Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 10962
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10962

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Open Access Journal

"Maybe I Say Something, I Understand a Bit": On the (In)Accessibility of Translation

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Submitted: 16 July 2025 **Accepted:** 10 November 2025 **Published:** 15 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

Working with interpreters is common in qualitative social research. It can even be necessary when researchers address the perspective of people with whom they do not share a lingua franca. Interpreters are then brought into the research endeavor to enable a communication setting that would otherwise be impossible. Following the theme of enabling communication, the dominant perspective on interpreted interviews suggests that there is only one person involved in the interaction—the interpreter—who can understand and speak both languages. This perspective falls short as it relies on a monolithic understanding of refugees as perpetually removed from (the linguistic requirements of) their new surroundings. However, when people have visited language courses or have otherwise been exposed to the language of their new contexts, they are gaining ground as agents of translation. Thus, the interactional dynamic of the interpreted interview changes drastically as the interviewee can participate more in how they and their stories are interpreted. Faced with the varying language proficiencies of the interviewees, the interpreter adapts their strategies of interpreting. Drawing from narrative interviews with refugees from Syria, collected at the Institute for Employment Research (IAB), this article explores the question of how the interviewees' language proficiency influences the interpreted interview, as it is rooted in situated performativity. Focusing on the interactions between all three participants, three empirical constellations highlight the relevance of acknowledging the performative density of translating and interpreting collaboratively.

Keywords

interpreting; methodology; multilingual research; narrative interview; performativity

1. Introduction

When social scientists attempt to investigate subjective experiences and realities, the qualitative interview is a central method of data collection. It offers (the promise of) gaining precious insights into the experience and lifeworld of an individual. In this endeavor, the qualitative interview seems an adequate means of exploring the biographical stories of migrants and refugees, even though it creates an inherently multilingual research scenario. Oftentimes, there is no shared lingua franca between the researcher and the interviewee. This difference is commonly addressed by a professional, and so the interpreter enters the interactional stage. While the power dimensions, dynamics, ethical implications, and consequences of researching refugees and migrants are commonly addressed in the literature, the methodological challenges associated with multilingual research have only recently become the focus of more studies. It is the intention of this article to shed light on the question of how the heterogeneity of research subjects and their language proficiency can influence the narrative interview as a qualitative research setting. To explore this complex issue, the concept of the interpreted narrative interview will be introduced in a first step, followed by an application of the chosen theoretical perspectives on the performative interactivity of the interview. Here, the consequences that arise from the participation of interpreters will be discussed using the conceptual vocabulary provided by Symbolic Interactionism. A literature review and an elaboration on the method will follow. This includes the introduction of "reconstructing narrative identity," a concept coined by Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann (2004) that aims to gain access to the subject in its narration. It will then be explained how this concept can be adapted in combination with (ethnomethodological) conversation analysis. Furthermore, the process of how the data was generated (rather than collected; see Egilsson et al., 2022), analyzed, and interpreted will be detailed. Building on this foundation, the article will turn to the empirical findings and the question of how the interviewees' varying language proficiency results in three distinct triadic constellations.

Figure 1 shows the effect of language proficiency and how the (myth of the) ideal typical translation is contrasted by its lived reality—as this article strives to illustrate.

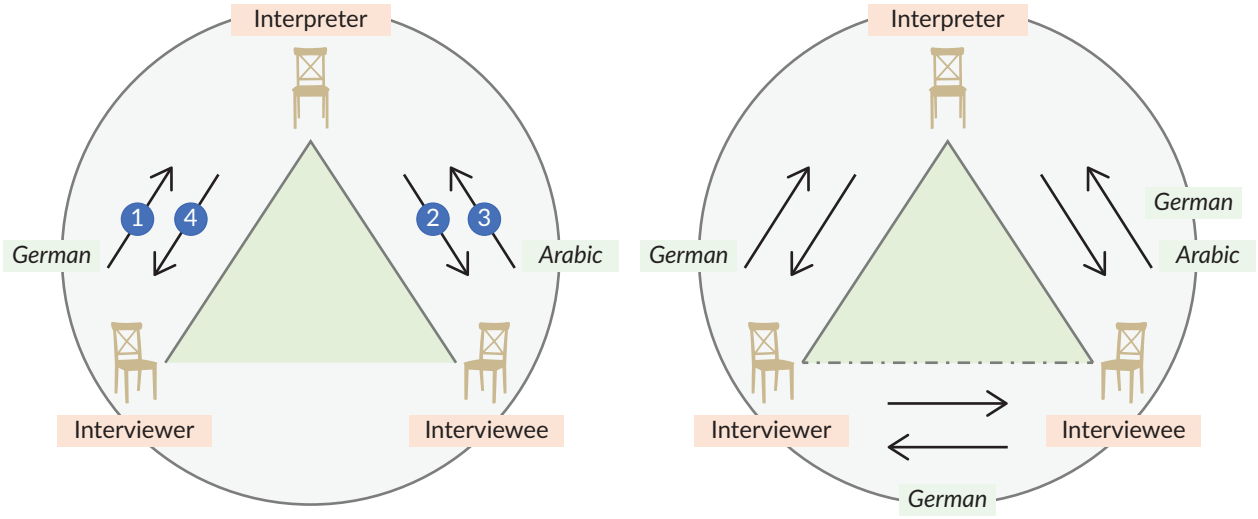

Figure 1. The ideal typical translation situation (left) and interpreting in/translation as community (right).

