (our emphasis) to be used for transcription. As far as translanguaging in translation is concerned, DeepL tended to only recognize and translate one language within a multilingual text, leaving segments in other languages untranslated. AI-generated output, both for translation and transcription, was considered preliminary and carefully reviewed to ensure accuracy and fidelity, particularly with regard to contextual and cultural nuances. We occasionally refined the output during the preparation stage; in others, we performed minimal initial editing, with the expectation of collaboratively addressing inaccuracies during interpretation sessions when each sentence was read and discussed in detail. Although a detailed discussion of AI use in multilingual research goes beyond the scope of our article, this methodological approach demonstrates how AI-assisted translation and transcription can significantly enhance collaboration, while simultaneously underscoring the fundamental role of human interpretation in maintaining accuracy and epistemological integrity. This is particularly relevant when translating field notes to maintain the emic perspective of the researcher who generated them. The following sections further demonstrate the use of AI tools and reinforce the critical importance of interpretation in navigating complex multilingual research contexts.

4. Language(s) and Translanguaging in Collaborative Interpretation: Findings From the Field

This section details findings on language practices in our common interpretation process. We held online sessions, which were usually attended by all five members, to engage with different layers of meaning embedded in the original language use. Thus, data sessions are spaces where linguistic repertoires are actively mobilized, interpreted, and recontextualized—shaped by the biographical, sociocultural, and epistemological frameworks that underpin the research process. During our interpretation sessions, translanguaging emerged at multiple points throughout our analytic process, reflecting the dynamics of language use within our multilingual research team. For our team ethnography, we see questions related to our values, identities, and relationships as very promising. In each of the following excerpts, English is unmarked, Arabic is underlined and bold, German is bold, and Italian is bold uppercase.

4.1. Negotiating Common Linguistic Ground

Before the start of the first data session (Figure 1), Nadja asks the team to provide "both the German and Italian and the English version" of each excerpt. Then, the following conversation unfolds in English:

01	KS:	i have a question should we do also or for example i am writing the field
02		notes in german write also an italian a translation then or
03	NT:	i mean i don't care it's important that we understand that all of us can
04		understand it so or italian or german or english
05	KS:	english yes okay
06	NT:	there should always be a translation which everybody can understand

Figure 1. Excerpt 1—"Or Italian or German or English."

Nadja's request was visibly unclear, because Kristina asks her to be more specific about which language(s) she should translate a German field note into. Kristina interprets Nadja's answer that everyone must understand the excerpts, and that they should therefore be provided in "or Italian or German or English" as "English," whereupon Nadja emphasizes once again that there should always be a translation that everyone can understand. While Nadja takes an inclusive stance here, she implies the field notes are written in discrete languages (German, English, Italian) and that the team members are aware of each other's linguistic repertoires. In the data sessions that followed, the team worked multilingually—drawing primarily on German and Italian, with English translations serving as a shared resource that ensured mutual understanding. In this sense, we see our existing linguistic resources as strengthened by the presence of English as a shared language within the team, which contributes to multilingualism alongside other linguistic resources rather than undermining them (Jenkins, 2015; Seidlhofer, 2003). This linguistic configuration prompts a critical reflection on how translingual practices within research teams not only facilitate communication, but also shape the interpretative dimensions of collaborative analysis, as reflected in the translanguaging dynamics continuously negotiated throughout our discussions.

4.2. Reflecting on Linguistic Repertoires

Immediately following the exchange from Excerpt 1, where Nadja's request for mutual comprehensibility led to a negotiation over which language(s) to use for translating field notes, Excerpt 2 illustrates how meaning-making in the translanguaging process unfolds on a semantic level but is also deeply embedded in social and linguistic dynamics (Figure 2).

01	NT:	i would ask you Safà to read because my arabic is not good enough to read
02		and i think it's the same for the others so if you could read the arabic parts
03		um that would be fine and who would like to read the rest?

Figure 2. Excerpt 2—"My Arabic is not good enough."

