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Multilingual Biographical Interviews With Migrated Young People: Translation Practices, Power Relations, and Epistemic Equality

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Abstract

Global migration and the resulting multilingual societies call for in-depth reflection in social science research. In particular, multilingual and interpreter-facilitated interviews raise methodological questions regarding translation practices and research interactions. This article explores the methodological implications of multilingualism in interview-based research, with a focus on power relations. It is based on empirical data from a recent study of migrated youth in state care. In this study, a multi-perspective research approach is adopted, with narrative-biographical interviews serving as one of the research methods. This method positions participants as experts in their own life experiences, with the potential to contrast the multiple societal deficit ascriptions that migrant youth in state care experience in everyday life at the intersection of social categories. To observe and understand the social practices that emerge from the study's design, the article analyses the first interview undertaken. The findings indicate how the different roles and relations of power, dependency, and agency were exercised in the analysed case, from initial access to the field and contact with the interviewee, to the interview situation itself. The results emphasise the importance of researchers engaging in ongoing, iterative reflexivity throughout the multilingual research process, particularly when working with participants in marginalised social positions. The article concludes with a call for systematic empirical engagement with multilingual research practices and deeper methodological sensitivity to the complexities of language, power, and epistemic equality in qualitative research.

Keywords

biography; epistemic equality; interview; migration; multilingual; narration; power; translation; youth

1. Introduction

Global migration has led to increasingly multilingual societies, challenging researchers to conduct qualitative interview-based studies across different languages. This situation calls for multilingual research approaches that enable inclusive, ethically grounded, and context-sensitive knowledge production, especially when working with marginalised migrant groups. The involvement of interpreters then creates new situations in interviews and their analysis. Starting from well-established methodologies in interview-based qualitative research, the research process is further challenged by additional interactions among the interpreter, interviewee, and researcher (Chiumento et al., 2018; Egilsson et al., 2022; Holzinger & Draxl, 2024; Williamson et al., 2011). This is particularly important in narrative interviews, where the precise wording of questions is crucial for creating narratives and where data are analysed verbatim (Fersch, 2013; Schütze, 1983). Given that the interpreter always adds their own interpretations of what has been said, a new constellation of "triple subjectivity" arises (Temple & Edwards, 2002). This triple subjectivity has not yet been systematically explored nor empirically researched. While interpreter-facilitated interviews are increasingly common in multilingual contexts, empirical studies investigating the concrete dynamics of the resulting triadic interview situations remain scarce, especially those involving young people and focusing on power asymmetries. The present article thus explores the consequences of multilingualism in interview-based research, focusing on interpreter-facilitated interviews, in which data are produced through interactions among three rather than two participants. The analysis is informed by empirical data from a recent research project on young migrants in state care.

Section two reviews the literature, identifying key debates on multilingual research and power relations in migration research. In section three, we introduce our ongoing, third-party-funded project that aims to reconstruct educational biographies of migrant and refugee youths who receive child and youth care services. For this project, we designed a research process that involves translation in all phases from field work to publishing results and implements reflexivity to question existing power relations, particularly in the dimensions of migration/ethnicity, gender, generational order, and their intersections. In section four, the first field experiences involving an interpreted narrative-biographical interview with a young person are analysed in a case study, following the research process from field access to the interview situation. Section five synthesises the findings on positionalities and dynamics in the interview setting, answering the question of how the initial considerations found expression in practice. Section six discusses the results within the power and hierarchy theoretical framework introduced in section two and fosters a reflexive approach towards multilingualism in qualitative interview research that systematically considers power relations and epistemic equality. The approach emphasises the importance of researchers engaging in ongoing, iterative reflexivity throughout the multilingual research process, particularly when working with participants in marginalised social positions, such as young migrants in state care. The article concludes with a call for systematic empirical engagement with multilingual research practices and a deeper methodological sensitivity to the complexities of language, power, and epistemic equality in qualitative research.

2. Power in Multilingual and Interpreter-Facilitated Research

Although multilingual research has long been practised, it remained largely methodologically unreflected and invisible until the last two decades, when scholarly attention to the implications and consequences of multilingual and cross-language research increased (MacKenzie, 2016, p. 168; Nasri et al., 2020; Uçan, 2023).

This growing body of literature on cross- and multilingual research has shed light on a wide range of methodological, ethical, epistemic, and practical challenges across different stages of the research process. The following section builds on these debates by first exploring multilingual research in migration studies and discussing its relevance. It then examines interpreter-facilitated interviews as one of the most prominent practices of multilingual qualitative research, tracing methodological and epistemic challenges throughout the research process.

From a critical social science perspective, research cannot be conceived as being detached from social structures. Instead, it is inherently embedded in them and shaped by intersecting power relations (Bourdieu, 1975), which is particularly evident in the field of migration studies from a postcolonial perspective. While knowledge production predominantly takes place in the Global North, (forced) migration occurs in and from the Global South (Bradley, 2007; Chimni, 1998; Shivakoti & Milner, 2022). At the same time, migrating people, especially from the Global South to the Global North, often face precarious living conditions (for an overview see Clark-Kazak, 2021, pp. 126–127), their voices and stories being pushed to the margins (Smith, 2008; Zanker, 2023). Consequently, migration research is pre-structured by asymmetrical relations and epistemic inequalities.

A key dimension of these inequalities is language, which is not a neutral medium but deeply entangled with power relations and "the construction of orders of difference" (Dirim et al., 2018, p. 51, translated by the authors; see also Rohde-Abuba & Konz, 2025, p. 209). It functions as a resource that establishes and reproduces social hierarchies. The German context illustrates this dynamic: German language fluency is regarded as a crucial prerequisite for educational opportunity and social participation, while other linguistic resources, such as first or additional foreign languages, are rarely acknowledged (Uçan, 2019, pp. 116–118). Hierarchies emerge even within the same language: Written language tends to be privileged over oral language, more elaborate varieties over everyday expressions, and standard forms over dialects or non-standard varieties (Havlin, 2022, pp. 7–9). Postcolonial notions of language and power are significant not only in relations between languages and within languages, but also in translation (Bassnett, 2017).