2. Interpreting (in) the Narrative Interview

The subject of this analysis is the participation of interpreters in narrative interviews as a prominent method of qualitative social research. It is the aim of the narrative interview to stimulate impromptu autobiographical narratives and thus generate data that "reproduce the biography bearer's layered experience as completely as is possible in the context of systematic social science research" (Schütze, 1983, p. 285, author's translation). A narrative stimulus is used to encourage this "reproduction" through autobiographical storytelling. This carefully worded question is intended to facilitate narrative expression and minimize the potential influence of the researcher's questions. Rather than being considered a random stream of information, the narrative flow is analyzed in terms of its content *and* mode of narration to understand the (creative and performative) process of autobiographical storytelling (Schütze, 1983). In self-determined free narration, latent structures of meaning of the narrating subject become somewhat manifest, so that researchers gain the opportunity to (ever so tentatively) peek into the subjective world of meaning. Integral to autobiographical storytelling is that the narrating subject offers up a distinct version of how they want to be seen, read, and understood by the researcher they are facing in the interview. However, the interview is an extraordinary situation in which the interviewer and interviewee share a very specific embodied atmosphere. They are co-existing in and co-creating a spatio-temporally unique experience which is marked specifically by the (performed) desire to listen and understand. Deppermann (2013) describes the interview as "interactively constructed social action" (§6, author's translation) and thus, "collaborative production of social reality" (§17, author's translation) in which the interviewer and interviewee negotiate the meaning, significance, and direction of the interview. Deppermann identifies resources for the constitution of meaning in the voice, eye contact, and expression, in gestures, facial expressions, and posture (§20, author's translation). The author consistently argues that meaning in the interview is constructed multimodally. Agreeing with this premise, Promberger and Höpfner (2023) accentuate that "these interactive concepts of interviewing frequently overlook the role of material objects" (p. 2), such as recording devices.

The inherent complexity of the narrative interview only grows exponentially when language is considered more thoroughly in the face of multilingual research. In the case of research into (forced) migration, the lack of a lingua franca is common and often "remedied" by interpreters. It is their job to step into the position and role of the communicative intermediary. For the structure of the interview, the additional person and their task means that the interactional dynamic shifts into a triadic constellation in which the interpreter signifies the difference of language (or lack of a shared one) between interviewer and interviewee. The interpreter is called upon to enable a conversation in a research setting that would otherwise be impossible. This shows the relevance of the work interpreters do and the value they provide: People and stories otherwise inaccessible can be a part of scientific study into topics that oftentimes are marked by political urgency or lack of visibility in public discourse. Qualitative social science provides such studies and, therefore, manages multilingual research settings continuously.

The methodology of the narrative interview, however, is challenged drastically in the presence of interpreters. As in the mono-lingual interview, it is of great importance *how* the interviewee is phrasing and performing their story. It is their choice of words and how these words (their stuttering, mumbling, or even silence) are delivered that is of the researchers' interest. Herein lies the reason why interpreters are often asked for an "exact reproduction" of the verbalized self-narrative by "simply translating it," as has been observed in the interviews analyzed for this study. This notion is also evident in literature: "As much as possible, we wanted

interpreters to provide us with similar types of words used by participants," write Kosny et al. (2014, p. 839) as they elaborate on their disappointment with the reality of their experience. The desire to stay "close to the original" is to comply with the standards of how a narrative interview is set up and what it is promised to produce. There arises a dilemma since any interpreter (and researcher) is just a person with a distinct biography, their own stories of triumph and loss. Interpreters cannot completely forgo their own selves in translating stories of another. Their subjectivity is irrevocably inscribed in how they choose words in favor of others and how they *move* between languages, as Kinsky (2019) points out. Every language holds tacit and cultural knowledge and therefore conveys more in its words than the surface value of individual letter combinations (Sebald, 2019). Communication through a lingua franca, therefore, functions as a cultural frame of reference in joint interaction; it works as a reference to collective knowledge since language is characterized by its "genuine sociality" (Sebald, 2019, p. 124, author's translation). Interpreters must take this into account when attempting to translate the semantic and cultural dimensions of any statement. Since it is imperative for the methodology of the narrative interview to focus on *how* a research participant articulates their story, the question of how the translational work of the interpreter transforms the narrated data is an inherently methodological one. In their translation, the interpreter reformulates and thus becomes an active co-author in the interviewee's interpreted story: The methodological premise of the narrative interview faces a contradiction.

The situational distribution of power also harbors potential for conflict due to the professional roles in play. A common fear or discomfort that often accompanies the researcher in hiring an interpreter is the loss of control that comes with the presence of the "language expert." While the interpreter wields both languages professionally, the researcher lacks the verbalized, direct access to the interviewee. For the duration of the interview, the translation is under scrutiny as the researcher observes and draws clues: Does the interpretation match the length and (emotional) expression of the original narration? This question is one Egilsson et al. (2022) encountered as they reported instances in which "there appeared to be a mismatch between the researcher's close observation of the interview interactions and the interpretation offered" (p. 649). In her participant observation of interpreted interviews, the author of this study, too, was able to "observe the observation," as the situation required the researcher to step down from their usual position of understanding "their" interview. It is their professional roles that both interpreter and researcher assume and in relation to which they act (that is not to say they simply could "en-act" their professional roles). In this distinct dependence, the researcher is confronted with the "opacity" of the translation. The interactional dynamic changes once more when German proficiency challenges the triadic constellation itself—for example, when refugees or migrants become (more) familiar with the language of their new surroundings or even learn it in formalized language courses.

