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EDITORIAL

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Researching in Multilingual Spaces: Addressing Methodological, Ethical, and Epistemological Implications

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Abstract

This editorial proposes reflecting upon multilingual social research in spatial terms to better grasp the manifold challenges described by the contributing authors when examining their own methodological approaches and research practices regarding multilingualism(s). Conceptualizing the research process as embedded in multilingual spaces brings power relations and their impact on the produced knowledge to the fore. These power relations and their implications appear as cross-cutting themes in all contributions to this thematic issue, which are otherwise multifaceted and diverse. The contributions provide insights into concrete research settings, and thus into specific multilingual spaces and their associated language regimes and practices that are embedded in and shaped by larger structural conditions. They look at how different actors meet in the multilingual research spaces; how their interactions are shaped by individual dispositions, organizational, financial, and personnel resources, concrete institutional practices, regulations and customs, larger structural conditions, and language ideologies. By highlighting that research challenges in multilingual spaces transcend issues of translation and translatability as well as underscoring the need for reflexivity, the contributions vividly illustrate the potential that consciously engaging with multilingualism holds for social research.

Keywords

empirical social research; language regimes; multilingualism; reflexivity; research methods

1. Introduction

We live and research in societies that are characterized by multilingualism—not only narrowly understood as different named languages being spoken, but taken "beyond the idea of commanding and using multiple named

languages, or multiple monolingualisms, to the notion of repertoires that include both linguistic and other semiotic resources" (McKinney et al., 2024, p. xxiii). Sociolinguists have long criticized monoglot conceptions and ideologies of named languages as enumerable and bounded entities that are clearly distinguishable from one another (cf. McKinney et al., 2024, p. xxii). Instead, they emphasize the social and historical construction of language(s) as well as an increased awareness of the multimodal nature of communication (often concealed by a dominant focus on the verbal mode of communication). Making things more complex, some have argued that the idea of multilingualism itself needs pluralization, due to the diversity of languaging and communication contexts (Makoni & Pennycook, 2024).

Besides linguistic diversity (and complexity), translation processes are also constitutive elements in all aspects of our lives (e.g., in interactions with state authorities; see Mokre, 2020) in general and, more specifically, in research. While the latter aspect has been mainly discussed in qualitative research, all data work can be understood as a translation practice. Several authors have thus questioned whether (supposedly) monolingual and multilingual research settings are fundamentally different, or if they merely differ by degree. Given that we consider both multilingualism and translation processes as constitutive factors of any social interaction, this likewise raises questions about the relevance of a thematic issue dedicated specifically to multilingual challenges in empirical social research. Even in the context of this editorial for a thematic issue on multilingual research challenges, this question is hardly rhetorical and requires addressing. Regardless of how it is defined, why do we assume that multilingualism poses particular challenges for social research and has implications for research ethics, methodology, and practice that remain insufficiently addressed in the literature (although increased interest in recent years has led to a number of notable exceptions; see, e.g., Holmes et al., 2022b)?

The answer to this question is twofold: On the one hand, monoglot conceptions and purely technical views on language continue to appear in research approaches that fail to recognize the respective fields' multilingualism as well as, more fundamentally, both the complexities of multilingualism and the social dimension of language (Bourdieu, 1982). In research, this reduces language-related matters to somewhat of a solvable technical issue requiring little reflection (e.g., reducing them to questions of "correct" translation). On the other hand, uncritically celebrating multilingualism and overemphasizing fluid languaging or translanguaging risks neglecting or even obscuring power relations and (mostly class-related or racialized) language hierarchies. Investing in the construct of named languages is sometimes necessary to resist marginalization and exclusion (cf. McKinney et al., 2024, p.xxxi)—or prevent the further silencing of marginalized voices in knowledge production processes. Overcoming monoglot conceptions of language and positing multilingualism as a constitutive factor of human interaction should thus not lead us to overlook power relations (cf. Duchêne, 2020)—also when engaged in multilingual research.

Inspired by Kraft and Flubacher's (2024) conceptualization of the workplace as a "space of multilingualism" (see also Blommaert et al., 2005) and Holmes et al.'s (2022a) focus on research spaces, reflecting upon multilingual social research in spatial terms can be revealing by shifting our attention to the particular language regimes; these consist of habits, regulations, and ideologies that restrict speakers' choice of linguistic means in spatially situated interactions. Blommaert et al. (2005) propose understanding multilingualism as a relational competence that is enabled and disabled by a given environment. Accordingly, communication problems arise from how individuals and their communicative resources are inserted into language regimes valid in a particular space (Blommaert et al., 2005, p. 198) and have ethical, methodological, and epistemological consequences for social research. Multilingualism may occur as

truncated competence, which, "depending on scalar judgement," can be dismissed as "having no language" (Blommaert et al., 2005, p. 197). Researchers can silence others or be themselves silenced by linguistic practices (cf. Holmes et al., 2022a, p. 13). Whose voice can be articulated and heard in this space is not only a political question and research ethics concern, but also a research quality matter that consequently requires both ethical as well as methodological and epistemological reflexivity.