In this excerpt, the team works with field notes that are predominantly written in Italian. They also contain passages in Darija, the Arabic variety used in Morocco, which was used both by the research participants in the field and the researcher, but do not appear in the passage above. However, not all team members can read Darija or fully understand it. To achieve mutual comprehensibility, the team members take a cooperative approach: The field notes are read by team members who have the linguistic resources they contain, and English translations are provided for those who do not have them. For example, after being asked, Safà takes over reading the Arabic parts aloud because she is more proficient than Nadja. The researchers' different linguistic repertoires enter into a reflexive dialogue, revealing how multilingual research teams actively navigate and negotiate linguistic dynamics when engaging with empirical material that spans multiple languages. Following Busch (2017), Nadja's remark "my Arabic is not good enough to read" can be interpreted on several levels. First, it can be seen as part of a language-biographical self-assessment. The extract illustrates her awareness of only having limited Darija knowledge. As a widespread language, Arabic is characterized by diglossia and extensive linguistic variation. In this respect, Nadja's statement can be read as an indication of a limited proficiency in Arabic in general, and more concretely in Moroccan Darija. While we continue to refer to Arabic as a named language, we recognize the contextual relevance of Moroccan Darija. Secondly, Nadja's remark can be viewed from the perspective of researcher reflexivity (Dausien, 2007), which enables a deeper understanding of the epistemological conditions under which qualitative research is conducted. The researchers' negotiation about who knows how to read the Arabic parts of the field notes becomes a moment of reflexive practice, which focuses on socially embedded and situated knowledge. It reveals an awareness of differing competencies within the team, while showing how the researchers' social and linguistic positioning influences both data access and data interpretation. Safà's positioning—both self-ascribed and attributed by Nadja—as demonstrating higher literacy levels in Arabic implicitly reflects internalized language dynamics. In light of Eurocentric hierarchies, as described by de Swaan (2001) or Blommaert (2010), Arabic appears as a less spoken language in the researchers' repertoires, especially in comparison to English (Seidlhofer, 2003). However, in this research context, the presence of various linguistic repertoires among team members (such as the ability to engage with Arabic text) does not create asymmetry, but rather enriches the research process, since there was always at least one person who could understand and interpret the data and enable meaningful co-construction of knowledge. The repertoires allow for multiple perspectives in accessing and interpreting data, making multilingualism a valuable epistemological resource. Since English, as in many other academic contexts, serves as the common medium of the interpretation group, speaking across additional languages

becomes possible, leading to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the material. Thus, the team's interactions do not reflect fixed hierarchies but rather emphasize the potential of multilingual collaboration. As Piller (2016) notes, recognizing the institutional and academic importance of all languages and their speakers challenges prevailing norms. For qualitative research, which depends on dialogic meaning-making, language reflexivity not only means acknowledging one's interpretive position, but also actively engaging the diverse linguistic resources that shape collective knowledge construction.

4.3. Translation as a Collaborative Practice in Multilingual Knowledge Construction

Building on García and Wei's (2014) view of multilingual language use as involving a full range of linguistic performances beyond code-switching or information transfer, the following excerpts illustrate how collaborative translation contributes to multilingual knowledge construction through the dynamic use of shared linguistic resources, mutual negotiation, and translanguaging (Figure 3).

| 01 | KS: | and and and we see above the title (.) okay we didn't read it yet, it was |

02   written **ethnographische protokolle november zwe twotausend**
           ethnographic   protocol   november   two two thousand

03   twentyfour **kita**:: so:: even if its not the title we read... so **kita** it could be
           daycare   daycare

04   a first (.) ehm

05   **hinweis**

| 06 | NT: | hint |

| 07 | KS: | hint. thank you, for the setting |

Figure 3. Excerpt 3—"Ehm Hinweis."