Helpful tools for understanding these interactive dynamics are provided by the theoretical language of symbolic interactionism. This approach allows for a micro-sociological focus on interactions as collaborative practices and raises the question of how meaning is produced in social interaction, as Blumer (1981) elaborates in three basic principles. He states that meaning is handled or modified in an interpretative process (Blumer, 1981, p. 81) when an individual encounters their environment. It is this process of formative meaning-making that lends itself to analyzing the interactivity of the interpreted interview. To fully comprehend the situational dynamic, this study utilizes Goffman's concept of the interaction order to understand the (implicit or explicit) rules that allow for a structure of "traffic of use" (Goffman, 1983, p. 6). It shows how an individual moves through an interaction. The performative dimension of the interview and the interpreter's task is addressed in Goffman's (1959, p. 17) words:

> When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be. (p. 17)

Using this lens to research the interpreter's experience of being tasked with an impossible endeavor—to interpret neutrally and remain invisible doing so—Aguilar and Guénette (2021) approach to "interpreting practices as situated and performative enactments" (p. 18) shows how processes of translation happen in a complex and dense social reality. Srubar's (2009) concept of reflexive nostrification shows that, as its basic operation, translation acts are comparative and therefore have a (re-) constructive character. As Srubar argues, to communicate even within the same language is to translate. Thus, translation is to be understood as an everyday process of managing a fundamental uncertainty "that can never be fully resolved" (p. 161, author's translation). The interpreted narrative interview provides a situation in which the lived-in nature of translation can be studied in situ.

3. Literature Review

Despite the growing multidisciplinary corpus of literature addressing multilingual research, working with interpreters in qualitative interviews is still rarely examined in depth as a methodological issue. Such a scope can be found in Egilsson et al. (2022), however, as the authors reflect on methodological and ethical challenges along their report of an interpreted interview. By conducting a follow-up translation, the researchers discovered "discrepancies and the interpreter's tendency to modify both questions and responses during the interview" (Egilsson et al., 2022, p. 638). Ditton and Lehane (2010) provide an insight into the active role of interpreters in narrative development and show how "the participant-interpreter-researcher trio constructed the migrant's narratives actively" (p. 6) There exist further insightful studies on the triad and its dynamic, as seen in the work of Kluge (2013), who accentuates the relevance of language, or the approach of Rumpel and Tempes (2019), which centers (relations of) power, while Temple et al. (2006) argue to view and use translated data as secondary data. To study this secondary data that is (provided by) the interpreted interview is the goal of Friedland and Penn (2003) too, as they discuss the use of conversation analysis "to identify both facilitators and inhibitors of a successfully mediated interview" (Friedland & Penn, 2003, p. 95). The authors describe: "A full understanding of the dynamics, social and power aspects, shifting roles and pace of an interview is exposed through [conversational analysis]" (Friedland & Penn, 2003, p. 109). These approaches share a focus on the interactivity of the interpreted situation. Jentsch (1998), for instance, describes the interpreted interview as a social process of shared co-presence in which the interpreter's role both complicates and enriches the interview through contextualization: "It's a price worthwhile paying" (p. 288). In their examination of the professional role of interpreters, Enzenhofer and Resch (2013) conclude: "The service of translating 'hides' a variety of role-specific requirements that also come into play in the research process." (p. 226, author's translation)

Holzinger and Draxl (2024) share this focus on the research process as they reflect on their experience with professional interpreters. The authors demonstrate how the presence of an interpreter and the different interpreting styles shape interviews and highlight performative aspects such as seating arrangements and the contradictory tendencies they identified in the way the researchers and the interpreter understood their respective tasks and positions. Holzinger and Draxl's (2024) contribution offers a rare glimpse into the

internal workings of an interpreted research project. While the authors provide an in-depth, practical analysis, Lauterbach (2014) emphasizes the importance of situating the role of interpreting within the research interest. The author concludes that the integration of interpreters into projects challenges the researcher to define the role the interpreter will be taking on. As a means of dealing with the inherent complexity of interpreted interviews, Brandmaier (2025) calls for reflexive pragmatism as she analyzes interpreting in interviews as "high quality" second-best option (p. 277). The author proposes "quality circles" to address misunderstandings and confusing interactions in the aftermath of the interpreted interview, providing an opportunity to reflect on the translation while continually improving the quality management of translation processes. In understanding the complexities of positionality and positioning that are inherent to interpreting, Bahadır (2021) shows the political in voice and perspective of the interpreter. The author unfolds interpreting as a performative, political practice that takes place on the crossroads of norms (such as neutrality), professionalism, and performance.

Interesting perspectives on the subject could be found in the literature on community interpreting. Furthermore, language proficiency has been analyzed in numerous studies. Bernhard and Bernhard (2022), for instance, focus on the gender difference in second language proficiency. This study, however, argues that the effect of language proficiency on research itself—and thus the (variable) ability to step in, position, and voice oneself—is a methodological question that remains to be answered.

4. Method

The data analyzed in this study come from the project Networks of Arrival at the Institute for Employment Research (IAB) in Nuremberg, Germany. In this project, the researchers follow the "integration" of refugees from Syria who arrived in Germany from 2014 to 2016 in a longitudinal study design. For this purpose, the research participants were interviewed thrice, the most recent interviews held in 2024. This article draws on the first interviews conducted in 2017. All interviewees were offered an interpreter; an offer that most interviewees accepted. The interviews were then conducted in German and Arabic. At the beginning of each interview, the research participant was informed about data security and their rights. Both documents (information on data protection and consent form) had been translated into Arabic prior to the interview by a translation office and were handed out to all participants. In line with the high standard of anonymization and data security, the participants were informed about the recording device (for the relevance of material objects, see Promberger & Höpfner, 2023), the nature of the study, and their right to revoke their consent at any time. Upon acquiring the signed consent form and the verbal confirmation, the interviews began.