Against this backdrop, multilingual research requires critical reflection on language as a central medium of social power relations and, at the same time, entails methodological and epistemic challenges. Nevertheless, the need for such research (and its reflection) is growing, as multilingual societies are becoming increasingly prevalent due to increased global migration (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025).

A variety of strategies for managing multi- and cross-lingual research across different research phases have already been developed, with advantages and disadvantages. In some cases, researchers conduct interviews in a language they share with participants (Al-Amer et al., 2016; Motzek-Öz, 2017; Uçan, 2019), but this often restricts the diversity of the sample. Another strategy is to select a common lingua franca (Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2009; Tuider, 2009), although this might limit participants' ability to fully express their views. Alternatively, interviews might be conducted in the researcher's language, potentially silencing or distorting participants' voices.

A common strategy, with its own complex implications, is the use of interpreters, whose role can range from a narrowly defined technical role to a more collaborative, co-researcher position, and their engagement might extend from isolated tasks at a specific point of the research to conducting independent fieldwork and

being involved in data collection and analysis (Bergen, 2018). Irrespective of the extent of the interpreter's involvement, they influence the knowledge production and can thus be seen as co-constructors (Tempes & Rumpel, 2022, p. 16). This results in several challenges and tasks in the research process.

One of the first tasks is selecting and training the interpreter. The more active their role is conceptualised, the more training and preparatory work is required. For example, this includes key informant interviews on the interpreter's positionality or training in qualitative research, especially in relation to conceptual and cultural frameworks (Lauterbach, 2014; Temple & Edwards, 2002; for an overview, see Brandmaier, 2025). In addition, careful attention must be paid to their qualification (Nasri et al., 2020; Squires, 2009) and socio-cultural matching between the researcher and interpreter, for instance, regarding social position, gender or ethnicity, as these factors can foster trust and create more conducive interview settings (Chiumento et al., 2018; Nasri et al., 2020, p. 17). Importantly, trust cannot be assumed solely based on shared language; rather, sensitivity to multiple social markers is necessary (Edwards, 2013; Havlin, 2022, pp. 17–18).

A second set of challenges arises during the interview itself, where much of the literature focuses on translation accuracy. This aspect is particularly relevant when the original language of the interview is not preserved and transcribed, and only the interpreter's translation is available for subsequent analysis (Brandmaier, 2025). While guidelines have been developed to improve translation quality (Squires, 2009), empirical studies show that interpreters might influence interview content in various ways, including by altering questions, inferring and expressing their own impressions of participants, or navigating sensitive topics without involving the interviewer (Egilsson et al., 2022). Moreover, inconsistencies across interpreters highlight the inherently subjective nature of translation and its impact on data production (MacKenzie, 2016).

However, challenges related to interpreter involvement extend beyond communication accuracy. Since interview situations are embedded in social structures, interpreters also shape their social dynamics. Their presence can affect the interview situation, e.g., eye contact between participants, seating arrangements, or the flow of narration. Interpreter-facilitated interviews can also cause tensions and contradictions, including the question of achieving a balance between a comprehensible translation during the interview that allows for integrability of further communication and the transparency of ambiguities and details, as well as the role of the interpreter and their (in)visibility (Holzinger & Draxl, 2024). Temple and Edwards (2002, p. 6) propose the concept of "triple subjectivity" in the interview to refer to the additional influence of the interpreters' own assumptions and concerns.

Taken together, the challenges of conducting multilingual interviews and the implications of interpreter involvement demonstrate that such encounters entail linguistic challenges beyond mere understanding. Instead, they are shaped by postcolonial constellations of positionality and the entanglement of language and power. While some contributions have illuminated how power relations surface in interpreter-facilitated interviews (Edwards, 2013; Tempes & Rumpel, 2022), systematic analyses of how these dynamics unfold in practice remain scarce, particularly when intersectional power relations are considered. Although migration research has increasingly acknowledged the interplay among categories such as gender, ethnicity, class, and age (Kim, 2024, pp. 1687–1688), studies that address the specific situation of young migrants in multilingual research remain under-represented. Empirical evidence shows that, from an early age, children use their

multilingual skills competently to communicate (Rohde-Abuba & Konz, 2025). However, there is a lack of empirically grounded studies on the enactment of power in research situations. The present article addresses this gap by empirically examining interpreter-facilitated interviews, shifting the focus from abstract reflections to the analysis of actual research practices.

3. Research Design

This article draws on interview data from the Integration Through Education for Migrant and Refugee Youths in State Care research project, which aims to investigate the educational conditions and experiences of migrant and refugee youth in state care in a German city. The study was designed with a multi-perspective approach, including different actors relevant to education. It comprises five subprojects, focusing on public authorities and administration (a), migrant and refugee youths' biographies (b), schools (c), professionals and volunteers in extracurricular education and social work (d), and coordination and synthesis (e). The project design responds to the intersecting layers of power dynamics and hierarchies shaping migration research (e.g., Bartsch et al., 2019; Castro Varela, 2018; Niedrig & Seukwa, 2010) through its specific methodology. The multi-perspective approach facilitates the inclusion of diverse positions and the exploration of power asymmetries not only between educators and those to be educated, but also among different educational professions, particularly in schools and social work.