Excerpt 3 highlights the key phenomenon of collaborative lexical searching. Kristina is searching for an English term, which is marked by a short pause and a filler on line 04. Her lexical search prompts Nadja to offer a candidate term, as seen in line 06 with "hint." Here, dealing with lexical gaps leads to collaborative translation and illustrates shared epistemic knowledge and linguistic understanding in interaction, but also reveals translanguaging as an unmarked and accepted practice among our research team that is treated as a common component of collaborative interaction rather than something requiring explicit negotiation or justification. Indeed, translanguaging occurs in an integrated manner (lines 05–07), reflecting its embeddedness in the team's communicative norms and the normalization of fluid language use in multilingual research settings. We use different languages fluidly based on context, sometimes translating for shared understanding and other times retaining the original utterance when its meaning is clear to all. This flexible approach is exemplified in Excerpt 4, which illustrates how participants draw on their full linguistic repertoires and co-construct meaning in context-sensitive ways. Excerpt 4 adds another layer to these translanguaging practices and highlights the dynamic processes involved in multilingual interaction, capturing the complexities of interpreting data across Italian, German, and English (Figure 4). Here, the discussion revolves around a field note originally written in Italian and translated into English for Rebecca

using AI. The exchange focuses on the Italian term *figlio*, which was translated into "child." Knowing that Italian has two grammatical genders, Rebecca was wondering why the term *figlio*, which she perceived as a male word, was translated into the gender-neutral term "child" and posed a question that initiated common reflections by Kristina and Nadja:

01   KS: but [...] why call it then **FIGLIO** if it's from the perspective of the
                                                      child / son

02   ethnographer? maybe first child first first child would it be **PRIMO**
                                                                                          first

03   **BAMBINO**? because **FIGLIO** is my child i think, no? **FIGLIO** my child so **mein**
               (male) child   child / son   child / son   my

04   **sohn** in german. so [...] **erster sohn wörtlich übersetzt**. so for me it's like
                son   first   son   literally translated

05   [...] yeah Nadja?

06   NT: it could be, **erster sohn** in german or **erstes kind**. so in in italian it's both uh
                              first son   first child

07   male and uh general. i'm not sure if i explained it well [...] yeah. so if it's um

08   a child uh without it it's relation to parents then it would be a **BAMBINO** or
                                                                                    (male) child

09   **BAMBINA** yeah but uh **FIGLIO E FIGLIA** is really a child of parents.
               female child   son and daughter

Figure 4. Excerpt 4—"FIGLIO."

Kristina initiates a reflection on the use of *figlio*, questioning its adequacy within the ethnographic context. Her reflection is explicitly comparative, drawing on her knowledge of German (*mein sohn*) and suggesting alternative phrasings (*primo bambino*, i.e., "first child"). Nadja responds by elaborating upon the semantic Italian distinction between *bambino/bambina* ([male] child/female child) and *figlio/figlia* ([male] child or son/daughter), noting that the latter implies a relational context—being someone's child—while the former is more general. *Bambino/figlio* may also signal extended masculine forms. This exchange highlights another key aspect of translanguaging in qualitative research, showing how meaning and metalinguistic knowledge are co-constructed through different linguistic repertoires. Rather than asserting authority, Kristina and Nadja collaboratively navigate the nuances, negotiating meaning based on their respective linguistic repertoires and widening them. This collaborative unpacking provides a multi-layered interpretation of the term *figlio*, which would be lost if only the English translation were available. The discussion reveals that translations are not unbiased practices: Translation becomes a site where meanings are shaped, questioned, and re-evaluated, rather than merely transferred from one language to another. Furthermore, the excerpt illustrates how researchers constantly balance the field language with the working language. In this case, the team navigates between Italian (field and field note language), German (due to the linguistic repertoire of team members), and English (dominant working language). Besides linguistic competence, this also requires methodological reflexivity—an awareness of how language shapes interpretation and of the complex

dynamics that underlie translation processes. Hence, translanguaging becomes a productive strategy that helps the team access deeper layers of meaning and fosters critical reflection on the positionality of the researcher, the emotional connotations linked to linguistic variation, and the constructedness of meaning itself. At the same time, although using AI tools accelerated our workflow, it also occasionally introduced inaccuracies that generated productive friction, prompting us to question terminology and reflect on how language mediates knowledge. Regarding language ideologies, Excerpt 4 reveals that it is not necessarily "native speakers" who make the most important contributions in interpretation processes, but that researchers (such as Rebecca) who have limited competence in a respective language can also make substantial contributions to meaning-making by asking questions about linguistic aspects that "native speakers" might overlook, and thus initiate processes of knowledge construction. Another revealing moment within the research team's negotiations appears in the following data excerpt (Figure 5), where Giorgia, who is less proficient in German, adopts the German term *bürokratisch*. Previously, Rebecca had used the term *bürokratisch* as part of her reflective translation of "enrollment," highlighting its connotative dimension within the context of school and administrative procedures (lines 03–04). Shortly afterwards, Giorgia adopts this term and integrates it into her own linguistic usage (line 10).

