

When Recruiters Talk About Language Skills: Research Challenges of Comparing “Folk” Concepts in Different Languages

Magdalena Zehetgruber 

Department of Business Communication, Vienna University of Economics and Business, Austria

Correspondence: Magdalena Zehetgruber (magdalena.zehetgruber@wu.ac.at)

Submitted: 10 July 2025 **Accepted:** 11 December 2025 **Published:** 22 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

In job interviews, recruiters, as gatekeepers, make decisions about applicants' employability, also regarding their language skills. An analysis of recruiters' beliefs and attitudes towards linguistic and communicative competence, therefore, helps us understand the concepts underlying their decisions. However, the way recruiters discuss these skills and concepts is influenced by the language they use. For this reason, when investigating recruiters' perceptions, the language of research must be closely aligned with the language of the target group. This article examines the challenges of conducting multilingual research on recruiters' beliefs and attitudes towards the language skills of job applicants in Austria and France. The study is based on a three-stage research design, comprising an exploratory analysis of job advertisements, an online survey ($n = 277$), and focus group interviews ($n = 12$) conducted in both German and French. This article draws on data and methodological considerations to describe comparability and translatability issues with respect to expressions related to the concept of linguistic competence that recruiters use as linguistic folk. The challenges encountered pertain to the utilization of a multilingual questionnaire and the interpretation and analysis of the resulting data. They also extend to the dissemination of results, which requires translation into English.

Keywords

folk linguistics; language as a social practice; linguistic diversity; metalanguage; methodological reflectivity; multilingual research

1. Introduction

During hiring processes, recruiters evaluate language skills and, as gatekeepers, make decisions about candidates' employability based on such evaluations. But how do they conceptualise such language skills? The way individuals discuss, react to, and evaluate language(s) is a subject that merits closer examination. This question has been approached from various angles and through several theoretical lenses within the field of (socio-)linguistics because it addresses how people and social groups "value and orient to language and communication" (Jaworski et al., 2004, p. 3). Concerning beliefs firmly entrenched within societies, language ideologies have been extensively researched (Busch, 2019; Coupland & Jaworski, 2004; Irvine & Gal, 2000; Silverstein, 1979). From a more individual perspective, drawing on sociopsychological principles, the manifestations of people's cognitive, affective, and conative reactions to language are investigated as language attitudes (Dragojevic et al., 2021; Garrett, 2010; Lasagabaster, 2006). The analysis of discourse on language use also represents a fundamental area of enquiry within the discipline of folk linguistics that "studies what people say and believe about language" (Preston, 2018, p. 375). In this context, the term "folk" refers to "not trained professionals in the area under investigation" (Niedzielski & Preston, 2000, p. xiii). Consequently, folk linguistics closely examines the beliefs and discourse of non-linguists concerning language and language use. Recruiters can be described as such linguistic folk. Investigating their conceptualisation of language competence can thus be enlightening in learning more about their folk beliefs, which can influence the outcomes of hiring procedures.

The manner in which we study and analyse different concepts, beliefs, and perceptions about language(s), however, is also influenced by the language(s) in which the research is conducted, being the language(s) in which such attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions are expressed. It is therefore essential to consider the research language(s), especially when attempting to make comparisons across different (national) contexts. Nevertheless, conducting research in several languages, thus researching multilingually, incorporates several challenges: "Researchers who engage in multilingual research are faced with complex questions and difficult decisions" (Viebrock et al., 2022, p. 13). The investigation of metalanguage, i.e., language used "to describe and represent itself...in the context of linguistic representations and evaluations" (Jaworski et al., 2004, pp. 3–4), may result in the further complexity of the aforementioned phenomena. Metalanguage, as previously defined, refers specifically to the unique characteristics of a given language. The exact word choice can exert a substantial influence on the discourse on linguistic representations. In addition, metalanguage manifests itself in folk beliefs and can operate at an ideological level (Coupland & Jaworski, 2004; Goodman & Seilstad, 2025; Holmes et al., 2013; Preston, 2004).

Within this context, the research questions guiding this article are twofold: Firstly, what challenges arise for the researcher in studying recruiters' conceptualisations of linguistic competence in two different languages, in our case, French and German? Secondly, what precisely does this mean for research dissemination, which is often in English? Therefore, the ensuing sections address the challenges associated with carrying out research on language and linguistic questions in more than one language. These are pertinent methodological questions within multilingual research that so far have been investigated from different perspectives regarding research design, data collection, data analysis, and research dissemination (Costley & Reilly, 2021; Goodman & Seilstad, 2025; Holmes et al., 2013). However, a paucity of methodological reflection on multilingual approaches in research, as well as multilingual use of metalanguage in folk contexts, is yet criticised in the literature (Abendroth-Timmer & Viebrock, 2022). Due to the topic under investigation, i.e.,

recruiters', thus gatekeepers', attitudes towards and their conceptualisation of linguistic skills that influence their decision-making processes during hiring procedures, this is a question of social reach.

2. Researching Multilingually (State of the Art)

Researching multilingually can be defined as "the use of more than one language in the research process and dissemination" (Holmes et al., 2013, p. 286). This research mode presents a number of challenges at various stages of the research process, necessitating the development of awareness. According to the extant literature on the subject, this concerns "(1) the research context, (2) the status of languages used, (3) the role multilingualism plays in each step of the research process, (4) one's positionality as a researcher and (5) one's multilingual repertoires and the role of those repertoires in research" (Goodman & Seilstad, 2025, p. 1; see also Costley & Reilly, 2021; Holmes et al., 2013). It becomes apparent that multilingual research is confronted with a series of conceptual and practical challenges that depend on the specific research project. In addition to the aforementioned aspects, the research topic, the relationships among the researcher and various stakeholders, and the language(s) of dissemination can also be described as influencing factors (Holmes et al., 2022a). In many contexts, monoglossic ideologies have been shown to impede multilingual research (Goodman & Seilstad, 2025). Lacking reflexivity about such underlying monoglossic ideologies and neglecting multilingualism as a resource for research are criticised in the literature (Abendroth-Timmer & Viebrock, 2022, p. 3). Consequently, several scholars have called for a greater awareness and education among multilingual researchers, especially with regard to data dissemination and publication (Holmes et al., 2022b; Viebrock et al., 2022). In this area, the dominance of English has been a subject of critique due to its implications for inequality among researchers in terms of publication accessibility and visibility for non-native speakers, and even more so for researchers with no proficiency in English (Amano et al., 2016; Ammon, 2012). When researchers attempt to publish in English only or only the best results internationally in this lingua franca, problems related to power and hierarchies may arise, as well as significant consequences for local, non-English contexts (Curry & Lillis, 2014). In addition, research exclusively in English neglects the social embeddedness as well as the (socio-)cultural dimension of language (Butler, 2020; Pan et al., 2020; Viebrock et al., 2022). These social questions of language use, on the other hand, also represent the greatest challenges of a multilingual research process. However, in the context of forced migration, refugees, occupation, conflict, and economic marginalisation, it is particularly important to consider linguistic questions of the multilingual researcher (Phipps, 2022), which aligns closely with the scope of this thematic issue, but also relates to the role of recruiters as gatekeepers within multilingual and migration societies. Viebrock et al. (2022, pp. 11–12) therefore conclude: "Multilingual research contributes to a greater understanding of society's diversity, including linguistic diversity in global contexts." In this regard, researching multilingually can also be understood as a "political act" (Viebrock et al., 2022, p. 15) to position individual multilingualism, i.e., plurilingualism (Council of Europe, 2001; Viebrock et al., 2022, p. 11), as symbolic capital of individuals and social groups (Bourdieu, 1977).