Conceptualizing the research *process* as embedded in multilingual *spaces* can help us to better grasp the challenges that arise across the phases of specific research projects—from, i.a., team composition, access to the field, data collection, field work, and analysis to presenting and publishing the results, as well as with regard to quality assurance and research ethics. This spatial conceptualization highlights that multilingual research challenges transcend issues of translation and translatability and sheds light on power relations that impact the research process and, consequently, the produced knowledge. Power relations and their implications appear as cross-cutting themes in all contributions to this thematic issue, which are otherwise multifaceted and diverse, i.a., in terms of research interests, disciplines, geography, or methodologies (although with a clear focus on qualitative approaches). The authors provide insights into concrete research settings and thus into specific multilingual spaces with their particular language regimes and practices that are embedded in and shaped by political–economic conditions as well as historical, postcolonial marked hierarchies. They describe and reflect their methodological approaches and research practices in view of multilingualism(s), and also emphasize the potentials of multilingual research.

2. Organization of the Thematic Issue and Overview of Individual Contributions

A spatial focus prompts the critical examination of the structural conditions that shape language practices in the research process, which includes scrutinizing language ideologies and research frameworks. Drawing on research in a region characterized by multilayered linguistic complexity, Puro et al.'s (2026) contribution highlights challenges that go beyond conventional research frameworks based on hegemonic assumptions of linguistic uniformity. They point to the need to decolonize language ideologies and research methodologies in order to understand different kinds of multilingualism and adequately address complex socio-linguistic contexts.

Structural conditions encompass, furthermore, concrete institutional contexts like research funding, gatekeepers, non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, and the publishing industry (cf. Holmes et al., 2022a, p. 9) as well as regulations and resources. The following two contributions in this thematic issue each underline the importance of organizational and institutional conditions that structure research in multilingual spaces. Based on their experiences in a large-scale community-based participatory research project with highly linguistically diverse participants, Radley et al. (2026) discuss the methodological difficulties of achieving linguistic inclusivity within a context of negotiating different power relations between institutions, academic researchers, collaborative partners, community co-researchers, and participants. The authors assert that adequate resourcing (necessary research time, support, and resourcing for both academics and community partners) is especially acute in multilingual settings. Schönthaler et al. (2026) reflect on the ethical dimensions of multilingual research, with a focus on institutional ethical reviews. Based on three case studies, they highlight how language mediates critical aspects of research practice and analyze (ethical) challenges posed by formal ethics in this regard. Bringing together key insights from their multilingual research experiences, they propose concrete recommendations for ethics review boards.

Different actors interact in multilingual spaces where specific conditions and expectations both enable and disable their linguistic repertoires. Several contributions focus on the implications of the researchers' linguistic repertoire that they bring to the research space. Both the contributions of Kawalla (2026) and Gilliéron and Hoppe (2026) draw on their experiences when conducting interviews in a language in which they were less proficient than the interviewees. Kawalla argues that this linguistic asymmetry causes a shift in power relations that may be beneficial for research in postcolonial contexts and that reflexive research conducted "outside one's linguistic comfort zone" may serve as a constant reminder of gaps in understanding that arise from the interviewer and interviewees' different backgrounds. Based on two transnational studies, Gilliéron and Hoppe also emphasize the potentials of multilingual research settings to engage more deeply with how meaning is produced in interview settings framed by global power relations, postcolonial constellations, and inequalities.

While several contributions touch upon the role of linguistic repertoires, language choices, and practices in the construction of positionalities in the multilingual research space, Rickert et al. (2026) explicitly focus on it. Drawing on four linguistic ethnographies, they show how multilingual research contexts introduce additional layers of complexity to the dynamic co-construction of researcher positionality. A critical engagement with linguistic positioning is also at the core of the contribution by Mijić et al. (2026). The authors show how they addressed linguistic challenges that arose at various stages of their study by drawing on and engaging with the different linguistic repertoires of the team members. Calling for the recognition of translation processes as integral to research itself, they demonstrate their epistemological potential in reconstructive analyses. Translation processes (both human and AI-assisted) and how the research team members' diverse linguistic repertoires interact with each other are also central to the contribution by Thoma et al. (2026). Understanding multilingualism and translanguaging as sites of negotiation, tension, and meaning-making, they analyze protocols from group interpretation sessions to examine the multilingual and translingual practices in the joint analysis of multilingual data.