Power relations are particularly prevalent in the research process of the second subproject, which involves interviewing migrant youths. As young people, "non-Germans" and persons in state care, they are subjected to multiple hierarchies, dependencies, and forms of marginalisation. For instance, hierarchies emerge from residence status, nationality, living conditions, language, and racism (for an overview, see Clark-Kazak, 2021). As young people, they are subjected to power relations in the generational order (Alanen, 2009). Within educational settings, particularly in schools, hierarchies are structured by differentiation based on ethnicity, associated deficit attributions, and institutional discrimination (Gomolla & Radtke, 2009; Hummrich, 2022), with the effect of disadvantages in school achievement (Hofherr, 2020). Young people in state care face precarious living conditions (Fendrich et al., 2023) and again disadvantages in school achievement (Salzburger & Mraß, 2022; Siebholz, 2023). The intersection of these categories leads to a multiplication of deficit constructions in the societal addressing of young migrant people in state care—a dynamic that must be actively addressed within the research methodology—and a highly marginalised position that has received limited attention.

To address these multiple power relations in the research encounter, we implemented narrative-biographical interviews (Schütze, 1983). This method positions the interviewee as an expert on their own life experiences, giving them control over the relevance and content of the narratives and challenging deficit-oriented perspectives. Narrative approaches in migration research have been shown to counterbalance "over-generalized notions of 'the refugee experience'" (Eastmond, 2007, p. 249), diversify knowledge about migrant biographies, and bring voices into public awareness that are otherwise marginalised and silenced (Eastmond, 2007).

Recognising that language shapes interview dynamics, particularly in narrative methods where precise wording matters, we offer professional interpretation services to enable people who speak languages not spoken by the researchers to participate. It is essential to ensure that participants are entirely able to express

themselves and avoid linguistic exclusion, mitigating power hierarchies related to language proficiency. At the same time, it is important to leave the choice of the interview language to the interviewee. As interpreters are mostly not trained in social sciences, preparatory meetings are held to explain the method and its underlying research attitude and discuss possible implications for interpretation practices. Interviews are audio-recorded, transcribed in the original languages, and the non-German parts translated into German. For the project in general, professional translation services will be acquired for these tasks; for the first interview, which forms the basis of this article, a research assistant whose first language is the interview language could be hired for transcription. A professional service provided translation. The need for these language mediation services was considered at the time of the funding application and is encompassed by the project's overall financing.

Besides considerations regarding power asymmetries and positionalities, the research project faces further ethical issues already considered in migration research (Clark-Kazak, 2021). Accordingly, the project received approval from the Institutional Ethics Board of the Chemnitz University of Technology. Voluntary informed consent is obtained not only by written forms that are translated into the participants' and their parents' spoken languages but also by explaining the project and data use in informative discussions with the participants and their caregivers. Due to the participants' high vulnerability regarding their residency permits and social positions, data protection and anonymisation are given special attention.

The project's data analysis will follow the documentary method of interpretation (Bohnsack et al., 2013) to reconstruct participants' implicit, incorporated, and action-guiding knowledge as documented in their narrated life stories. Particular focus is given to habitual attitudes towards educational processes and institutions.

While the overall project was carefully planned with a reflexive awareness of structural hierarchies and dependencies, this article shifts the focus to what happens in practice in the interview setting. Rather than remaining at a conceptual level, an open ethnographic research attitude is adopted to closely examine interview interactions. The following section presents findings from the first interpreter-facilitated interview conducted in our recently launched project. Analysing this first case in depth allows for the reconstruction of the practices and power relations involved in fieldwork, developing a deeper understanding of researchers' entanglement in these practices. Thereby, we aim to illuminate how theoretical sensitising and methodological decisions—however well-intentioned—play out in practice, and how they may both challenge and reproduce existing hierarchies.

4. Findings

To examine how preparations manifested in practice, we analysed the first interpreter-facilitated interview from the project. The 17-year-old interviewee Roza Gûl (all personal and location-related data have been pseudonymised) had resided in Germany for one and a half years. The interview was conducted by a native German female researcher, with support from a professional male interpreter who shared the interviewee's regional origin. He was recommended and engaged by a translation agency based on his experience in therapeutic interactions, which have similar underlying assumptions to narrative interviews. This interpreter was chosen primarily for his experience and regional origin, rather than for factors such as gender or religion, which were deemed less significant. Nevertheless, emphasis was placed on obtaining the interviewee's consent to the chosen interpreter, especially regarding gender.

The interview was facilitated by two staff members of the care organisation and supported by an interpreter. Subsequently, it was transcribed into the original languages, Arabic and German. The Arabic parts were translated into German by professionals. A total of 11 persons were involved in this complex process, resulting in the final transcript. For this article, selected transcript passages were translated from German into English to facilitate readers' understanding. Given the focus on interaction rather than a verbatim analysis, we do not provide the original transcripts for reasons of scope.

This section introduces material from the project's first case, which we reflect on at this early stage with particular attention to the power dimensions of multilingual practice. The central question concerns the allocation of speaking opportunities, the establishment of expert roles, and the modes of production and distribution of power and knowledge in observable practices before and during the interview. In analysis, situations of field entry and the establishment of a relationship with the interviewee have already prompted us to reflect further on multilingual practices and power relations in our research and in the field (4.1). Following the field process, we then focused on language negotiation before the interview (4.2) and multilingual practices during the interview (4.3).

4.1. Field Access: The Powerful Role of Generational Order and Language

Contact with the interviewee, Roza, was arranged via the organisation that looked after her, specifically one German-speaking and one also Arabic-speaking carer. Communication was thus initially mediated when approaching the young person and obtaining her consent to participate in the interview. The first direct but still mediated contact was a phone call between one of the two researchers and the participant, with the Arabic-speaking carer present on her side. Access to the field thus took place within the framework of a generationally ordered relationship, namely the caring relationship between the carer and the young person. In this case, the language aspect represents an additional dependency, but in the foreground is the dependency of field access on the support of the generational others. Notably, both researchers addressed Roza by her first name, whereas they addressed the carers and the interpreter by their last names. We interpret this difference in how people were addressed as an expression of, and a practice in, generational ordering. The researchers became involved in this process while conducting their fieldwork.