Viebrock et al. (2022) propose the DISSECT model as a methodological approach to multilingual research processes. This model can be interpreted in two ways: firstly, as a metaphor to dissect the research process in the analysis and look at separate parts independently; secondly, as an acronym for the different dimensions involved in a multilingual research project and its analysis. The dimensions under consideration pertain to the doability (D) of a project, i.e., the practical and technical decisions regarding data collection and analysis; the relation to the researcher's and the participants' identity (I); the structural (S) and systemic (S) dimension,

which examines the institutional context of the project; the ethical (E) dimension, especially with respect to the participants; the context (C), which relates to situational requirements, expectations and traditions; and finally, the theoretical (T) or conceptual discussions that accompany multilingual research.

A consideration of multilingual research, with a focus on its doability, gives rise to a number of questions concerning language choice in the various stages of the project. This particularly relates to the need for translation in research design, data collection, and analysis. Any research that is based on the translation of data, or that compares data in different languages, must acknowledge the fact that translation implies some kind of interpretation, which must be considered in the analysis and the research process as a whole (Demirkaya, 2014; Reichertz, 2007). This includes reflection on the social context of language to provide meaningful translations, especially in developing research instruments such as surveys. The interpretation of meaning is inherently situated within the context of social settings and cultural groups; consequently, meticulous consideration is necessary within the translation process. Two approaches to the translation process can be described, acknowledging this need in different ways: adoption and adaptation. In the context of questionnaire design and translation, adoption has often been associated with the so-called ASQ model ("ask the same question"). This model assumes that questions translated into multiple languages work in the same way, provided the "same" question is posed (Harkness, 2003). While being a simple and, at least superficially, efficient way of designing research in several languages, it needs to be questioned whether the translated instrument will produce equivalent results to the source questionnaire. This is due to the risk of overlooking the social embeddedness of language (Behling & Law, 2000; Pan et al., 2020). Adaptation, on the other hand, "acknowledges and accounts for the semantic, conceptual, and other differences that exist across languages" (Pan et al., 2020, p. 12). In the context of survey and questionnaire translation, the overarching objective is to achieve functional equivalence. As posited by Behling and Law (2000), functional equivalence consists of semantic, conceptual, and normative equivalence. However, it is acknowledged that adaptation at a pragmatic level remains the most challenging endeavour in this regard. Questions of translatability, however, do not only concern research instruments such as questionnaires, but also encompass critical aspects of data analysis. This assertion is especially valid in the context of coding multilingual data, for example, when dealing with interviews conducted in multiple languages (Kull et al., 2019).

Despite the methodological considerations and literature on multilingual research, these challenges are not always addressed in the dissemination of studies, even when they are informed by data in multiple languages. For instance, within the context of large-scale European studies examining language use in professional settings (e.g., Beadle et al., 2015; Berthoud et al., 2013; European Commission, 2006), similar challenges to those described in Section 4 may have emerged. However, these challenges are not mentioned in publications, and translated data is presented almost as an original (in English), without questioning its comparability across languages. As demonstrated in Beadle et al.'s (2015) study on foreign language proficiency and employability, a comparison and description of situations in various European countries was undertaken to formulate general conclusions on the role of language skills regarding employment. This question is almost analogous to the one that is guiding the project underlying this article. Within the whole report, however, the issue of the research language (data collection and analysis) is not addressed. This may be attributed to the constraints imposed by word limits in scholarly publications, which hinder the presentation of original data alongside the provided translations (Holmes et al., 2013). While this does not detract from the validity or reliability of the data, it would be worthwhile to consider the challenges that may

be present in such comparative sociological research contexts. The present article, therefore, seeks to address such challenges within the context of a specific research project, the results of which can be found in related publications (Zehetgruber, 2023, 2024a, 2024b, 2025a, 2025b).

3. Research Context

In the present project, two national contexts were selected for a comparative approach in order to analyse recruiters' attitudes and conceptualisations of linguistic competence. In this manner, the medium and the object of research were both language itself, thus elevating language to a metalevel (Jaworski et al., 2004). As a means of investigating the conceptualisations surrounding linguistic competence through language, i.e., metalanguage, and asking non-linguists, i.e., so-called linguistic folk, about it, specific vocabulary is used that requires precise interpretation in its context (Preston, 2004). Thus, collecting such metalinguistic folk data in two distinct national contexts, Austria and France, and utilising two different research languages, necessitates deliberations on the equivalence of the multilingual research process on several levels (Pan et al., 2020). Therefore, the article focuses on the D with respect to the DISSECT model, examining the practical or technical decisions made at different points in the research process, which are, however, influenced by the other dimensions of the model. To acknowledge these factors as well as the numerous layers of multilingual research that are generally involved, the specific research context of the project is outlined as follows.