This uptake is analytically significant in several respects. First, it illustrates how speakers do not only draw on translanguaging as a communicative strategy, but as a dynamic resource for collaborative meaning-making. By taking *bürokratisch* into her interpretation, Giorgia both expands her own linguistic repertoire and actively aligns herself with Rebecca's conceptual framing. She does not simply echo the term, but actively recontextualizes it to articulate her own understanding of "enrollment." In doing so, she contributes to a

01   RW: now it takes place in a school or it's at least an educational context. so i

02   was just translating enrollment for me and it sounds like um like a like a real

03   **bürokratisch** part of going to school it's not like an or for me it sounds not
              bureaucratic

04   like a party or um and um and context with where the family is attends to it's

05   more like the **verwaltungsbereich** i don't know administration

06   administration and part of the part of going to school.

07   um so we know that **FIGLIO PRIMO FIGLIO** means the eldest uh of a person's
              (male) child / son first (male) child / son

08   GA: uh um children. we still don't know how many but uh in the timeline is quite

09   some time ago so this child is now uh 20 20 ish uh no yes i think and there's

10   also what Rebecca said earlier it's **ISCRIZIONI** sounded a bit **bürokratisch**
                                                   enrollment   bureaucratic

11   that was said uh so now we have um **LETTERA DEL COMUNE**.
                                                 letter from the municipality

Figure 5. Excerpt 5—"Bürokratisch."

shared interpretive process that co-constructs meaning across linguistic resources. Moreover, retaining the German word—without translating it into English or Italian—suggests that *bürokratisch* was semantically precise and, therefore, analytically useful for Giorgia. Its phonetic and semantic proximity to its Italian and English equivalents likely facilitates this borrowing. At the same time, its use reflects the sociolinguistic dynamics of the group: German appears to hold a certain discursive position of relevance, possibly due to its frequent use by other team members or its perceived conceptual clarity.

In this respect, language choice is not only shaped by functionality in the interaction but by the participants' biographical trajectories, shared knowledge, and the hierarchies within the team. By adopting the German term, Giorgia signals her ability to connect to Rebecca's interpretation and simultaneously positions herself within the team's collaborative discursive space. She therefore contributes to the emergent, situated process of meaning-making and knowledge construction and demonstrates her ability to navigate and draw from a shared multilingual repertoire.

These three excerpts highlight how translation in multilingual research is a dynamic, collaborative practice central to knowledge construction that potentially "disrupts" or transforms language hierarchies. Translanguaging is enacted as both a communicative practice and as a methodological stance: Meaning is reflexively co-created by using and negotiating shared linguistic resources. The emergence of knowledge construction from ongoing interactions, both from human negotiations and AI-assisted input, underscores the complexity and reflexivity inherent to multilingual interpretation. While these examples demonstrate the collaborative and reflexive dimensions of multilingual research, they also point to how shared linguistic repertoires intersect with researchers' biographical and professional backgrounds.

4.4. Between Shared and Biographical Knowledge: Navigating Meaning in Interaction

In Excerpt 6 (see Figure 6), Kristina expresses uncertainty ("if I remember well," line 01) about the meaning that the word *kita*, an abbreviation for the German term *kindertagesstätte* ("daycare center"), had in the Austrian research field. After a self-repair (Schegloff et al., 1977), where she replaces the word *alto adige* (Italian for "South Tyrol") with the German term *südtirol*, she ends with "or not" (line 02): A tag question, which serves to express uncertainty or request confirmation and reflects the typical function of the German *oder nicht* (Clausen & Scheffler, 2022). This construction often appears at the end of a turn to request agreement or clarification. In English, the more idiomatic equivalent would be a marker such as "isn't it?" rather than the literal "or not." Although this form is not common in English, it remains contextually understandable. Nadja offers a translation into Italian, providing the phrase *asilo nido*, which corresponds to the Austrian term *kita*.