Up to this point, the researchers had been dependent on the carers to approach the young person. First, this was because the carers were the adults in the care situation, responsible for and trusted by Roza. Second, a German- and Arabic-speaking carer enabled cross-lingual communication between the young person and the researchers. It thus follows that access to young people with migration experience is mediated by language use and the care situation. In both dimensions, the carers were in a powerful position.

The effects of this only became clear after the interview: It had not previously been mentioned that the interviewee's first language was not Arabic but another language (not disclosed for anonymisation reasons), which is a minoritised language in the respective nation state. The two caregivers had referred Roza to us as someone with whom we could conduct an interview in Arabic. Given that Arabic was the common language between the carer and the interviewee, it was unquestionable to us that the interview could be conducted in this language. The researchers unconsciously attributed knowledge of the interviewee's first language to the adult caregivers and accepted their approach to communicating the research interest to the interviewee. Consequently, we lacked knowledge of the interviewee's de facto first language, which prevented us from

providing an interpreter in that language. Having this knowledge would have been essential for understanding and addressing the dominance of another language over the interviewee's first language, which she has experienced repeatedly in her life.

Until now, the focus has been on the preparatory work involved in initiating the concrete interview situation, which we assumed requires considerable conceptual and practical effort. In the analysed situation, we can identify practices through which the researchers navigated access to the interviewee in the interplay between generational order and language. As can be seen, researchers working with young people in multilingual settings inevitably become involved in both generational and language-related social practices in the field when seeking to gain access to young people and obtain informed consent from them and their guardians.

4.2. Before the Interview: Implicit Language Use and Explicit Decision-Making

Next, we analyse the situation in which the interviewee and one of the researchers, serving as the interviewer, met in person before the interview began. Several situations of implicit and explicit language choice for communication can be found there.

The first encounter took place when Roza stepped through the door of the organisation's facilities, where the interviewer had arrived shortly before:

> And then the doorbell rang. Mrs Burkhardt answered it, and I followed her into the hallway, where she had already opened the front door. Mrs Burkhardt disappeared into the counselling room. I stopped in the corridor at the door. Roza came up the stairs and in through the door. I said, "Hello, are you Roza?" to which she nodded. I said that I was Susanne Siebholz and that I was going to do the interview with her. Mrs Burkhardt came back into the hallway and was immediately in conversation with Roza, and we moved back into the kitchen. (Siebholz, field notes on the interview situation with Roza, 2025)

The initial communication in the greeting situation took place in German. The first choice of language was initiated by the German interviewer, followed by a non-verbal response from the interviewee. Mrs Burkhardt, the carer, and the interviewee also used German, which seemed taken for granted and apparently already established. Throughout the situation, German was established as the common language of communication, and all tacitly accepted it.

The first explicit thematisation of languages occurred when the interviewee, the carer, and the interviewer referred to two different versions of the participant information:

> Roza took a seat on the other side of the table. Mrs Burkhardt sat down next to her. We talked about the participant information together. I gave Roza the Arabic translation and said that Mrs Yasemin Haddad had already gone through the German version with her, which she confirmed. Mrs Burkhardt gave me the version for the underage participants, which Roza had signed herself. (Siebholz, field notes on the interview situation with Roza, 2025)

Here, Arabic is used for the first time, namely as the document language, while the conversation continues in the same language as before. An irritation arises from the interviewer's handing over the Arabic translation to Roza, despite her assumption that Roza is already familiar with the participant information. The status or relevance of this document remains unclear, especially since, as it turns out shortly afterwards, Roza had already signed the German version, which the carer, Mrs Haddad, had previously explained to her. Roza's signature functions as a sign of consent, meaning that she had already accepted the German version, along with the carer's explanation, as an appropriate procedure. Consequently, the Arabic version appears unnecessary, thereby suggesting that the document primarily holds symbolic value in this situation. However, it allows reading the Arabic version later, which is important for research ethics, as the content includes the option to withdraw consent. Roza is addressed here as a competent reader of the Arabic language.

Shortly after the interpreter's arrival, the interviewer expands on this by also ascribing writing skills:

> Mr Saleh came in, greeted everyone present and sat down at the head of the table. He took out his notebook. I wrote Roza's name down on my interview manual and asked her to write her name in Arabic next to it. Mr Saleh started translating. (Siebholz, field notes on the interview situation with Roza, 2025)

First, Arabic is once again explicitly thematised with the request to write one's own name. Second, the interpreter uses it as a spoken language for the first time in this situation, which appears to be an unquestioned and self-understood practice. Like the interviewer, the interpreter also addresses Roza as someone familiar with Arabic.

The language for the interview subsequently becomes the subject of a decision-making process by Roza:

> Roza said something in Arabic, which Mr Saleh translated for me: She would like to do the interview in German. I replied that this was absolutely fine with me, that it was up to her and that Mr Saleh would be happy to interpret on "stand-by," i.e., simply be there if she wanted to say something in Arabic. I addressed the points that we had prepared for the preliminary conversation in the interview manual, as well as, once more, the anonymisation. When I had finished, I asked Mrs Burkhardt to go outside, which she did. Mr Saleh translated for me that Roza had decided to do the interview in Arabic after all. I briefly confirmed this with "ok." (Siebholz, field notes on the interview situation with Roza, 2025)

The interviewee's initial decision subjects the bilingualism in the situation to scrutiny, which emerged when the interpreter joined and began interpreting. The interviewer supports this decision and explicitly acknowledges the interviewee's decision-making authority, while upholding interpreting as a background option. On the one hand, there is an explicit addressing of the (future) use of the language by first "switching" the interpreter "off" and then "on" again, as a co-production of the interviewee and the interviewer. On the other hand, an implicit use of language can be observed concurrently, as Roza utilises Arabic for the first time in the conversation, initially to inform those present of her preference for German, and subsequently, changing her mind, for Arabic as the interview language. The motivation behind Roza's decision and its subsequent revision remains unknown; nevertheless, it can be observed that Roza has taken the initiative to shape the situation, thereby displaying agency, as supported by the interviewer.