The data for this article is derived from a doctoral project that examined the attitudes and perceptions of recruiters in Austria and France regarding the role of language and communication skills in hiring procedures (Zehetgruber, 2025b). The project itself draws on an analysis of job advertisements as an exploratory study, a survey with recruiters from the two countries who mainly work for recruiting agencies ($n = 277$), and (focus group) interviews with some of the survey participants ($n = 12$). Conducted at an Austrian university, German was the primary language of research. However, data collection was undertaken in both German and French. A comparison of the status of these two languages in their respective national context—as well as in the context of this research—reveals notable parallels. In both cases, they are designated as the official national language and are also the most prevalent working language of corporations within the respective country. For some participants, the language of research did not correspond to (one of) their first language(s) (L1); however, for all participants, it was their primary working language. Consequently, it can be deduced that discussing their work in this language did not constitute an additional linguistic challenge for the participants. German and French were employed throughout all stages of the research process, including project design, data collection, and analysis. Nevertheless, English has been and continues to be utilised as an additional language for the purpose of data dissemination, as also evident in the present article.

As previously stated, the linguistic background and positionality of the researcher also need to be considered within multilingual research. This encompasses not only a general knowledge of the languages but also of linguistic varieties that might be peculiar to a specific respondent group (Heckmann, 1992, p. 147). To this end, the researcher's linguistic profile is briefly outlined as follows: The author of this article is proficient in the languages of research, with German as their L1 and French as well as English at a C1–C2 level. Having resided in France for several years, the author possesses a profound understanding of the French language in practical applications, especially within academic settings (work experience at a French university), and developed a strong awareness of social and pragmatic norms with respect to the language. The author has also acquired proficiency in several other languages but currently uses only the three aforementioned languages—

English, French, and German—on an almost daily basis, especially in professional settings. Other languages were not part of the research project. The researcher has no prior professional experience in the context under investigation, neither in recruitment nor in HR-management in general.

Since the mentioned challenges of multilingually researching recruiters' beliefs about language occur at several stages of a research project, data collection, data analysis, and data dissemination will be discussed step by step.

4. Challenges of “Multilingually” Researching Folk Beliefs on Language

4.1. In Data Collection

Challenges within data collection relate to several dimensions of multilingual research within the DISSECT model but mostly concern technical and practical decisions with respect to its doability. In this regard, especially questions about survey translation arose, yet a number of connected challenges were also identified during the other stages of the project. In its first phase, the exploratory analysis of job advertisements, data was collected from Austrian and French online job boards. In order to ensure the comparability of the data collected from these two countries, the criteria for data collection were meticulously delineated. As a preliminary filter to identify potentially pertinent advertisements, English terms for job designations and profiles were utilised. Searching for job profiles in the respective national languages would have entailed questions of their translatability. Therefore, job designations that can be used relatively neutrally in their English form within the national and linguistic contexts under investigation were selected, for example, “key account manager,” “sales manager,” or “communication manager.” Furthermore, the utilisation of English in business contexts varies significantly between the two countries under consideration. Consequently, the employment of English search terms for filtering the advertisements held the risk of introducing bias, particularly with respect to positions that already require a high level of foreign language proficiency, especially English, and are more internationally oriented. Therefore, the selection of comparable search terms to identify advertisements for the analysis proved to be a challenging endeavour. Apart from this search strategy in English, other search criteria were applied, in German as well as in French. Regarding search terms denoting specific languages (e.g., German, French, English), this did not engender a linguistic problem because they are somewhat neutral and readily transferable between languages; it was possible to implement an ASQ strategy. However, due to the project's focus on linguistic diversity and multilingualism, search terms with respect to multilingual competence were also included in the process of data collection. This proved to be more challenging, as different vocabulary relating to multilingualism reflects distinct conceptualisations, impeding comparability. The following example will illustrate this challenge in more detail. The German term *mehrsprachig* (“multilingual”) is used in everyday language, thus also among linguistic folk. The use of the Latin-based term “multilingual” is to be regarded as academic language in German and is predominantly employed by linguists. As job advertisements tend to reflect folk conceptions, the former, more frequent expression, was consequently selected as a search term. In French, the expressions *multilingue* and *plurilingue* are both utilised in everyday language. Both expressions were thus employed as search items in sorting out job advertisements; however, their usage is limited (the French show a preference for *bilingue*, as seen in Section 4.2) and does not necessarily correspond with their definitions in linguistics, according to the Council of Europe's (2001) differentiation for societal multilingualism and individual plurilingualism. The apparent equivalent in German, *vielsprachig*, to refer to the

societal phenomenon is not of much use in practice, and even less so by non-linguists. For this reason, it was not employed in the research process at all (for a comparison of the two concepts, see, for example, Kemp, 2009). This demonstrates that in multilingual data collection for quantitative, corpus-based analysis, the scope of a search strategy is contingent on the specific word choice, a phenomenon that was observed not only in the initial phase of the project but also had ramifications for subsequent phases.

For the online survey with recruiters from the two countries as the core element of the project, the participants were addressed in their respective languages. Consequently, the questionnaire was developed in both German and French. However, the adaptation to the participants' languages did not only entail utilising the respective national languages presumed to be their working languages, but also the employment of a language closely aligned with their professional discourse and language use, their *functiolect*. This goes alongside the objective of survey translation to achieve the aforementioned "functional equivalence" in the questionnaires (Behling & Law, 2000; Harkness, 2003; Pan et al., 2020). Such functional equivalence was attained by using expressions found in the job advertisements. Nevertheless, the endeavour to establish a comparative and comparable research instrument for the two national and linguistic contexts gave rise to issues pertaining to the translatability of the questionnaire. The subsequent examples will illustrate some of them.

Firstly, it was observed that not all the words used in the advertisements and consequently applied in the questionnaires had equivalents in the respective other language. The German expression *verhandlungssicher*, a compound adjective literally meaning "sure of negotiation," is frequently used in job advertisements to describe professional language skills. In French, however, there is no perfect functional equivalent. Expressions such as *professionnel* ("professional") or *opérationnel* ("operational") might be used to refer to the same kind of language level. These terms are, in their own right, difficult to translate into German. Given the objective of the study to find out how exactly recruiters define and comprehend such expressions, which are indeed ambiguous and sometimes opaque in nature, it is challenging to draw comparisons between them or to treat them as equivalents. In the end, the expression *niveau de négociation en allemand* ("negotiating level in German") was used for the French questionnaire. Employing one of the short adjectives more common in French job advertisements and candidates' skills descriptions would not have entailed the dimension of negotiation. For the sake of comparability, a non-frequent expression in French was given preference.