In line 04, Kristina approves Nadja's explanation and then asks if *kindertagesstätte* is "a mixed one [institution]," referring to *kindergarten* and *asilo nido*, with Nadja responding that *kita* is for children up to three years, while Kindergarten is for children from three to six. The term *asilo nido* is effortlessly integrated into the following interaction, signaling a shared understanding among team members, based on biographical knowledge, that the others are familiar with the term. Its unmarked and routine use illustrates how translanguaging is embedded in the participants' communicative practices and highlights the normalization of fluent language use in our translingual team.

01	KS:	ehm, **kita**, if i remember well, it's **kindertagesstätte** in austria and it's
		daycare daycare center
02		like **kindergarten** in, in, in, i thought, in **ALTO AD_ südtirol**, or not
		kindergarten south tyrol
03	NT:	no, it's, it's like eh **ASILO NIDO**
		daycare
04	KS:	mhm mhm
05		but it's not, it's only for **ASILO NIDO**, or it's a mixed one?
		daycare
06	NT:	no, it's not mixed
07	KS:	no, no, okay
08	NT:	it's, it's, it's, it's, um, for children until three
09	KS:	three, three, okay
10	NT:	mhmm
11	KS:	i wasn't sure now
12	NT:	and then from three to six, uh, it's **kindergarten**
		kindergarten
13	KS:	okay
14	NT:	in austria, yeah

Figure 6. Excerpt 6—"ASILO NIDO."

This part of the interaction illustrates the team's dynamic use of multilingual resources and corresponds to translanguaging practices in which speakers draw flexibly upon their entire linguistic repertoire. First, this is consistent with García and Wei's (2014) view that translanguaging allows individuals to draw on their entire linguistic repertoires to communicate effectively across languages and, like in educational settings, allows us to develop "the weaker language in relationship with the one that is more dominant" (Creese & Blackledge, 2016, p. 3). Second, many terms lack universal meanings and differ from region to region: Both *kindertagesstätte* and *kindergarten* have different meanings in the German-dominant fields where we conduct our research. Furthermore, the term *Krippe* is also used in Austria; however, it did not appear in the dataset interpreted during the data session. By discussing terms, we share our biographical knowledge about different educational systems in these regions and widen our understanding of them.

Biographical knowledge became relevant during a session dedicated to analyzing administrative forms. The documents, as it is the norm in South Tyrol, are originally written in Italian and German. Therefore, translation was deemed unnecessary, since all team members could use at least one of these languages. During the session, Giorgia shared a split screen that displayed the two documents next to each other, which Kristina read aloud in German. Excerpt 7 (Figure 7) depicts how Kristina, Nadja, and Rebecca are engaged in

01   NT: and i see that it's a - direct translation i would assume from italian to

02   german (.) the- i'm just thinking but um - maybe if it was not a translation

03   it could also start or it could also be something like **bitte füllen sie "das**
                                             please fill in   "the

04   **gesuch" "sorgfältig und in allen seinen teilen" aus** - i would find that more
           application" "carefully and in all of its parts"

05   logical for my language feeling but i'm not sure how you what what you

06   would say **"das gesuch ist sorgfältig und in allen seinen teilen auszufüllen"**
                   "the application is to be filled in carefully and in all of its parts"

07   KS: what what for me actually sound strange is this part **"in allen seinen teilen**"
                                            "in all of its   parts"

08   this part in it it sounds for me strange actually it's nothing as you said also

09   now it's nothing that you normally would write in that like that i think (.)