4.3. During the Interview: Multilingualism in Practice

Up to this point, the discussion has focused on observations regarding the speaking and power positions in the context of field access and interview preparation, as well as the conversation preceding the interview. Following the same questions, the subsequent section will focus on the various social practices during the interview, in which multilingualism and language-related negotiations played a role.

4.3.1. Establishing an Interpreted Interview Situation

It is interesting to observe the actual realisation of the chosen consecutive interpreting mode at the beginning of the interview. After the stimulus was provided and the interviewee began narrating, the interpreter opted to translate in larger units, a conscious decision that followed the preparatory phase and briefing. This decision was taken in a tension between two factors: the need for an exact understanding in the interview (in consecutive interpreting mode, the literalness principle is no longer possible with larger units) and the need to allow space for the interviewee's narrative in the sense of the interview approach (as few interruptions as possible). In relation to the latter, early analyses indicate that a long initial narrative was achieved as intended.

The observable agency in the triangle situation is as follows: First, the interpreter allows the situation to unfold; second, the interviewer aligns with it; and third, Roza seizes the opportunity to speak but actively pauses for interpretation, thereby allowing the interviewer to understand her. This demonstrates the complex interplay in a multilingual narrative interview setting. In this case, the absence of any explicit mention of the distribution of roles, etc., in the interview situation is noteworthy. The self-flowing nature of communication suggests that all participants were adequately skilled to successfully navigate the complexity and shared a tacit knowledge about multilingual speaking situations. For the interviewer and the interpreter, the situation was preceded by explicit preparation, whereas the interviewee's proficiency in communicating using language mediation and in telling her life story was a competence derived from her everyday life experience. This interview is notable for the interviewee's active engagement in the interpretation process, a quality that is further emphasised as the interview progresses. She determined the timing of translation and repeatedly validated the translations. To summarise, the observation reveals the participants' collaborative production of the interpreting mode, which, in this instance, unfolds spontaneously and yields an outcome that aligns with the interview concept. However, it also elucidates the potential "breaking points" that might emerge in other interview contexts where participants may be less prepared or experienced.

4.3.2. Use of the Interviewee's Own Multilingualism

Another relevant aspect of the multilingual interview situation is the interviewee's use of language resources. The underlying phenomenon has been referred to in the literature as "code-switching" or "code-mixing," terms that denote the alternation between distinct languages or language varieties (Uçan, 2020). In the context of multilingualism, the term "translanguaging" describes a speaker's use of their full linguistic and semiotic repertoire in a unified manner (Uçan, 2020). This raises the question of where and how the interviewee used her language repertoire during the interview.

The interview excerpts follow a transcription system indicating paralinguistic and interactional features (see Table 1).

Table 1. Transcription guideline.

Note	All words are written in lowercase. Punctuation is only used for intonation.
.	Strongly falling intonation
;	Slightly falling intonation
?	Strongly rising intonation
,	Slightly rising intonation
no	Emphasis on a word or syllable
ma-	Word interruption
yeees	Lengthening (the more letters, the more lengthening)
(teacher)	Uncertainty in understanding a word when transcribing
yes=yes	Spoken in quick succession
(.) or (3)	Short or longer pause (seconds)
later [spoken in a hoarse voice]	Vocal or linguistic peculiarities (for the duration of the italicization)
[city], [Arabic:]	Anonymisation; spoken language other than German
//Interviewee: yes//	Short statement with an overlap of speakers

For the initial narrative, Roza used Arabic, as she had explicitly decided beforehand. In the further course of the interview, she used Arabic, German, and some single words in English.

From the onset of the follow-up questions, a recurring finding was that the interviewee would directly respond to the interviewer's question, thereby skipping the translation:

Interviewer: and=and which other subjects do (.) you have? you have german (.) social learning computer learning,

Interviewee: yes only this;

Interviewer: and you have also said (.) ma-=maths and (.) english;

Interviewee: nnnno

Interpreter: these are the favourite-

Interviewee: (we learn) not now, but (.) later then, but not now=now only learning for german,

Interviewer: ahh

Interviewee: yes; [Arabic:] i am now preparing for school; but there are times when we are in class then the teacher teaches us stuff; a little bit of math, a little bit of physics and also chemistry.

Roza responds in German to the interviewer's questions about her academic subjects, enabling the interviewer to understand her responses without an interpreter. The interpreter's suggestion is ignored. Roza then switches to Arabic to provide a more detailed explanation of the school situation. The content of her statements in Arabic is equivalent to her previous statements in German, yet they serve to further

elaborate on them. It is evident that the Arabic expression is more fluid and more complex. This suggests that she has attained the limits of her capacity to express herself in German. The subsequent transition to Arabic for her further remarks is seamless.

A further finding relates to interview passages where Roza verifies with the interpreter in Arabic to ensure she has understood correctly before answering:

> Interviewer: so um just remember (.) the=the first day; when you came to school (.) in [city] tell me how it (.) [breathing] how it was how it went on.
>
> Interviewee: [Arabic:] how it was on the first day of school?
>
> Interpreter: [Arabic:] okay
>
> Interviewee: yes the first time, when i went i was go with alex, we were go together i went with alex

Roza follows up in Arabic on the interviewer's German question, which was indirectly formulated. She repeats it as a direct question and in condensed form, to which the interpreter provides a brief confirmation. Roza comprehends the question in German but seeks validation from the interpreter. The interpretation is not superfluous, but its scope is diminished, and its meaning is transformed when Roza uses it to validate her own understanding. It is apparent that Roza is less dependent on the interpreter than the interviewer. She utilises her direct understanding of the interviewer to substitute for interpretation, requesting brief reassurances or even omitting the interpreter altogether. This can be read as a shortcut strategy using her linguistic repertoire in two languages. In this instance, the interviewee once again exercises active control over the interview situation, metaphorically putting the interpreter into an "energy-saving mode."