Secondly, another question that emerged for data collection pertained to the selection of vocabulary employed to discuss multilingualism in the questionnaire. This was similar to the search strategies used in the collection of job advertisements. The expression *mehrsprachig in Wort und Schrift kommunizieren* ("multilingual written and oral communication") was identified in Austrian job advertisements and consequently included in the questionnaire. However, the French job advertisements had not made use of a comparable expression, which is why, again for the sake of comparability, the phrase *communiquer dans plusieurs langues à l'écrit et à l'oral* was used. A similar challenge arose regarding German compound nouns such as *Kommunikations- und Sprachverhalten* ("communication and language behaviour"), which are hardly translatable into French (the expression *la manière de communiquer et de parler* was chosen for this purpose) or *Trainings- und Weiterbildungsangebote* ("training and continuing education opportunities"; translated as *les offres de la formation continue*). Further issues were encountered in relation to diastratic variation in language, akin to the challenges encountered in the development of search strategies for the collection of job advertisements. While expressions may be lexically equivalent, they do not attain functional equivalence on the socio-normative, pragmatic level. This phenomenon can be observed, for instance, in the use of

adjectives such as *redegewandt*/*éloquent* (“eloquent”). While the term *redegewandt* is widely utilised in German, *éloquent* in French holds an academic connotation.

Notwithstanding the challenges that arose, which necessitated the consideration of methodological ambiguity in data analysis (see Section 4.2), the creation of representative questionnaires in French and German was feasible. This was primarily facilitated by the preceding analysis of job advertisements. It provided the basis for the selection of appropriate terminology that respected not only purely linguistic dimensions, but also the situational, social, and normative dimensions of language use. In addition, it is difficult to determine which questionnaire was the source questionnaire and which one the translation, as both versions were developed simultaneously, even if the given examples so far might suggest otherwise. However, a third version of the questionnaire was also made available in English with the objective of ensuring that respondents lacking proficiency in the respective national languages were not excluded from participation. For this version, achieving functional equivalence was more challenging due to the absence of a preceding collection of job advertisements for reference. This is the reason why the English version of the questionnaire, which was only completed by one participant, can be regarded as an adoption (ASQ approach), whereas the French and German versions are to be seen as adaptations. The English expressions are used for the presentation of data in non-German or non-French publications on the project. This gives rise to further challenges related to research dissemination (see Section 4.3). The questionnaire was not translated into any other languages, which would have acknowledged the linguistic diversity of the participants (which was not as pronounced, though, as previously assumed; see Zehetgruber, 2025a).

The third phase of the study, focus group interviews, was intended to provide supplementary insights into the conceptualisations and beliefs of recruiters. During this phase, it was possible to adapt questions and materials linguistically to the respective context without altering the study design *per se*. Some of the translatability challenges described for the questionnaire also concerned this phase of investigation, but were less salient. In addition, differences in the linguistic situation of the two countries became visible. In the Austrian context, various linguistic varieties of German were used and mentioned in the focus group discussions. Recruiters referred to dialects and their use as a means of social inclusion. This aspect marked the use of varieties/languages during the discussions, creating perhaps a different atmosphere in the discussions themselves. In the French context, however, this was not the case. The discussion did not address linguistic variation, neither in terms of the participants' language use nor in terms of metalinguistic discourse. In this regard, the linguistic background of the interviewer must be considered in relation to the identity-dimension of the DISSECT model. Being an L1-speaker of German in Austria, the researcher shared a common linguistic background with the interviewees in the Austrian group discussions, whereas this was not the case for the French interviews. The researcher cannot rely on so-called native competence in French and is not identified as such by the discussants. The moderator's own linguistic background and involvement may have exerted an influence on the linguistic (and/or social) behaviour of the participants, which needs to be considered in data analysis (Demirkaya, 2014).

4.2. In Data Analysis

Since data collection took place in two languages, potential differences need to be taken into consideration during the analysis stage. In order to mitigate the risk of drawing wrong conclusions in terms of the research questions within multilingual data analysis, it has been recommended to integrate researchers with a similar

linguistic background into the data analysis process (Schröer, 2002). In the present study, the author of this article is a single researcher whose linguistic profile, which has been outlined earlier, allowed them to undertake the entire process of analysis without the need for translation. This was particularly pertinent in the qualitative, content-based analysis, where it was important to adhere to a rigorous approach and refrain from translating the data. The implementation of translations during this research phase would have introduced the potential for the conveyance of information that is not included in the original text. This could have a detrimental effect on the research objectives, specifically the definition of folk perceptions of linguistic competence. It is evident that in the case of the project under investigation, defining the various concepts in question is not merely a linguistic undertaking; it is also the fundamental research subject. Consequently, the process of translation would have introduced an additional meta-level, thereby exacerbating the complexity of interpretation. Given the complex nature of translation as a linguistic and cultural transfer mechanism, reliance on translated aspects alone should be avoided, and the original should be drawn on for interpretation if possible (Shimada, 2015; Snell-Hornby, 2007). Therefore, the data remained untranslated for the purposes of analysis. From the perspective of a researcher, these considerations entailed the challenge of perpetually alternating between languages when dealing with the data, and of constructing concepts and deriving conclusions as autonomously as possible from a specific language.

In consideration of the aforementioned factors, a number of challenges were identified during the three phases of the research project. In the analysis of job advertisements, specific terms employed to describe language and communication skills in German and French were coded and categorised according to various levels of necessity and language proficiency. The overarching objective of the analysis was to allocate these terms in both languages to categories, thereby facilitating both comparison and interpretation of their precise meaning. However, the ambiguity of the words used, in conjunction with the difficulty in distinguishing between them, serves to further complicate the attribution of the words to such categories. As illustrated in Figure 1, an