While the author was present for some interviews to conduct participant observations from the second wave onward, the interviews were solely conducted by two senior male researchers. The author began her work in the project as a student assistant, transcribing, coding, and analyzing the interviews in weekly sessions. All excerpts from interviews were translated from German into English by the author for this publication. Deciding on a method to explore and analyze the research subject posed a challenge, since both the interactional dynamic of the interview and the semantic dimension of the interpreted story were of interest. Furthermore, the methodical concept needed to address the author's inability to understand Arabic.

To best explore these dynamics, the approach to the reconstruction of narrative identity by Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann (2004) is utilized as they focus on the constitution of narrative identities in linguistic acts

(p. 55). Narrative identity, they argue, manifests in the autobiographical narration of own(ed) experience (p. 319) and thus should be analyzed and reconstructed along the lines of case structures. But it must be recognized that the interpreter's translation cannot simply produce the translated version of the interviewee's narrative identity. As this study argues, the interpreter instead moves between the languages and in this referential movement, the interpreter creates an *alter*-narration. While Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann accentuate the importance of a positioning analysis, the interpreted interview provides much more complex practices of "direct and explicit or indirect and implicit" (p. 199, author's translation) positioning than a monolingual interview. It is for this purpose that the (ethnomethodological) conversation analysis is used—in line with Friedland and Penn (2003)—to adequately capture the structural dimension of the interpreted interview. Although conversation analysis focuses on "natural" conversations, the interactions in the interpreted interview develop along a specific interactional order, which lends itself to the conversation-analytical perspective. This way it is possible to analyze how the situationally valid social order is constituted by "interrelated speech acts of the actors involved" (Kleemann et al., 2009, p. 14, author's translation). Still, to adequately grasp the interactional dynamic, an innovative approach is necessary, especially since turn-taking, directionality, or irregularities are vital to understanding the interview's complexity. In combining these two approaches—the reconstruction of narrative identity and conversation analysis—the lack of language proficiency the author shares with the researcher in the interview is engaged as part of the analytical process. As much as the profound inaccessibility of the translation shapes the experience for the interviewing researcher, the analyzing author is forced to face the same obstacles. Because there was no (financial) opportunity to work with a back-translation at the time of her thesis, this "weakness" of the study design served as a source for deeper insight into the processes of how the interview participants deal with the dilemma of not understanding (everything).

The opening sequences of all 18 interpreted interviews from the first wave were analyzed. These were of special interest for the analysis, since, in accordance with Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann (2004), the initial moments of interactions are characterized by participants establishing the(ir) positionality. One main finding of the initial analysis showed three different constellations as to how the beginning of the interpreted interview unfolded: firstly, with an interaction that followed the ideal typical flow of an interpreted interview; secondly, with details that positioned the interviewee as person with (limited) German proficiency in an otherwise ideal typical translation setting, and, lastly, with an opening sequence in which the interviewee positioned themselves as proficient with the German language. Following this first step "into" the material, 13 cases were selected for further analysis. To allow for an analysis that could reduce complexity, a specific notation was created. This made it possible to zoom out of the density of the transcribed interview and focus on the structure of the communication and the function of interactional elements. Based on the established communicative structure of each case, passages were selected that either represented the conversational normality or an irregularity. In thus adapting the conversation analysis to the research subject, pivotal passages could be identified and analyzed through the lens of the (attempt to) reconstruct narrative identity.

This analysis focuses heavily on verbalized language. Factors such as the traffic of gazes or the performative arrangement of moving bodies in a symbolically charged room are of great importance to understand the interpreted interview in its complexity. Yet, it is the focus on the spoken word that this article shares with the methodical approach qualitative social science tends to bring forth, as the multimodal situation is condensed into an audio file and that, in turn, into an easy-to-handle transcript. The immediate density of subtle bodily

displays that accompany ever-so-slight triadic shifts, even before or beyond the spoken word, can be observed in situ as the interactivity of the interpreted interview unfolds. This study remains anchored to the transcript of the interview.

To enhance clarity, the following excerpts were simplified through the use of a transcription system, which is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Transcription guideline.

[*Name*]	Pseudonym for a name or anonymized content of transcript
[ARABIC]	Use of the Arabic language
[...]	Insertion/Interruption
(*Comment*)	Comments on paralinguistic elements such as laughter

5. Empirical Findings: Triadic Constellations and Their Interactivity

The interpreted interview and its interactivity change with the varieties of interviewees' German language proficiency, as will be demonstrated in the following. Firstly, communicative facilitation is introduced as the ideal typical constellation in which neither the interviewer nor the interviewee is proficient in the language of the other (to an extent that this would reflect in even minute utterances to be found in a transcript). The analysis secondly turns to controlled facilitation, which is marked by the interviewee's rudimentary use of their German proficiency. Lastly, the third triadic constellation will display the collaborative quality translation acquires in the face of substantial proficiency in the German language.

5.1. Communicative Facilitation: When Interpreting Enables

In this scenario, the interpreter acts as a "communicative bridge" between those who wish to communicate. This mode of translation is defined by the supremacy of interpretation that lies in the translator's hand. As only the interpreter understands and speaks both German and Arabic, the structure of the interview is characterized by its inherent imbalance of power: over the interpreted narrative and the situational control the researcher prefers to have over "their" study in its practical realization (for elaborations on the relations of power, see Rumpel & Tempes, 2019). A clear path dependency is visible, centering the necessity for interpreting that (en)forces a choreography to communicative flow. As narrators, interviewees experience this dependency, as they are granted a listening ear yet are unable to speak directly into it. The following analysis illustrates this struggle empirically.

5.1.1. Performing Invisibility

The assumption of conversational normality in this triadic constellation can be imagined as translational loops. Using German, the researcher directs a question or statement "through" the interpreter to the interviewee. Once the interpreter "receives the message," they translate it into Arabic, after which the interviewee responds. In a last translational step, the interpreter translates the happenings for the waiting researcher. This last element concludes the translational loop. Although the metaphor of translational loops evokes the notion of isolated cycles, in translation (as in all communication), no loop or cycle is ever closed.