10   **"in allen seinen teilen**" it sounds strange
           "in all of its   parts"

11   RW: yeah i would say it sounds like a very or like a um administrative way of talking

12   NT: ah okay

13   KS: i thought maybe it could be like somebody had could be uh had - had to

14   **schreiben können so so uh alle felder oder und alle felder ausfüllen oder**
           write   can   so so uh all   fields or   and fill in all fields   or

15   **in die richtung** - like **seinen teilen** it's it's it's not it's not it's nothing like **seine**
           in this direction   its

16   **teile** it's nothing uh not connected to administration stuff i think **seine teile**
           parts   its parts

17   it's not **seine felder** like because it's a **feld** - so yeah for me it would be more
                its parts   field

18   logically logically if they um if if they would write um **"das gesuch ist**
                                        "the application is

19   **sorgfältig" und "das gesuch ist sorgfältig und" eigentlich alle felder**
           carefully"   and "the application is carefully and"   actually   all   fields

20   **"auszufüllen" oder so also** something with **felder** kind or or i don't know
           "to fill in" or something like that   fields

21   but **seine teile** it's it's not like i think uh it's maybe from the uh from the uh
             its parts

22   **TRADUZIONE**?
           translation

Figure 7. Excerpt 7—"In allen seinen Teilen auszufüllen."

examining the German text, focusing specifically on the sentence "*das gesuch ist sorgfältig und in allen seinen teilen auszufüllen*" (i.e., "the request is to be filled out carefully and in all its parts"). In the excerpt, quotation marks indicate reading. The conversation revolves around the appropriateness and naturalness of the phrase "*in allen seinen teilen*" (i.e., "in each of its parts"). Nadja initiates the discussion by offering an alternative that may be more "logical" for a German speaker according to her "language feeling" (line 05), which points to a linguistic perspective that transcends its cognitive dimension (see Busch, 2012). Similarly, Kristina responds by expressing a sense of "strangeness" (line 07), noting that the phrase is not typically used in German, and suggests more "logical" (lines 05, 18) phrasing. By hypothesizing that German might be a "direct translation" (line 01) from Italian, starting from a very brief text passage, and then exploring alternative phrasings, the speakers position themselves as familiar with both languages and their usage. This exchange demonstrates that multilingual repertoires enable nuanced interpretation and the reconstruction of potential intertextual relations between documents. In South Tyrol, official documents must be produced in both languages, with identical appearance and layout, although by law the Italian version prevails in case of doubt (Chiocchetti et al., 2014). As far as the translation process is concerned, it is not always possible to ascertain which of the administrative texts is the source. However, German administrative texts typically mirror bureaucratic Italian, leading to unclear or "stümperhaft" results (i.e., "clumsy"; see Zanon, 2001, p. 180; see also De Camillis, 2021) because of different sentence structure and terminology.

By focusing on terminology, the interpretation differentiates the linguistic choices based on the researchers' perception of what feels "logical." This difference is connected respectively to the German spoken by the researchers and to that used in the document. This allows us to base our exploration of linguistic choices upon text genre, as suggested by Rebecca when she commented on the "strangeness" within the language as evidence of its administrative genre. Kristina and Nadja grew up in South Tyrol and know both German and Italian but spent most of their adult lives in Austria and Germany, making them more familiar with bureaucratic texts from these contexts. Their criticism points to the relevance of biographical experiences with and knowledge about language in different national and regional contexts. This excerpt signals how using nuanced language analysis to demonstrate competence was an important step in constructing a common understanding of the data that built on a shared linguistic knowledge of German.

4.5. Challenging AI-Generated Translations and Opening Spaces of Negotiation

In Excerpt 8 (Figure 8), Safà presents a field note in Italian with some passages in Arabic transliterated into Latin scripts and an Italian translation between parentheses. The following excerpt depicts the discussion regarding the Arabic expression *bnt bladi*, which AI translated into *compaesana* or "countrywoman," while its literal translation is "daughter of my country." Here, Nadja challenged both the English and Italian AI translations, arguing that they failed to convey the original term's deep, affective, and cultural charge. As the discussion shows, *bnt bladi* implies a familial connection to the nation, as though the country is a shared parent and everyone from that country is family. Besides highlighting the limitations of AI and human translations, this discussion illustrates the richness of collaborative meaning-making. It is important to note that the expression is in Moroccan Darija (transcribed as *bnt* to reflect local pronunciation), but it was challenged by Nadja, who speaks Syrian Arabic (which, for the same reason, is transcribed as *bint*). This moment underscores García and Wei's (2014) notion that translanguaging involves more than switching between named languages; it is also about expanding one's linguistic repertoire through exposure to unfamiliar expressions that carry specific cultural and emotional weight (García & Wei, 2014). Like in