It is finally noteworthy that the question is then answered in German. The subject is a situation that she experienced after arriving in Germany, which raises the question of the potential relevance of the linguistic context of this biographical experience for the language in which it is memorised (Zwengel, 2013).

In summary, following the initial narrative delivered by Roza in Arabic, three recurring phenomena have been identified. First, in the first follow-up questions, Roza uses German repeatedly and responds directly to the interviewer's questions in German. Second, Roza provides direct responses in Arabic to the interviewer's German questions, bypassing interpretation. Third, for some of the questions, she checks back with the interpreter in Arabic to ensure she has understood them correctly.

In conclusion, the interviewee performs a variety of practices involving the two languages, which are interpreted during the interview. In doing so, she actively employs her own and the other participants' linguistic repertoire to express herself. It is paramount to recognise that, in these practices, the interpreter's presence is pivotal to ensuring mutual understanding, regardless of the language used. His role is to enable the interviewee to seamlessly alternate between languages. This underscores the interpreter's significance as a crucial prerequisite for a language-open environment.

4.3.3. Offering Interpretation and Wording

Another phenomenon we observed in our material is the interpreter's meaning-making. He not only translates what Roza said but also offers wording, making this transparent:

Interviewee: [Arabic:] we had a lot of difficulties because the school was located at another place where we didn't grow up; and the language is also a little bit different it was not like people were making fun of us but the other thing

Interpreter: [Arabic:] i understand it; that means they bullied you *mobbing* [he uses the English word]

Interviewee: [Arabic:] exactly yes (3)

Interpreter: um as already mentioned we went=to=school [breathing] nevertheless it was difficult there because //Interviewer: hm// it is another place is another school a different language a different dialect respectively //Interviewer: mhm// and the other students didn't (.) treat us well bullied us respectively //Interviewer: hm-hm// she did noot know the word a-

Interviewer: hm-hm (2) you added this //Interpreter: exactly// so to say

Interpreter: um so th-that's what i understood how she formulated it (.) //Interviewer: hm-hm// so she cou-could that word she didn't come up with the word //Interviewer: hm-hm// and there i said do you mean this by that; and she said yes;

At this point in the interview, Roza describes a situation but seems unsure of the right term to refer to it ("it was not like people were making fun of us but the other thing"). The interpreter takes this as a question and offers his own interpretation of the situation as "mobbing," which Roza validates. When translating into German, the interpreter ensures transparency by disclosing that, as Roza did not know the word, he suggested one that she approved. Through this, the interviewer learned that the concept of "mobbing" was introduced by the interpreter but approved by Roza. We can see here the performance of multiple meaning-making. The interpreter offers a word towards Roza, even a more generalised concept for the phenomenon she described. He interprets her expression as a question or a request, even though it was not explicitly phrased as one. Towards the interviewer, he marks this as a deficit ("she did noot know the word"). Thus, he positions himself and is positioned by Roza, who is lacking a word, in this situation as the linguistically more competent person who can help the person with a lack of vocabulary. However, he asks Roza to validate his interpretation, thereby encouraging her further involvement and participation. At the same time, he grants Roza as much interpretive authority as possible, which strengthens her expert position in terms of the narrative-biographical interview method.

4.3.4. Mutual Commenting

During the interview, mutual commenting and correcting practices could be observed between the interpreter and the interviewee:

Interpreter: [breathing] well [breathing] uum so at the beginning there was er was an interpreter there, her name was yasemin er she helped me a lot with the with with paper to-

Interviewee: [Arabic:] hmmm *sorry* [she uses the English word] it is not yasemin hana //Interpreter: hana?// who helped me in the beginning hana.

Interpreter: [Arabic:] hana? and then came yasemin?

Interviewee: [Arabic:] yes

As we know, Roza can speak and understand German. She is listening attentively to the interpreter's translation. In this instance, she realises the interpreter has mixed something up and intervenes. She interrupts and corrects him, explaining it again in Arabic. Again, she proactively uses her multilingual competencies. She positions herself as the expert who understands both languages and whose narration should be correctly displayed. This shows that a situation has been established that allows Roza to interfere and put her perspective into focus. At the same time, this shows again her agency and her possibilities of action, which she can realise based on her competencies.

Another phenomenon was the interpreter commenting on Roza's narration towards the interviewer:

Interpreter: yes and afterwards when i um left the apartment; (.) of of my rela- of my relatitives i also experienced bad things (2) but nothing more specifically (.)

The interpreter translates Roza's narration. At the end, he adds the comment "nothing more specifically." Through this, he conveys the implicit expectation that the "bad things" could have been explained more, indicating either his own expectation or one he anticipated from the interviewer. He discloses that he translated precisely but the vagueness is embedded in Roza's own words. He thus comments not only on words and their meaning, but also on contextual information. His comment is directed towards the interviewer rather than Roza. It remains unclear if she understands it. She does not respond to it, either way. The interpreter himself draws no consequences from his observation of the vague content. He provides this information to the interviewer, who can then decide whether to ask a question about it.

In these scenes of commenting and correcting, the interpreter, although highly influential due to his multilingual competencies, returns control to the interviewee and the interviewer.

5. Positionalities and Dynamics in the Interview Setting: Synthesis

Considering the participants' positions before and during the interview, as well as their dynamic relations, we can derive more general implications from our case study findings.