Instead, it falls within the responsibility of the interpreter to ensure that the participants perceive the level of knowledge about the situation and narration to be equal. If a narration is translated incompletely and a whole new story is dedicated to the omitted detail, the discrepancy is a dilemma for the interpreter to deal with. This may be the case if the interviewee tells a story very densely in many sentences and the interpreter translates using paraphrases, thereby selecting key elements over (in their opinion) less relevant information. Since the narration is supposed to flow *through* the interpreter, such discrepancies or omissions, colorations or additions are signs of a translator who is visibly working on the material to be translated. In this triadic constellation, however, such discrepancies usually go unnoticed since only the interpreter could reveal them.

The ideal type translation situation is one in which the interpreter is not supposed to show up as a person, but rather as their functional role. The assumption that any professional could work within their role and thereby forego their own personhood is to be described as a functional, even foundational myth that can only be maintained performatively on the basis of the opaque translation. The interpreter as their own person is not (to be) addressed directly: Questions consistently are directed to the translational process and product rather than the interpreter. In one instance, the researcher asked the interpreter during his translation if one of the names was a girl's name. The interpreter verified this and went on with the re-narrating as he abruptly interrupted himself:

> Interpreter: The/so three visit the school, among them [*Nour*] is [Researcher: okay] a girl, for me that goes without saying, [*Nour*] that is a [Researcher: yes] girls name, isn't it? Sorry. So [*Nour*], when she brought homework. (FL13, 247–251)

In his inserted statement, he explains the disruption in the conversational flow. He references himself and the self-evidence that the name "Nour" bears for him as the receiving listener. In this moment, the interpreter decides to make himself visible—as a "me" in the interaction, as a subject within the translation, and as a member of a different cultural community and, therefore, of distinct "self-evident" knowledge as Sebald (2019) pointed out. The interpreter apologizes and thus refers to his task of explicating cultural differences and providing subtle contexts when the interviewer may need them for his understanding.

So, the interpreter is advised to adhere to certain rules. One main rule is that the interpreter is asked to maintain a "precise translation" as a measure for the interviewer to remain "close" to the narration (as Kosny et al., 2014, wished for, too), to be able to rely on the biographical data given. Usually, this rule is brought up by the interviewing researcher:

> Interviewer: Good, well, let's start with the first question, [Interpreter: [ARABIC]] right, can you then please translate as literally as possible what's written there, right? That's always important with the first question. (FL13, 26–29)

The interviewer uses this statement to remind the interpreter by addressing him directly and personally. With the remark on accuracy, the necessity for translation is marked as a challenge in the process of data co-creation. From this directive forward, the power of what reaches the researcher's waiting ears lies solely with the interpreter. Superficial analyses could conclude that the interpreter's task is interpreting—their actual task, however, lies in creating a situation in which the interpreter both holds and enables confidence:

in their translation and the situation in which they create it. By complying with the set of rules attached to the notion of good translation, this sense of confidence can be established.

5.1.2. Interactional Crises: A Mirror of (In)Accessibility?

It is this sense of confidence, though, that can be shaken. Since it is the interpreter's task to regulate the situation by managing the (perceived) equilibrium of knowledge, even slight indications of deliberate or accidental omissions in the translation can evoke an interactional disturbance. Small—or more extensive—interactions either between the interviewer and the interpreter or the interviewee and the interpreter easily result in a feeling of irritation: Something said outside of the usual flow (maybe in a whispered tone, or even laughingly) can evoke a feeling of exclusion. As the analyzed material comes from interviews conducted by a research institute that is directly connected to the Federal Agency of Work, for the interviewed refugee, this feeling of exclusion is inherently one in which they are positioned. However, the door to the interpreted can be closed voluntarily, too. For example, when the interviewer is excluded by choice:

> Interpreter: She wants to learn the language and work in the [service sector].
>
> Interviewee: [ARABIC]
>
> Interpreter: (*Laughs slightly*)
>
> Interviewee: Mhm. (*interviewee and interpreter laugh together*)
>
> Interviewer: What did she say? That she is done?
>
> Interpreter: Yeah, well, that's what she wants.
>
> Interviewer: Okay. (FL31, 117–124)

In most situations, the interpreter regulates the perceived knowledge before the interactional disturbance grows into a crisis of grandeur as seen in the previous example in which the interviewer found himself banging at closed doors—being unable to understand, to share in the laughter, and to judge whether he was laughed *about*. The significance of details is illustrated here, as the interpreter initiates a disruption of a lengthy Arabic interaction:

> Interpreter: Ah. I mean, he's telling me now why he lost these [*thousands*], he went to a guy, to an [*agency*] and wanted to book [*a trip*] to Germany. (FL12, 144–145)

With the "Ah" the interpreter signals their understanding of the perceived lack of information and goes on to explain the interaction that just transpired. In doing so, the interpreter reactivates the interviewer as a member of the triad and involves him, once more, in the conversation he was merely observing prior. The interpreter also chooses to make himself visible as "me" the interviewee ("he") is telling a story to. By relaying that the interviewee is narrating "now," the interpreter creates the impression of immediacy.

The interactional disturbance is repaired by involving, referencing, and recentering the interviewer in "their" central position of the triad, thereby complying with the image the researcher has of his person and position in a professional setting: The interpreter is showcasing his knowledge of the interaction order (Goffman, 1983). As he identifies and repairs the irritation, the interpreter complies with the set of rules in this interaction. To interpret in communicative facilitation is to maintain a regulated (situation of) translation—as shown by the performative management of the (in)accessible translation.