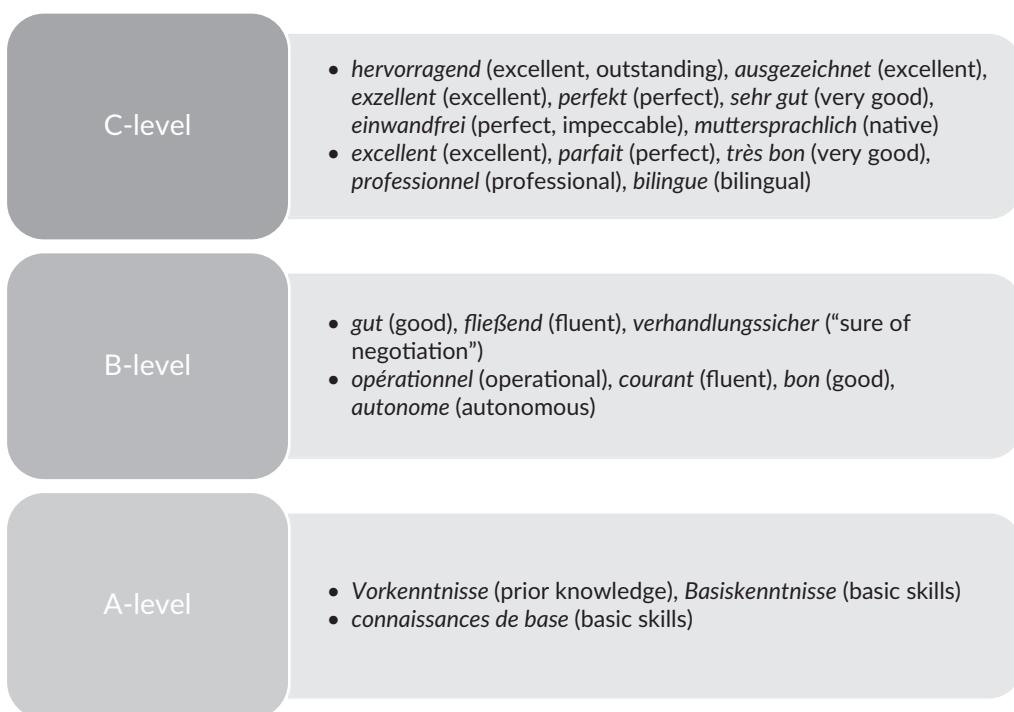


Figure 1. Categorisation of competence levels.

attempt has been made to categorise the expressions in both languages according to levels of the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001, 2020). Nevertheless, the disparities between the expressions are occasionally barely perceptible, and their rationalisation is not always straightforward. This phenomenon can be illustrated by the attempt to translate them into English, since some of the expressions could be translated by using exactly the same word or at least seem to be very close synonyms.

As the research objective was to ascertain how recruiters discuss and, as a conclusion, conceptualise such language skills found in the advertisements, these were addressed in the questionnaire. This is a particularly salient point in relation to the question of multilingualism. References to linguistic diversity were not frequently observed in the job advertisements, especially in the French context. However, the term *bilingue* ("bilingual") was used with a high degree of frequency (see also Figure 1), corresponding to German *zweisprachig* or, in its Latin-based academic form, *bilingual*. It is evident that these expressions are indicative of the capacity to articulate oneself in two languages, predominantly at a native level. Nonetheless, the job advertisements in French utilise the term *bilingue* to denote a particularly elevated degree of linguistic proficiency, rather than merely possessing knowledge of two languages. The term is employed in instances where the "second" language is not explicitly mentioned, for instance in expressions such as *anglais bilingue* ("bilingual English"), *allemand bilingue* ("bilingual German"), or *vous êtes bilingue allemand* ("you are bilingual German"). In such cases, the presumed French language is not explicitly identified as the "second" L1. The expression was also employed by the recruiters in the survey and the interviews, indicating that it is a common occurrence among French recruiters in their folk understanding of language competence. It was recognised that the supposed translations or equivalents in German could not be used in the same way, and this was a factor that necessitated consideration during the codification process. In the Austrian context, on the other hand, the term *Muttersprache* ("native tongue"), its derived adjective *muttersprachlich* (see also Figure 1), and the English loanword *native speaker* were commonly used (both in job advertisements and in the survey/interview data). The French equivalent of *Muttersprache*, *langue maternelle*, however, was not employed as frequently in relation to the discussion of language skills. It can thus be posited that the concept or ideology underpinning the French *bilingue* and the German *Muttersprache*, namely, very high or native(-like) competence in a given language, may remain comparable, yet its linguistic realisation has occurred in divergent ways. In the analysis, due consideration thus had to be given to these differences. In translated data, not acknowledging the social meaning and use of these expressions, such differences might have been lost.

A similar challenge was encountered with other expressions as well. The definitions provided by the participants for fluent language skills (*fließende Kenntnisse/niveau courant*) were categorised through a deductive-inductive approach, with an effort made to quantify certain categories. A salient category that emerged from the analysis was that of linguistic correctness. In order to identify references and occurrences, a search was conducted for the German word *Fehler* (meaning "mistake" or "error"), which is used in different combinations and compounds. In France, however, it was necessary to take both *faute* ("mistake") and *erreur* ("error") into consideration, which complicated the process of automated counting. This challenge is connected to the absence of multilingual data analysis software, a problem which has been criticised in the literature (Holmes et al., 2013, p. 287). Consequently, the process of codification can prove to be significantly more arduous when confronted with expressions originating from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Had a more substantial corpus been available, corpus-linguistic methods could have been utilised for comparison. However, in that case, it would have been necessary to rely on cross-linguistic corpus-assisted discourse

analysis, which is not yet very well established (Hofer-Bonfim, 2025; Taylor & Marchi, 2018). Given the limited scope of the corpus of both the job advertisements and the data from open-ended questions, this approach was deemed to be unfeasible within the confines of the selected methodology.

In the descriptive statistical analysis of the closed questions, the different languages used for data collection did not have major consequences. The sole consideration is that, in comparing the statistical results from the two countries, the questionnaires are treated as identical, and the different language use in them is not accounted for. Researchers and those interested in the project and its results should be cognisant of this fact.

4.3. In Data Dissemination

As previously stated, the data was not translated for the purposes of analysis. This has led to the emergence of additional linguistic challenges in research dissemination. In academic publications, it is demanding to present multilingual data without resorting to translations, which are necessary to enable a broader audience to comprehend the argument. In the context of a study analogous to that delineated in this article, this issue is rendered yet more complex by the presence of metalanguage as outlined above. Presenting data in a language other than the original one has the potential to obscure or modify the research outcomes since metalanguage is closely connected to the specific language it addresses. Furthermore, this may result in a diminution of transparency and traceability. Consequently, in publications pertaining to the project, all quotations and references to the data are presented in the original version. Translations into other languages, English or the respective other language of research, are only provided when absolutely necessary. This article itself serves as an illustration of such necessity, as all the examples given from the German and French data have been translated into English. This approach is expected to enhance the comprehensibility of the presented material for all readers, including those who are not proficient in the research languages.