First, the interviewer was very active, initiating, planning, and preparing the interview situation. This put the interviewer in a powerful position in the first place, allowing them to set the agenda for a research project (Tempes & Rumpel, 2022, pp. 6–7). In this process, despite our intensive preparation, we were unable to take the interviewee's multilingualism into account as intended because Arabic-language communication between the carer and the interviewee in the field was assumed to be a given practice. Even though the potential involvement in power relations, particularly those connected with generational order and/or language hierarchies in migration societies, had been reflected upon before entering the field, this involvement still resulted in the undesirable outcome that Roza's actual first language was neglected. This

oversight of power imbalances among ethnic communities and the subsequent challenges for interpretation have also been observed by Tempes and Rumpel (2022). Thus, the experiences and analyses strongly underscore the necessity of *iteratively* reflecting on power relations.

Second, the limited control and the need for trust (see also Edwards, 2013) that had been evident in the preliminary stage continued in the interview situation. When the interviewee began her narration, the interviewer was no longer part of the immediate picture, as the verbal communication took place between the interviewee and the interpreter. In this situation, the interviewer relied on her trust in the interpreter, their preparatory work, and the audio recording. The emerging self-flow of communication resulted from the competencies (acquired either through active preparation or hands-on experience in daily life) and the tacit knowledge of all participants. Roza's multilingual competencies contributed substantially to this situation. Such competent contributions of study participants, as also shown by Rohde-Abuba and Konz (2025) in their interviews with multilingual children, should be recognised more widely in social science research. From the researcher's standpoint, interpreted interviews offer both practical and ethical benefits, including enhancing data quality through greater linguistic expressiveness and facilitating participation in the study regardless of an individual's proficiency in the researcher's spoken language(s). Clearly, both benefits constitute an important step towards the epistemic equality we are aiming for.

Third, it has emerged that the interpreter's actions during the interview were highly complex. They are generally expected to facilitate communication between the interviewer and the interviewee by translating, fostering the participants' immediate understanding. However, they face constant challenges while doing so (Nowak & Hornberg, 2020; Tempes & Rumpel, 2022). There were moments when the interpreter did not immediately understand the interviewee. This could be due to their diverse cultural backgrounds and ethnic communities (despite their shared regional origin), or because the language used in the interview (Arabic) was not the interviewee's first language, among other reasons. There were also moments when the interpreter went beyond direct translation. For example, when introducing the word "mobbing," the interpreter provided a new semantic meaning. Nevertheless, he sought the interviewee's approval, thereby inviting her to express herself further. Overall, he provided the interviewee with space to shape and steer the situation, thereby strengthening her position as an expert in the narrative-biographical interview, as intended from a methodological perspective. Towards the interviewer, he offered comments and interpretations to deepen understanding. In summary, the interpreter actively engaged in the interview situation (Chiumento et al., 2018; MacKenzie, 2016; Tempes & Rumpel, 2022), inscribing himself as an actor in different modes: establishing comprehension, suggesting meaning, and taking and giving authority over interpretation. These results suggest that the role of the interpreter in the research process is best described as a hybrid of knowledgeable field member and research team member.

Fourth, throughout the interview, the interviewee displayed a remarkable range of agency by choosing the interview language and breaking points for translation during her narration, switching between languages, and commenting on the interpreter's translations. She shortened or skipped translation and implemented a constructive communication strategy. This reconstructed demonstration of agency by the interviewee can be considered desirable within the framework of the narrative-biographical interview, a method of interview predicated on the attribution of expertise to the interviewee. Although direct causal connections cannot be concluded, the reconstructed interview situation documents a space of opportunity that has been successfully created and allowed the interviewee to exercise agency (see also Eastmond, 2007). Therefore,

the observed approach of the interpreter and interviewer in their exercising of the bilingual extension to the narrative-biographical interview concept can serve as a role model for research strategies that aim to foster participants' agency and actively address multiple intersecting power relations during fieldwork.

Beyond the enactment of positionalities, the observed dynamics of power relations yield two abstractions. One dynamic can be understood in the context of generational order (Alanen, 2009). During the preparations, some of the involved adults, the carers, interpreted the linguistic needs of the young interviewee. The researchers followed their expertise without doubt. Consequently, the knowledgeable position was associated with the adults in the field. As the direct relationship was subsequently established, the generational hierarchy's impact diminished for two reasons. First, the interviewee's agency was facilitated within the working triad of researcher, interviewee, and interpreter. Second, a research method was employed that ascribed the expert position to the interviewee as much as possible (Schütze, 1983). The other dynamic relates to the migration-societal order. The researchers entered the field as native members of the majority society, which is a potentially powerful position. This position was subsequently relativised by the linguistic competence gap and the interviewer's dependence in the interview (see also Edwards, 2013; Tempes & Rumpel, 2022).

6. Discussion

This article has explored the complex dynamics of a multilingual, interpreter-facilitated narrative-biographical interview with a migrant young person, focusing closely on the interrelationships between all participants and the implications that arise from them. Our case study revealed that the multilingual interview situation is shaped by a multitude of social and institutionalised dependencies—including generational hierarchies and linguistic asymmetries—which are not entirely predictable in advance. Analysis showed that even the most carefully planned interviews are subject to shifting constellations of power and interpretation. Furthermore, the concept of "triple subjectivity" (Temple & Edwards, 2002) is expanded upon in this study, with subjectivity multiplying manifold across the entire research process.