5.2. Controlled Facilitation: Emancipatory Potentials and Their Realization

Controlled facilitation might appear like the first triad on the surface. Interviews that fall in this category are usually conducted with refugees who have just started learning the language formally. Most of them already spent a significant amount of time in Germany, "just waiting" (FL34, 74) for language courses to begin. Even though the interviewee holds, for example, an A2 language certificate, their proficiency or increased proximity to German could remain almost entirely invisible within the German interactions—and thus, within the "version" of the interview that will be transcribed. With the small shifts that occur when the interviewee understands some things, the interpreter's monopoly begins to deteriorate. A tiny remark by the interviewee may change the interactive constitution of the interview, because it represents the "potential of the possibility" to interact with the translation.

To gain access to the translation, a new path of verbalized communication must be created in the conversational infrastructure. Such a new pathway connects interviewee and interviewer, therefore enabling them to "seek each other out" using German. Although the German language proficiency may be relatively low, its impact is significant. Whilst the translation mostly follows its usual flow, the potential to verify or falsify lies dormant until the interviewee decides to speak up. The new pathway, although fragmentary, empowers the interviewee and enables emancipatory detachment from the interpreter. This comes as a challenge to the role and expectations the interpreter regulates, as their performative task shifts without explicit ground rules (Goffman, 1983).

5.2.1. Establishing Language Proficiency

The following excerpt illustrates the intricate happenings that unfold when an interviewee uses "their German voice":

> Interviewer: I'll turn it on, okay. Yes. So we're interested in the lives of refugees in Germany, the experiences that people have had here.
>
> Interviewee: Okay.
>
> Interpreter: [ARABIC] [Interviewee: Yes] [ARABIC] [Interviewee: Yes] Okay. (*Laughs*)
>
> Interviewee: (*Laughs*) Sorry. Maybe I say something, I understand a bit [I: okay] everything/[I: and] not everything, but a little bit as I say. (FL35, 10–17)

The first small indicator that something might be different than in the first triadic constellation is already shown in the first "okay" the interviewee utters in reaction to the interviewer. After his confirmation, the interpreter begins to translate—to which the interviewee, again, reacts using the German "Yes." The usual directionality is disabled from the beginning as the interviewee chooses to use German. After the interviewee and interpreter share a laugh, the interviewee turns to the interviewer and utilizes the prelude of the interview to articulate his position as an "understanding" contributor to the conversation. In introducing himself adequately he becomes an agent of (his own) translation. Even though he affirms clear limits of his linguistic capabilities, the fact that he speaks—no matter the exact words—holds positioning power. As Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann (2004) show in their approach, positioning elements are essential to understanding the narrative. The direct back and forth following the declaration of (semi-)independence clearly demonstrates the relevance of this notion.

Instances such as this show how one German statement can contextualize the interpreted narrations that follow. Once the language proficiency is established, the timing of German language initiatives is interesting: When are interviewees "stepping in"? Oftentimes, within this triadic constellation, the desire for verification and falsification motivates interviewees to step out of speaking solely Arabic:

> Interpreter: [*Several thousand currency*], yes, brought from Syria. They have also been used up. Yes.
>
> Interviewer: Okay. But the family was already there. Even in [nation state].
>
> Interviewee: Yes. With/together. Yes. (FL36, 251–255)

The interviewer has a question that is answered by the interviewee: Yes, his family accompanied him. This example illustrates the change in conversational directionality that accompanies the language proficiency presented by the interviewees. When a question or topic was expected to include vulnerability or complexity, answers were usually given in Arabic from the start; if details (e.g., of the flight route) had to be corrected or verified, the interviewees often chose to speak German. A simple nod can be enough to ensure the interviewer knows about the interviewee's understanding. Because with the language proficiency of the interpreted person, the concept of silence changes, too. When the interviewee understands a statement or question themselves, their silence can be a moment of confirmation, contemplation, or pause. In this case, silence (and its meaning) can be detached from the anticipation of the impending translation.

5.2.2. Differences of Directionality and What They Tell Us

Even these slight shifts within the interview are managed performatively. Because it is the interpreter's professional task to regulate the interview, it is necessary to focus on the interpreter and how they manage the interviewee's latent presence in "the interpreted." One result of these changes is that the interpreter can be "dropped out" of the conversation:

> Interviewer: Can you tell us again from this time how you came to this decision to stay in Germany and not to continue travelling?
>
> Interviewee: Okay.

Interpreter [ARABIC]

Interviewee: [ARABIC]

Interpreter: She understood. (*Laughs*)

Interviewer: Okay. I had the impression, too. (*Laughs*) (FL33, 171–176)

In this interaction, the interviewee reacts directly to the interviewer. Although the question—and subsequently, the answer—appears to be complex, the interviewee signals her will to speak. After she states her understanding using an innocuous "okay," the interpreter inserts his translation and corroborates the possibility of her *non*-understanding or distrust in her German capabilities. This brief exchange between interpreter and interviewee produces his approval: She (actually!) did understand. The interpreter laughs in reaction to his discovery and thereby signifies his incredulity. Following this interlude, the interviewer shares an important reference to performative, embodied communication as he states that he "had the impression." Aguilar and Guénette's (2021) stance on interpreting practices as performative, situated enactments is evident here. Whilst the translation serves the purpose of verification, the interviewer did not need the approval: He was able to somehow sense that the interviewee was able to follow. Both "listening" and "understanding" are elements of the highly performative endeavor that is the interpreted interview. The fact that the interviewer and interviewee communicated verbally without a mediator opens new contingencies as to how the (narrative) data will be co-constructed in the further course of the interview.