In the context of research dissemination, researchers must achieve a balance between approaches that are accessible and comprehensible, while ensuring that the original content is not significantly altered by linguistic adaptations made for the audience. Failure to do so can result either in the invisibility of research conducted in languages other than English or in the misinterpretation of research because of neglecting the linguistic dimension (Amano et al., 2016; Ammon, 2012; Curry & Lillis, 2014). Misinterpretation can be understood as drawing wrong conclusions as a result of incomplete consideration of the social and normative dimensions of language use in translation. In the context of our multilingual societies, this approach would not only impede research but also overlook the pivotal role of language in shaping social interactions and as a means of social practice. In consideration of the project's emphasis on issues of linguistic penalties, inequalities resulting from linguistic diversity, and more general questions of diversity and inclusion, it would be even more problematic to conceal its multilingual nature.

In previous English publications on this project (Zehetgruber, 2023, 2025a) as well as in oral presentations, there have been several instances where it has been challenging to locate adequate explanations or translations for passages in languages other than the one in which data had been collected, especially since data had not been translated for the analysis. The project's primary research question, which draws upon recruiters' conceptualisations of linguistic competence, illustrates this challenge. The research objective in German was to address *Sprachkompetenz* and also *sprachliche und kommunikative Kompetenzen*. In English publications, this invariably gives rise to the question of whether to refer to that objective by linguistic

“competence(s)” or “competency/competencies,” or rather to draw on “skill(s).” The latter is also used in German, having been borrowed from English, but not with the same semantic and functional dimensions as in English, thus making a point in distinguishing between *Kompetenz* and *Skill*. In English, however, it is challenging to sustain the same level of distinction, which means that the underlying question, which is based on the central (meta)linguistic concept, may be interpreted in a manner deviating from the original intent. A similar set of challenges was encountered during the process of describing the various linguistic levels that were defined and delineated by recruiters. As it is already challenging to locate definitions for the expressions employed in job advertisements in both German and French, it is all the more difficult to translate them into English without first conducting a thorough analysis of job advertisements in English as a basis. Thus, the objective was to preserve the original version of the data as much as possible so that the full linguistic dimension is reflected in the material. The translations that have been assured for publication can thus be regarded as the author’s interpretation of the expressions in question within the context of the research project. As has been previously indicated, the presentation of original data together with its translation for the sake of transparency can naturally result in issues with regard to word count for international publications, given that multilingual examples necessitate the delivery of translations and explanations for the specific vocabulary. This has also proven to be a real challenge in previous publications.

5. Implications for Further Multilingual Research on Language(s) in Professional Contexts

The reflections on the challenges of multilingual research involved in the present study offer several implications for future research in multilingual societies, especially multilingual research including metalanguage. In analysing challenges and in reducing them for future projects, the DISSECT model (Viebrock et al., 2022) has proved to be a useful guideline. As demonstrated by the examples presented in this article, a number of practical and technical decisions guide the multilingual research process and ensure its doability (D). However, the challenges encountered in this regard and the decisions made within the project emphasise the importance of meticulously considering the context (C) of the investigation and the manner in which the discourse under question is socially embedded. The initial, exploratory phase of the project proved to be of significant importance in familiarising the researcher with this context as well as the institutional requirements (SS). Consequently, this phase was foundational for the subsequent adaptation process in the design of the survey and the interviews conducted. It is evident that the knowledge acquired during this phase played a pivotal role in facilitating adaptation. Had this analysis of job advertisements not been carried out in advance, the adaptation process would have been significantly more arduous, and a more adoption-oriented approach might have been selected. In light of the potential risks associated with adoption in survey design, this issue is of particular concern (Behling & Law, 2000; Harkness, 2003; Pan et al., 2020). For further research, it can be recommended, especially when investigating folk beliefs, to always first study the specific language of the folk to be investigated (Preston, 2018). Moreover, given the dominant role of English in terms of publication and research dissemination, it may be advantageous to consider folk beliefs as well in English, even in instances where it is not the primary research language for a given project. Although such an approach increases the workload within a research project due to the necessity of additional data collection, it may nevertheless result in the minimisation of problems in the presentation and publication of multilingual data in English in advance by providing the necessary toolkit to attain functional equivalence in the translation process. In instances where this is not a viable option, the present article invites the initial presentation of the original data, followed by the provision of a translation that acknowledges the challenges encountered during the translation process. This approach is intended to ensure both appropriateness and accessibility.

Apart from these reflections, a future outlook and potential avenues for further research in linguistically diverse settings are proposed. Firstly, it would be advantageous to initiate a greater number of multilingual research projects and teams, with a view to conducting research as frequently as possible in the language most appropriate for the research context. In research involving human participants, the selection of language is of particular significance. It is crucial to ensure that the participants are able to use a language that they feel comfortable with and which allows them to express themselves optimally (Costley & Reilly, 2021; Holmes et al., 2013). This reflects the importance of the dimensions of identity, ethics, and context within the DISSECT model (Viebrock et al., 2022). When we think about hybrid language use in professional encounters or the analysis of corporate language policies, the presence of multiple languages within a research team has a significant impact. While recourse to the services of translators and interpreters can obviously be an alternative, the presence of a wide range of languages within the research team itself obviates the need for translation. Consequently, this gives rise to a number of questions concerning power relations and hierarchies, inclusion, and the risk of downplaying methodological and ethical issues related to monolingual research as well as monolingual practices in society in general (Holmes et al., 2013, 2022b). The merits of multilingual research teams apply to all phases of the research process, including data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and data dissemination. However, the linguistic diversity of the research team may also exert influence on the preliminary stage of research projects, as together with the variety of languages, a variety of perspectives comes into play. Furthermore, the extant literature contains numerous recommendations regarding linguistic diversity in research, including the collaboration with co-interpreters who are proficient enough in a given language of interest or, even preferably, part of a given speech community (Brizić, 2007; Schröer, 2002). In addition, it is important to acknowledge the significance of raising awareness concerning the potential influence of linguistic differences in the various phases of multilingual research. This issue also carries a political dimension (Holmes et al., 2022b).

In view of the fact that one of the primary concerns of the outlined project pertained to the folk perceptions with respect to language skills in recruitment, it would be a worthwhile endeavour to collect data on language-related topics in other areas of HR-management. This would facilitate a more comprehensive investigation into folk concepts of language competence among the professional group of HR professionals, for example, with respect to appraisal interviews, salary negotiations, or promotion and training measures. This is particularly evident in multinational companies and other professional settings characterised by multilingualism. In such contexts, language choice and the perceptions of language use can significantly influence outcomes. Consequently, the employment of multilingual approaches in research may be beneficial and necessary to achieve a comprehensive understanding in this regard as well. Furthermore, in the context of exploring folk concepts of language skills, it is valuable to examine further linguistic (and national) environments to gain insight into the expressions and definitions employed by other speech communities, even though involving yet more languages complicates the process and calls—again—for multilingual research teams. Apart from that metalinguistic discourse, however, it would also be productive to examine actual language use in recruitment from a multilingual perspective. In addition to the realm of HR-management, multilingual approaches have been demonstrated to yield advancements in researching service encounters in the public sector (see, for example, Scheibelhofer et al., 2021) and several other professional settings characterised by linguistic diversity (Zehetgruber et al., 2025).