In the analysis of the project's first case, we were able to trace *empirically* how different roles and how relations of power, dependency, and agency were exercised in the interview situation (see also Tempes & Rumpel, 2022). Notably, during the interview, the interviewer—despite initiating the research—became the least linguistically competent actor. This visible lack of competence could contrast with the interviewee's own experiences of dependency and deficit ascriptions and thus open space for new experiences of self-efficacy and opportunities for action-taking. In this situation, the interpreter did not emerge as a neutral conduit but as a co-constructing actor (Chiumento et al., 2018; MacKenzie, 2016; Tempes & Rumpel, 2022), negotiating understanding and meaning in multiple directions. His actions ranged from establishing linguistic equivalence to actively introducing new interpretations, while enabling the interviewee to affirm or redirect the interpretive offer. In doing so, he simultaneously supported the interviewee's agency and mediated the interviewer's comprehension, inscribing himself within the data collection process as both translator and interpretive agent.

In reflecting upon power dynamics, it is crucial to recognise that, although the interviewer intentionally placed herself in a position of linguistic and epistemological dependency to foster a more equitable interaction, this loss of control was voluntary and reversible. In contrast, marginalised persons, such as

migrant young persons in state care, do not have the same option to exit the dependency and power relations that structure and shape their position. This contrast highlights the ethical and epistemological imperative of reflexivity in social research. The findings underscore the importance of power-sensitive methodological reflection in biographical research, particularly when working with marginalised youths in interpreter-facilitated settings. More studies are necessary to better understand the concrete dynamics in interpreted interviews, which are increasingly common in multilingual contexts. In particular, studies involving young people and focusing on power asymmetries should be taken forward.

Drawing on considerations from migration, multilingualism, and postcolonial studies, this article argues that the process of knowledge production in multilingual, interpreter-facilitated research should be rendered as transparent as possible. Researchers are required to explicitly articulate the methodological decisions made during data collection and analysis. By doing so, these decisions become subjects of critical scrutiny. The reflexive approach to multilingualism adopted here reveals the inherently negotiated and resource-intensive nature of such research practices. Nevertheless, in societies shaped by migration and multilingualism, this methodological engagement is not optional. Failing to account for linguistic diversity risks reproducing epistemic blind spots, particularly about young people in marginalised positions who embody the convergence and intersection of multiple power dimensions.

While societal power relations always precede interview situations, the empirical question is how they are actualised and performed in multilingual interviews. Tempes and Rumpel (2022) have previously identified potential power positions that actors may hold, including the power to choose narrative content, and have observed their actualisation in the interview setting. However, our detailed analysis of speech and interaction practices reveals new aspects: first, the potential to shift and change power positions situationally (e.g., by assigning expertise to the interviewee). Biographical interviews enable other positioning than anticipated (cf. the findings on the interviewee's agency in interpreting). In this sense, the interview experience may extend beyond the immediate encounter, as it offers interviewees, at least once, the opportunity to see their own biographies positioned at the centre of scientific knowledge production (Eastmond, 2007). Second, in view of the situational, dynamic performance of power relations, it can be concluded that dependence on interpreters, as well as on caregivers, constitutes a structural moment to be considered, as does their potential to shift power relations.

The critical, empirical analysis of power relations and dynamics in field situations that we propose is closely linked to the goal of achieving epistemic equality. The findings demonstrate that epistemic equality must be considered not only in terms of its structural integration within the project design, through the incorporation of diverse field perspectives, but also fundamentally in the research practices (Inge et al., 2024; Sippel & Ucelo Jiménez, 2025; Smith, 2008). Accordingly, we suggest that epistemic equality can only be conceptualised as the result of situational, interactive production throughout the research process. The analysis undertaken thus far within the context of a project involving young migrants has concentrated on the preparation and data collection processes. On this basis, researchers are advised to be highly power-sensitive in field settings and to continuously reflect on their actions. Furthermore, it is recommended that processes of situational, interactive (non-)production of epistemic equality be considered continually, whether analysing field situations or multilingual data, always questioning the role of implicit, unquestioned knowledge among all participants.

Although our analysis and subsequent reflections are based on only one interpreter-facilitated interview, we have already presented new empirical findings, as conducting multilingual interviews in an open biographical format, particularly with young migrant people, has not hitherto been the focus of methodological studies. This has resulted in the exclusion of their perspectives from knowledge production. While our initial findings demonstrate the potential and relevance of power-sensitive studies of multilingual interviews, the observations should be further enriched and contrasted with additional cases to systematically expand and consolidate the results. The overarching objective is to theorise social practices and power processes emerging in multilingual research situations and their consequences for epistemic equality. This will contribute substantially to critical analysis of knowledge production in migration societies of the Global North, feeding into the same goal of addressing epistemic injustice as postcolonial and decolonial criticism (Bassnett, 2017; El Masri, 2025; Fricker, 2007; Mignolo, 2011; Smith, 2008, pp. 163–195).

While the present article focused on data collection in field situations, further questions arise regarding the subsequent analysis. With Tempes and Rumpel (2022), analysis of multilingual data continues to be dominated by "white" researchers from the Global North. During our research, the question of how to undertake biographical analyses with epistemic sensitivity, reflecting the intersection of multiple power relations, remains to be addressed in an iterative process.

In summary, combining the methodology and research attitude of the narrative-biographical interview with thorough interpreter onboarding into the research process enables researchers to address and challenge existing, intersecting hierarchies in migration research (see also Clark-Kazak, 2021). Nevertheless, it is imperative that researchers devote sufficient attention to the initiation and preparatory stages in the field before conducting interviews, particularly when engaging with young participants, as migration-related and generational orders interact in this context. It is also imperative to adopt a reflexive approach towards hierarchies and power relations throughout the entire multilingual research process. The prerequisite for this approach is sufficient financial and staff resources to ensure adequate preparation, the establishment of a productive research relationship among the interviewee, interpreter, and researcher, and ongoing reflexivity.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

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

LLMs Disclosure

For this article, ChatGPT 5 and DeepL Writing Assistant were used for grammar and style improvement, and to help with translation.

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