For the interpreter, the interviewee's language proficiency forces (or enables) them to take a step back and await their reactivation. If the interviewee speaks German, the interpreter is usually put on pause as their situational function is removed from immediacy. To showcase an example: After a German statement by the interviewee, the interpreter commented, "You understood what he said" (FL36, 40), and thus referenced his (acutely obsolete) task. In moments in which the interviewees show an emancipatory use of the German language, the interpreters can "disappear" from the interview as it will be transcribed. What they cannot disappear from, however, is the shared situation, the chair on which they sit, and the atmosphere they co-create. It is the interpreter's presence in the situatedness (Aguilar & Guénette, 2021) of the interview that signifies there is a gap to be bridged, even if the interviewee is trying to build a crossing for themselves. Three people sit in a room—and one of them personifies the difference between the two who wish to converse. To be "muted" in such a (functional) constellation must be managed performatively, too.

Interviews with research participants who were willing to use their still somewhat unsteady (German) voice differ fundamentally from the first triadic constellation: being able to use laughter as a powerful tool for creating a community or to find interactional alliances "across linguistic borders." The translation becomes more accessible and subject to interference and negotiation as the choreography of the interpreted interview expands in directionality.

5.3. (Interpreting in/Translating as) a Community

The collaborative translation seen in this triadic constellation is characterized above all by its multiformity. Translation loops can be found here, as well as processes that are based on a division of (translational) labor

rather than on the interpreters' sole responsibility. Like a musical composition, which uses various creative means to convey an atmosphere, interpreting in/translating as a creative community is a process in which a wide variety of creative means of interpreting are used. What distinguishes this triadic constellation from the last: Here, translation loops are used by choice if something important needs to be said in Arabic (because sometimes things can only be articulated in the language in which they were experienced, due to the social nature of language, as Sebald, 2019, points out). With increasing language proficiency—shown, for example, by statements such as "I understood everything" (FL10, 53)—these choices become more indicative of deliberate expression. To interpret (in) such an interview is not to enable a conversation otherwise impossible. Instead, conducting the interview with an interpreter fulfills the requirements of this meaningful communicative exchange. The interpreter acts as a supporter of the narration, not so much its facilitator. As the translation becomes a project of all participants, the gradual emancipation from the dependency and traditional role of interpreter is evident. Interpreting in/translating as a community means all forms of mediated and unmediated communication can be actualized, as seen here:

> Interpreter: And he told him, it is possible, to make an appointment, to conclude the contract.
>
> Interviewee: [ARABIC] I had hug/yes.
>
> Interpreter: He was very happy and very pleased.
>
> Interviewee: And I did cry [a little bit. (*laughs slightly*)]
>
> Interpreter: [And grateful.] (FL32, 438–444)

This excerpt shows how the elements of translation interweave. Interpreter and interviewer *co-narrate* a joyous experience, however: This co-narration does not involve a translation loop, but rather German fragments that are stitched together seamlessly, resulting in an integrated narration. A kind of common thread is woven through the individual pieces of the translation puzzle. None of the contributions by the interviewee or interpreter is meaningful by itself; only in combination do they align, and there the story emerges. Translation here is a collectively elaborated product that includes the interviewee himself, who, in this way, asserts the right to *voice* his own narrative. Interpreting takes an unusual shape here, as Arabic elements weave together with German expressions. Nevertheless, the interviewee begins in Arabic and thus constitutes a situation in which the interpreting is then shared between interviewee and interpreter. As the German proficiency allows only for limited stylistic choices, the interpreter embellishes the interviewee's answer.

5.3.1. Communicating via Echo

One characteristic of the collaborative translation is how echoing is used as a method of interactionally regulating the functioning interview. For that purpose, words or short phrases are recited by interviewee and interpreter alternatingly:

> Interviewee: Or [*gardening tools*], I don't know.

Interpreter: And [*gardening*] maybe [Arabic]

Interviewee: [*Gardening tools*].

Interviewer: [*Gardening tools*].

Interpreter: [ARABIC]

Interviewee: [*Gardening tools*].

Interpreter: [*Gardening equipment*]?

Interviewee: [*Gardening tools*] and/or

Interpreter: [ARABIC] [*Gardening equipment*], no?

Interviewer: Yes, okay. O.k. O.k., if you look into the future now,…how do you imagine your future? (FL10, 1221–1231)

The interviewer is pumping the brakes and puts an end to the cycle of echoing repetition. This pattern is prominent in the data and reveals the ritualistic nature of ensuring that something was understood and interpreted correctly. Without an obvious change in the repeated words, the ritual appears to be relevant for the relationship between interpreter and interviewee: by providing the interpreter with an opportunity to maintain (the performance of) his role and function in the interview, coming back to Goffman (1959), as he describes that the image and role of an individual are a collaborative effort. In the translation, this mode of corroborating each other offers a way to not disappear from the immediacy of the interview:

Interviewee: [*Number*] square meters, with kitchen and bathroom.

Interpreter: [*Number*] square meters with kitchen and bathroom. Small room. (FL32, 381–382)

As shown in this excerpt, additional categorizations (such as "small room") and ornamentals can be added to the statement of the interviewee. Here, the interpreter shows his approval of the interviewee's language proficiency by not correcting it, whilst still exerting his "task" of contextualizing knowledge.