The linguistic repertoires of both the researchers and participants are central concerns in all contributions to this thematic issue. However, several authors explicitly center their reflections on the methodological implications that ensue from the linguistic repertoires of their participants. Jang (2026) as well as MacDonald et al. (2026) focus on the influential linguistic concept of translanguaging, which Otheguy et al. (2015, p. 281) define as "the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages." Both studies are based in school contexts characterized by monolingual institutional norms that delegitimize other languages and translingual practices. The studies' authors propose developing translingual research designs that aim to account for the multilingualism of participants and enable them to draw on their entire linguistic repertoire as much as possible. Examining translingual writing practices among multilingual children, Jang underscores the need for context-sensitive, process-oriented, ethically responsive, and multimodally attuned approaches to capture translingual engagement and respond to ethical considerations related to (institutional) power dynamics and representing the participants' voices. In their codesign study with multilingual caregivers, MacDonald et al. also advocate for reconsidering standard research methods in view of multilingualism. Aiming to foster the equitable participation of marginalized groups in research, the authors reflect upon concrete translanguaging strategies that can be employed as a methodological approach in research processes. In a similar vein, the contributions of Karaköse (2026) and Tries and Mehringer (2026) both highlight the potential of systematically analyzing the emerging multilingual practices to reveal underlying power dynamics and social hierarchies. Karaköse delves into the overlaps and

differences between her own linguistic repertoire and those of the interviewees. By offering participants the opportunity to codetermine the language of the multilingual interview, the author promotes participants' agency. To illustrate how language, power, and multilingual qualitative research are intertwined, Tries and Mehringer discuss two empirical examples from interviews; one interview was conducted without an interpreter, while the other was interpreter-mediated.

Interactions in interpreter-mediated interviews are the focus in Bella (2026) and Siebholz and Burgmer (2026). They both vividly demonstrate that interpreting is a fundamentally phenomenological act that involves the presence of a physical human being in a given space who is neither neutral nor invisible, often in a context of power asymmetry (Cronin & Delgado Luchner, 2021, p. 94). Analyzing changes related to the interviewees' language proficiency, Bella zooms in on the interactional dynamic of the interpreted interview and emphasizes the performative density of collaborative interpretation. By contrast, Siebholz and Burgmer focus on power relations from initial contact to the interpreter-mediated interview situation itself. By illustrating the exercise of dependency and agency, the authors indicate the need for an ongoing, iterative reflexivity. Both contributions align with Zehetgruber's (2026) article, which, rather than seeing translating as a neutral, mechanical activity, understands it as being shaped by the indexical meanings of the specific context (cf. Angermeyer, 2024; McKinney et al., 2024, p. xxxix). Based on the utilization of a multilingual questionnaire in a comparative study involving two national contexts, Zehetgruber discusses comparability and translatability issues concerning research instruments and the resulting multilingual data. Furthermore, by problematizing translations for dissemination purposes, she also addresses power relations and institutional constraints associated with English as the global academic lingua franca.

3. Conclusion

In sum, the fifteen contributions look at how different actors (e.g., research participants, researchers, multilingual team members, interpreters, translators, gatekeepers) meet in the multilingual research spaces; how their interactions are shaped by individual dispositions (e.g., language competences, methodological training); organizational, financial and personnel resources; the concrete institutional practices; regulations and customs; larger structural conditions (e.g., postcolonialism, language hierarchies, racism, economic, historical, and geopolitical conditions), and language ideologies. They show how language choices, translations, and interpreter involvement shape interactions between actors, influence conversation dynamics, and shift the limits of what can be expressed in an interview situation. They illustrate how established methods fail to adequately address multilingual data, where established methods fall short, and where further methodological knowledge is in need of elaboration. Reading through the contributions, it becomes palpable that multilingualism strongly emphasizes the importance of subject adequacy in research, and that research quality depends on seeking, allowing, and reflecting on collaboration. All contributions vividly illustrate implications that multilingual research spaces have on the knowledge produced within them and thus highlight the need for reflexivity, but also the potentials of researching multilingually—in other words, they engage with both the "stumbling blocks and stepping stones" (Mijić et al., 2026).

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Conflict of Interests

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