6. Conclusion

In multilingual contexts, recruiters, as so-called linguistic folk, engage in discourse and reflection regarding the language skills of candidates and prospective employees. In their discourse, they utilise a particular metalinguistic vocabulary that is specific to the language in question. Therefore, it is important that, while researching their beliefs and attitudes, their linguistic background and the language they use are given due consideration. This pertains to the processes of data collection, analysis, and the dissemination of research findings. In consideration of the thematic focus of the project underlying this research on issues of discrimination, diversity, and inclusion, it is even more important to avoid downplaying the significance of linguistic differences, as they have the potential to result in discrimination, for instance, in the context of job interviews. Instead, there is a need to recognise the inherent interconnectedness between language and identity, as well as the concept of language as a social practice that is also manifest in the research process. The employment of multiple languages during the research process may positively impact the acknowledgement of different language skills and the potential of rich linguistic repertoires. Furthermore, it has the capacity to interrogate the reproduction of inequalities that are frequently perpetuated by language use in professional contexts.

Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between WU Vienna University of Economics and Business and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

For this article, the author drew on the help of DeepL for translation (German–French–English) and DeepL Write to edit the manuscript and enhance the linguistic quality of the article. No other LLMs were used.

References

Abendroth-Timmer, D., & Viebrock, B. (2022). Mehrsprachige Forschung—Mehrsprachigkeit in der Forschung: Theoretische und empirische Herausforderungen aus internationaler Perspektive. *Fremdsprachen Lehren und Lernen*, 51(2), 3–9. <https://doi.org/10.24053/FLuL-2022-0015>

Amano, T., González-Varo, J. P., & Sutherland, W. J. (2016). Languages are still a major barrier to global science. *PLOS Biology*, 14(12), Article 2000933. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.2000933>

Ammon, U. (2012). Linguistic inequality and its effects on participation in scientific discourse and on global knowledge accumulation—With a closer look at the problems of the second-rank language communities. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 3(2), 333–355. <https://doi.org/10.1515/applrev-2012-0016>

Beadle, S., Vale, P., Humburg, M., & Smith, R. (2015). *Study on foreign language proficiency and employability. Final report*. European Commission.

Behling, O., & Law, K. S. (2000). *Translating questionnaires and other research instruments: Problems and solutions*. Sage Publications.

Berthoud, A.-C., Grin, F., & Lüdi, G. (Eds.). (2013). *Exploring the dynamics of multilingualism: The DYLAN project*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Bourdieu, P. (1977). L'économie des échanges linguistiques. *Langue française*, 34(1), 17–34. <https://doi.org/10.3406/lfr.1977.4815>

Brizić, K. (2007). *Das geheime Leben der Sprachen: Gesprochene und verschwiegene Sprachen und ihr Einfluss auf den Spracherwerb in der Migration*. Waxmann.

Busch, B. (2019). Sprachreflexion und Diskurs: Theorien und Methoden der Sprachideologieforschung. In G. Antos, T. Niehr, & J. Spitzmüller (Eds.), *Handbuch Sprache im Urteil der Öffentlichkeit* (pp. 107–139). De Gruyter.

Butler, J. (2020). *The promise of multilingualism: The languages of Berkeley—An online exhibition*. UC Berkeley. <https://trad.observatoireplurilinguisme.eu/en-us/thematic-files/culture-and-cultural-industries/88889017-langues-et-cultures/13874-the-promise-of-multilingualism-by-judith-butler>

Costley, T., & Reilly, C. (2021). Methodological principles for researching multilingually: Reflections on linguistic ethnography. *TESOL Quarterly*, 55(3), 1035–1047. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.3037>

Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. <https://rm.coe.int/1680459f97>

Council of Europe (Eds.). (2020). *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment; companion volume*. Council of Europe Publishing.

Coupland, N., & Jaworski, A. (2004). Sociolinguistic perspectives on metalanguage: Reflexivity, evaluation and ideology. In A. Jaworski, N. Coupland, & D. Galasiński (Eds.), *Metalanguage* (pp. 15–52). De Gruyter Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110907377>

Curry, M. J., & Lillis, T. M. (2014). Strategies and tactics in academic knowledge production by multilingual scholars. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 22(32). <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v22n32.2014>

Demirkaya, S. (2014). Analyse qualitativer Daten. In J. Settinieri, S. Demirkaya, A. Feldmeier, & N. Gültekin-Karakoç (Eds.), *Empirische Forschungsmethoden für Deutsch als Fremd- und Zweitsprache: Eine Einführung* (pp. 213–227). Schöningh.

Dragojevic, M., Fasoli, F., Cramer, J., & Rakić, T. (2021). Toward a century of language attitudes research: Looking back and moving forward. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 40(1), 60–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X20966714>

European Commission. (2006). *ELAN: Effects on the European economy of shortages of foreign language skills in enterprise*. https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/languages/policy/strategic-framework/documents/elan_en.pdf

Garrett, P. (2010). *Attitudes to language*. Cambridge University Press; Cambridge Core. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511844713>

Goodman, B., & Seilstad, B. (Eds.). (2025). *Researching multilingually. Multilingual Matters*. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781788925709>

Harkness, J. A. (2003). Questionnaire translation. In J. A. Harkness, F. J. R. van de Vijver, & P. P. Mohler (Eds.), *Cross-cultural survey methods* (pp. 35–56). Wiley.

Heckmann, F. (1992). Interpretationsregeln zur Auswertung qualitativer Interviews und sozialwissenschaftlich relevanter 'Texte': Anwendungen der Hermeneutik für die empirische Sozialforschung. In J. H. P. Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik (Ed.), *Analyse verbaler Daten: Über den Umgang mit qualitativen Daten* (pp. 142–167). Springer Nature.

Hofer-Bonfim, B. (2025). *Diversitätsberichterstattungen im Spannungsfeld zwischen Differenzierung und Standardisierung: Eine sprachenübergreifende Analyse* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien.