01　　NT:　　i find the translation interesting (laughs), eeh, because, eeh, **bint** is eeh
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　girl / daughter

02　　SEK:　**RAGAZZA** maybe?

03　　　　　　yes **RAGAZZA** or eeeh even ehm, daughter.
　　　　　　　　girl

04　　NT:　　yeah _girl_

05　　SEK:　both.

06　　NT:　　yeah, so daughter? **ja**...
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　yes

07　　SEK:　yeah because the literal translation as you are pointing out, so when we say

08　　　　　　**bnt bladi**, especially in morocco, we mean someone from your same country,
　　　　　　　girl / daugher of my country

09　　　　　　but it is like, "daughter of my same country" or "son of my same country". so it

10　　　　　　seems like we have the same mother country.

11　　NT:　　yeah. and for me it's stronger than **COMPAESANA** in some way because it's,
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　female person from the same village / country

12　　　　　　or, not stronger but it's something else because **COMPAESANA** refers to the
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　female person from the same village / country

13　　　　　　nation or to the mmm yeah, [incomprehensible word] and **bint** refers to to a
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　girl / daugher

14　　　　　　family. eeehm

15　　GA:　　it's like the **DEL MIO STESSO S_**, i don't know if **DEL MIO STESSO** is like
　　　　　　　　　　　　　of　my same b_　　　　　　　　　of　my　same

16　　　　　　my same blood or something like that. like, like I'm thinking about aaa about

17　　　　　　an equivalent, maybe not a translation, something similar in italian. it's like

18　　　　　　**DEL MIO STESSO**, or mmm like these metaphors with blood things.
　　　　　　　of　my　same

19　　NT:　　but it's not about blood. it's about...

20　　SEK:　yeah it's more aaa like imagine the country as parents.

21　　NT:　　yeah [nods], as a family!

22　　SEK:　ok, yeah exactly! and then you say to people you are son of my country and

23　　NT:　　mmm [nods]

24　　SEK:　so there is like this shared land, land is shared which is not land it's most like

25　　　　　　family like Nadja was pointing out.

26　　NT:　　mmm [nods]

Figure 8. Excerpt 8—"bnt bladi."

Excerpt 4, someone who would be considered a "non-native" speaker challenges the translation by contributing to the interpretation.

The phrase *bnt bladi* sparked a broader reflection: What gets lost, softened, or reinterpreted in translation? Who decides how to render meanings? These moments reveal that knowledge is not merely translated, but co-constructed through our multilingual team's access to language, context, and biographical understanding. Consequently, we first present participant quotes in the original language(s) during our interpretation sessions—whether Tunisian or Moroccan Darija, South Tyrolean dialect, or other varieties—before offering an English or other translation. This practice, as exemplified by the expression *bnt bladi*, helps preserve both the linguistic form and the emotional and cultural resonance of participants' speech. At the same time, it underscores asymmetries within the team: Not all members understand all languages or dialects, so translation becomes a live act of interpretation, often performed by those few who can access the original utterance.

5. Conclusion

This article explored how our diverse linguistic repertoires interact with one another and with ethnographic materials during group interpretation sessions. Building on research about interpretation groups (Baumgartner et al., 2023; Riemann, 2011), translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014), and reflexivity (Creese et al., 2016; Dausien, 2007), we focused on interpreting multilingual ethnographic material in a linguistically diverse team, the role of human and AI-assisted translation, and the relationship between English and translanguaging. In doing so, we made the analytical process more transparent (Creese & Blackledge, 2012) and adopted a critical reflexive approach that closely connects language practices to researchers' biographical experiences, thereby encouraging biographical reflexivity and challenging methodological nationalism (Ruokonen-Engler & Siouti, 2013; Thoma, 2022).