5.3.2. I, You, Me—Community?

One of the interpreting strategies is the use of the first person. Whilst this mode of interpreting is prominent in all three triadic constellations, interpreting in/translating as a community brings its own promises and challenges to this strategy: With the interviewee being able to understand the translation, using the "I" can create closeness and the feeling of catching oneself in the translation. Especially for interpreting short stories and dense narrations, the transmission of the "I" lets the interpreter step back, behind the person they are translating for. This motion of intentionally shifting into the first person is seen here:

> Interpreter: He told this decision-maker: "If you don't want me here in Germany, then please give me back my documents so that I can go back to Syria and die there." (FL08, 1018–2020)

This sentence reveals a pivotal story in the life of the interviewee. Recognizing the relevance of the moment, the interpreter proceeds to switch from the third to the first person to quote the interviewees' statement. In line with Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann (2004), he considers positionality as he interprets, knowing of the significance of letting the interpreted person shine through and offer up the closest version to Schütze (1983) goal of reproducing the layered experience. In this interpreted story, the shift in perspective signifies the "honing in on" that is seen in the lexical, exact translation. In the subtlety of this shift, the complexities of managing the performativity of interpreting a person with significant language proficiency are demonstrated. A shift this subtle demonstrates how complex it is to interpret (for) a person who can speak for themself.

Nevertheless, while taking on the interpreted person's "I" brings benefits, it also heightens the potential for confusing who is speaking in the interpreter's statements. Comments such as, "He also said that, not that that would have been I" (FL10, Z. 1245–1252), illustrate that using the first person in a constellation in which the interpreted person can wield their own "I," can blur the lines between the two person(a)s. For the interview, this fluid dynamic can challenge the reconstruction of (narrative) identity and of speaker positionality. However, being able to shift gears because the interviewee understands and speaks German also means that "true" community can be created in moments such as this:

> Interviewer: Yes. Shawarma doesn't taste similar to Döner?
>
> Interviewee: (*Laughs*)
>
> Interviewer: I only know it [Interpreter: no] from the outside. (*Laughs*)
>
> Interpreter: (*Laughs*) It does taste different.
>
> Interviewee: Yes, if you eat shawarma, you can't eat kebab again.
>
> Interviewer: Ah, okay, okay, [Interpreter: (*Laughs*)] okay. Once shawarma, always shawarma.
>
> Interviewee: Yes. (*Laughs*) (FL34, 1553–1563)

At first glance, this interaction may seem irrelevant to the researcher as the participants are chatting about food. But the fact that they are capable of sharing this moment, to go beyond in every sense, makes visible the power of language proficiency. Beyond any path dependency, scheduled topic, positioning of self and other, in this moment of talking about food, a connection between all three participants can be observed. As the researcher states that he "knows only from the outside," he shows his interest in learning about a culinary specialty. In doing so, he not only recognizes the difference in cultural knowledge and meaning of *shawarma* as something he is unfamiliar with (Sebald, 2019), but he also appreciates it. Srubar (2009) testament to the uncertainty that lies in any translation and may never be fully resolved, finds a beautiful twist: because, beyond the (interpreted) depiction of facts, this situation illustrates how community can be found or created on the grounds of difference.

6. Conclusion

This article examined the question of how the language proficiency of research participants influences the interactional dynamic of the interpreted interview. Understanding the complexity of the interpreted narrative interview is key to grasping how the need for translation challenges its methodological premises. The interpreted narrative interview was therefore introduced as a social interaction in which the three participants (interviewer, interviewee, and interpreter) co-construct narrative data. How they co-create said narrative data is shaped by the "situatedness and performativity" (Aguilar & Guénette, 2021) of experiencing the interview together. Understanding the requirements and goals of an interpreted narrative interview served as a foundation for the second step, which discussed the methodical concept that aimed to manage the inaccessibility of the translation in a productive way. The empirical findings of the study then provided insight into what happens in the face of varying German language proficiency: when the research participants partly act as their own agents of translation and participate in how they and their stories are interpreted. Three distinct triadic constellations were displayed: from the communicative facilitation in which the interpreter truly enables a translation scenario, to the enabled facilitation as a constellation in which the interviewee speaks just enough German to verify, falsify, check the interpreted, and insert themselves using (mostly) Arabic. The last constellation elaborates on the interactional consequences of interviewees who appear as co-authors of the translation. Interpreting in/translating as a community relies on the interpreter to support, corroborate, and interpret select passages. Interpreting is at times utilized, at times adapted to collaboration, and at times intentionally overlooked; yet, even when it seems absent, the process of continuous translation persists, as seen in the performative practice of passages that appeared to be entirely monolingual.

In understanding that research subjects are, in fact, as diverse as researchers are, an opportunity for reflection appears: The wary social scientist has the chance to forgo latent assumptions about "non-understanding" interviewees that deeply influence the scientific conceptualization of the data collection and interpretation, and thus, the knowledge created. It is imperative to perceive interviewees—and more specifically: refugees—as linguistically diverse individuals who are not perpetually removed from learning the language they encounter daily. This perspective can foster a methodological understanding of the interpreted interview that centers performativity, interactivity, and the power of the (rising or raised) voice. Future research into the topic could focus more on the embodied dimension of meaning-making as a performative endeavor and examine further how the (in)accessibility of translation is managed in other contexts (of qualitative social science), for example, by conducting ethnographic observations. A potential research trajectory could involve reflecting on the contradictory tendencies in the interpreted interview, as discussed by Holzinger and Draxl (2024).

Acknowledgments

This article is based on the author's master's thesis, which she submitted to the Institute of Sociology at Friedrich-Alexander University in 2020 to obtain her MA in sociology. Since this submission, the author has continued to work on translation processes in qualitative social research as part of her doctoral thesis.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data used for this article is highly sensitive and solely accessible by applying for a position as an external guest researcher. Access to data is exclusively possible via the Institute for Employment Research in Nuremberg, Germany. Kindly contact the author or the IAB for more information on the process.

LLMs Disclosure

No LLMs were used in the writing of this article.

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