Holmes, P., Fay, R., Andrews, J., & Attia, M. (2013). Researching multilingually: New theoretical and methodological directions. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 23(3), 285–299. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijal.12038>

Holmes, P., Reynolds, J., & Ganassin, S. (Eds.). (2022a). Introduction: The imperative for the politics of 'researching multilingually.' In P. Holmes, J. Reynolds, & S. Ganassin (Eds.), *The politics of researching multilingually* (pp. 1–28). Multilingual Matters.

Holmes, P., Reynolds, J., & Ganassin, S. (Eds.). (2022b). *The politics of researching multilingually*. Multilingual Matters.

Irvine, J. T., & Gal, S. (2000). Language ideology and linguistic differentiation. In P. V. Kroskrity (Ed.), *Regimes of language: Ideologies, polities, and identities* (pp. 35–84). School of American Research Press.

Jaworski, A., Coupland, N., & Galasinski, D. (Eds.). (2004). *Metalanguage*. De Gruyter Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110907377>

Kemp, C. (2009). Defining multilingualism. In L. Aronin & B. Hufeisen (Eds.), *AILA applied linguistics series* (Vol. 6, pp. 11–26). John Benjamins Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1075/aals.6.02ch2>

Kull, A., Petersen, S., & Camp, M.-A. (2019). Sprachlich-kulturelle Herausforderungen bei der qualitativen Inhaltsanalyse musikbiografischer Interviews mit chinesischen und schweizerischen Musikstudierenden. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 20. <https://doi.org/10.17169/FQS-20.3.3373>

Lasagabaster, D. (2006). Les attitudes linguistiques: Un état des lieux. *Éla. Études de linguistique appliquée*, 144(4), 393–406. Cairn.info. <https://doi.org/10.3917/ela.144.0393>

Niedzielski, N. A., & Preston, D. R. (2000). *Folk linguistics*. De Gruyter.

Pan, Y. L., Sha, M., & Park, H. (2020). *The sociolinguistics of survey translation*. Routledge.

Phipps, A. (2022). Foreword: Towards a reparatory politics of researching multilingually. In P. Holmes, J. Reynolds, & S. Ganassin (Eds.), *The politics of researching multilingually* (pp. xvii–xx). Multilingual Matters.

Preston, D. R. (2004). Folk metalanguage. In A. Jaworski, N. Coupland, & D. Galasinski (Eds.), *Metalanguage* (pp. 75–103). De Gruyter Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110907377>

Preston, D. R. (2018). Folk linguistics and language awareness. In P. Garrett & J. M. Cots (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of language awareness*. Routledge; Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315676494>

Reichertz, J. (2007). Qualitative Sozialforschung—Ansprüche, Prämissen, Probleme. *Erwägen Wissen Ethik*, 18, 195–208.

Scheibelhofer, E., Holzinger, C., & Draxl, A.-K. (2021). Linguistic diversity as a challenge for street-level bureaucrats in a monolingually-oriented organisation. *Social Inclusion*, 9, Article 3520. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v9i1.3520>

Schröer, N. (2002). *Verfehlte Verständigung: Kommunikationssoziologische Fallstudie zur interkulturellen Kommunikation*. UVK.

Shimada, S. (2015). Kulturelle Differenz und Probleme der Übersetzung. In J. Dreher & P. Stegmaier (Eds.), *Zur Unüberwindbarkeit kultureller Differenz. Grundlagentheoretische Reflexionen* (2nd ed., pp. 113–127). transcript.

Silverstein, M. (1979). Language structure and linguistic ideology. In P. Clyne (Ed.), *The elements* (pp. 193–248). Chicago Linguistic Society.

Snell-Hornby, M. (2007). Übersetzen. In J. Straub, A. Weidemann, & D. Weidemann (Eds.), *Handbuch interkulturelle Kommunikation und Kompetenz. Grundbegriffe—Theorien—Anwendungsfelder* (pp. 86–94). Metzler.

Taylor, C., & Marchi, A. (2018). *Corpus approaches to discourse: A critical review*. Routledge.

Viebrock, B., Meier, G., & Aisabahi, R. (2022). DISSECTing multilingual research in the field of language education: A framework for researcher development. *Fremdsprachen Lehren und Lernen*, 51(2), 10–25. <https://doi.org/10.24053/FLuL-2022-0016>

Zehetgruber, M. (2023). Why and how to include linguistic diversity in business: Insights from an analysis of job advertisements in Austria and France. In B. Hofer-Bonfim, M. Zehetgruber, E. Peters, & J. Schnitzer (Eds.), *Diversity and inclusion across languages: Insights into communicative challenges from theory and practice* (pp. 47–66). Frank & Timme.

Zehetgruber, M. (2024a). Le rôle des langues dans les offres d'emploi en France. In T. Bartl, L. Bäumler, E. Heiszenberger, T. Wais, & V. Weiland (Eds.), *Romania diversa—Potentiale und Herausforderungen. Beiträge zum 37. Forum Junge Romanistik in Wien (11.-13. April 2022)* (pp. 285–301). Akademische Verlagsgemeinschaft München.

Zehetgruber, M. (2024b). Sprache(n) als Dimension von Diversity? Analyse von österreichischen und französischen Stellenanzeigen in Hinblick auf sprachliche Diversität. In M. Stumpf (Ed.), *Diversity in der Wirtschaftskommunikation* (Vol. 36, pp. 241–258). Springer Fachmedien. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-43199-0_10

Zehetgruber, M. (2025a). 'Jede weitere Fremdsprache ist ein Vorteil, da man dadurch punkten kann.' Recruiting within and for linguistic diversity. In M. Zehetgruber, B. Hofer-Bonfim, E. Peters, & J. Schnitzer (Eds.), *Linguistic diversity in professional settings. Needs, policies and practices* (pp. 263–287). Frank & Timme.

Zehetgruber, M. (2025b). *Sprache(n) und Kommunikation in Bewerbungsprozessen. Sprachliche Kompetenzen aus der Perspektive von Recruiter:innen in Österreich und Frankreich* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien.

Zehetgruber, M., Hofer-Bonfim, B., Peters, E., & Schnitzer, J. (Eds.). (2025). *Linguistic diversity in professional settings*. Frank & Timme.

About the Author



Magdalena Zehetgruber works as a senior lecturer (post doc) at Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU Wien). She has a background in applied linguistics, romance philology, and German as a foreign language. Her research interests include linguistic diversity in professional settings, multilingual language acquisition, and (business) language didactics.