Regarding reflexivity in multilingual research, our findings illustrate the need for ongoing, critical reflection on language practices and on the relations between diverse linguistic repertoires in a research group—specifically examining related power dynamics. While we acknowledge that collaborative research practice can be shaped by academic experience, position, age, gender, race, and hierarchies within the team, our analyses suggest that our linguistic repertoires are the main source for meaning-making in our interpretation group. However, as Excerpts 4 and 8 show, no single team member has absolute "sovereignty" over meaning due to a particular language dominance. Rather, other participants may co-create meaning through questions and comments that engage with a language they do not (fully) understand. This leads to approximation, or search for meaning, that constitutes an important part of the shared interpretation process. Reflexivity in multilingual research goes beyond acknowledging one's (shifting) positionalities: Researchers' biographical and linguistic ties to their fields, as well as their biographical and professional knowledge about language(s) and language practices in other fields, deeply shape how data is and can be interpreted and understood. Therefore, both data interpretation and linguistic knowledge are shaped by ongoing reflections about language practices and the interplay of diverse linguistic repertoires within a research group. Such knowledge is not neutral, but situated (Haraway, 1988), and emerges through embodied, socially, and linguistically embedded practices. Drawing on critiques of methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002), our findings challenge assumptions that linguistic knowledge operates within bounded, national language categories. Instead, we show that linguistic knowledge

emerges through translanguaging: team members dynamically mobilize their entire linguistic repertoires, transgressing single-language ideologies and the nation-state logic that treats named languages (e.g., German, Arabic) as internally uniform and territorially bounded entities (Otheguy & García, 2024).

These collaborative and multilingual dynamics were not only shaped by human interactions within the interpretation group but were also significantly influenced by the digital tools we employed. In particular, incorporating AI into our interpretive process added a new layer to the negotiation of meaning, further complicating (and at times enriching) our engagements with language, translation, and epistemic collaboration. This complexity is further heightened by the evolving interaction between human translators and AI-assisted tools, which together transform translation practices and knowledge production. At the same time, the AI-based translation tools used in our research largely reflect nation-state–based assumptions. As these tools increasingly shape interpretation processes, reflexive approaches must extend to their use. An important question, then, is how these tools can be integrated into reflexive practices so that their assumptions, limitations, and potential biases are critically considered. While AI functioned as an instrument at the start of our interpretation process, our engagement with it soon became a hybrid communicative site for negotiating, reconfiguring, and, at times, contesting linguistic boundaries. We used tools that were designed for "other-than-research purposes" (Pilati et al., 2024, p. 3), "repurposing" (Rogers, 2009) them for our research. AI had a significant impact on our work: On the one hand, it accelerated our translations and transcriptions and enabled the faster preparation of empirical material for our interpretation group. On the other hand, it slowed down our common work due to the missing or limited usability and reliability for individual languages and translanguaging. This deceleration, however, promoted conversations around meaning, ethical standards, and the hierarchization of languages that we would probably not have had without the use of AI tools. Since multilingualism and translanguaging are not an exception in research, but the norm, there is a need to further develop ethically reliable AI tools for multilingual and translingual material, as well as research on the use of these tools in linguistic and social research. This calls for fair recognition of the essential linguistic work carried out by researchers who know minoritized languages (less likely to be included in AI solutions), which frequently goes unnoticed and uncredited.

Another important point was the relationship between English and translanguaging, which played a central role in our team. During our interpretation process, our realization of its significance led us to discuss different perspectives on English. Despite not being the dominant language of any of us, it is the only language we all share, functioning as an architectural scaffolding that opened up a space for translanguaging. As this article's graphical presentation shows, English remains unmarked, whereas we considered it necessary to demarcate other languages. Acknowledging its position in academic discourse, we likewise chose to write this article in English. Still, we want to highlight its ambivalence: While English enables translanguaging practices and connects us to a wider academic community, it simultaneously carries epistemic privilege and reinforces existing hierarchies in knowledge construction.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Due to the nature of the research, data sharing does not apply to this article.

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