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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 translanguing 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 translanguing practices. The studies' authors propose developing translanguing 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 translanguing writing practices among multilingual children, Jang underscores the need for context-sensitive, process-oriented, ethically responsive, and multimodally attuned approaches to capture translanguing 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

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Challenges of Multilingual Research: A Discourse in the Context of Nagaland, India

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Abstract

Nagaland, a small Northeastern state in India, may be considered to be one of the world's most linguistically diverse regions. This is so because it is home to 17 officially recognized tribes, along with many unrecognized sub-tribes, most of whom speak two to three sub-dialects that are often not mutually intelligible. For example, the Chakhesang tribe has three distinct dialects, namely, Chokri, Khezha, and Sapu, each unique in phonology and lexicon, that members of this tribe find it difficult to communicate with each other. This diversity creates challenges for both education and research. In a similar vein, multilingual research in Nagaland recurrently encounters difficulties and challenges that go beyond the conventional global frameworks. Although multilingual research has made advancements, contexts like Nagaland, which are characterized by multilayered linguistic complexity, remain to be addressed. This study presents the argument that standard research methods, which usually assume more uniform linguistic contexts, are not sufficient for Nagaland. It also raises the need for context-sensitive approaches to multilingual research that can account for such complexity. The study explores the challenges of conducting multilingual research in Nagaland, while also evaluating the limitations of existing research methods, and attempts to advocate for a new framework that can better suit its multilingual realities. The findings of the study contribute to the broader discourse on multilingual research methods by emphasizing the importance of culture and linguistic sensitivity in diverse contexts.

Keywords

hyper-diverse; linguistic diversity; methodological challenges; multilingual research; participatory action research

1. Introduction

In the context of multilingual societies, where multiple languages and dialects exist side by side, both advantages and disadvantages arise, especially for academic research. As more studies are done in such linguistically diverse communities, it becomes important to address the questions around whether dominant research methodologies work in such settings. Building on this premise, this study focuses on Nagaland, a state in Northeast India known for its exceptional linguistic plurality, to examine how research methodologies need to adapt to remain valid and inclusive. Regions like Nagaland remain methodologically unrepresented despite global advances in multilingual research, as traditional research frameworks continue to fail in accommodating their intricate socio-linguistic realities. In the context of Nagaland, language is more than just a means for communication; it also plays a crucial role in shaping communal identity, maintaining collective memory, expressing belonging, or resisting the homogenizing control of narratives (Chaterji, 2025; Longkumer & Choksi, 2025; Tikhir, 2024). It may be noted that ignoring this symbolic multidimensional function can not only distort research results but also potentially become a source of socio-cultural conflict.

The present study is then driven by the objective of exploring the unique challenges that emerge when conducting research in such multilingual environments and advocates for the development of tailored methodological approaches that are both culturally sensitive and contextually grounded.

1.1. Contextual Overview

Nagaland, one of the northeastern states of India, stands out as one of the most linguistically dense and diverse regions in the world (Borah & Gope, 2025). Despite its small geographical area, the state is home to more than twenty-five major indigenous languages with 17 officially recognized tribes and numerous sub-tribes, each possessing distinct linguistic identities (as per 2011 Census data). Over 70 languages and sub-dialects are actively spoken, reflecting linguistic diversity (Nagaland Tribune, 2025). The need for a common language for large-scale communication arose, leading to Nagamese, a pidgin, being adopted as the lingua franca of the state. What sets Nagaland apart is not just the number of languages spoken but the nature of multilingualism marked by layers of intra-tribal, inter-dialectal, and inter-village variations. In Nagaland, language encapsulates the community's cultural heritage and shared consciousness, extending beyond its communicative purpose (Longkumer, 2016; Nagaland Tribune, 2025; Walling, 2022). While culturally rich, this linguistic density presents many challenges to researchers attempting to engage with communities through various methodologies (Borah & Gope, 2025).

One of the unique linguistic features of Nagaland is that the tribes are internally multilingual. For instance, the Chakhesang is linguistically divided into three mutually unintelligible dialects: Chokri, Khezha, and Sapu. It has five different tones that can change the meaning of the word (Gogoi et al., 2024). A simple phrase like "Have you eaten your food?" is expressed in entirely distinct ways across the three dialects: *Mha ti ma la?* in Chokri, *Khuni to ma la?* in Khezha, and *Avu le ma?* in Sapu. Similarly, the Ao tribe speaks two principal dialects, namely, Mongsen and Chungli, which are also mutually unintelligible. While in the same Chungli dialect, for instance, the word "meat" is *shee* in one dialect and *shoo* in another. Borah and Gope (2025) have also highlighted this diversity; the Ao tribe has five dialects, Zeliangrong has three, and Yimkhiung has five. Apart from these, such diversity can be seen in the remaining tribes in Nagaland, often requiring a third language, such as Nagamese or

English, for intra-tribal communication. The question of whether these languages can be classified as dialects or distinct languages is also posed.

However, this only reflects the first layer of linguistic variation. Within these dialects, variations occur, shaped primarily by geography, clan divisions, and village-specific usage, further complicating linguistic categorization. For example, even within the Chokri-speaking villages, such as Pholami and Kikriima, there are noticeable differences in vocabulary, pronunciation, and even grammatical structures. The word for “fish” may be *khu* in one village but *fū* in another. These small differences may seem minor, but they can still lead to confusion and misunderstanding between speakers of the “same” dialect. According to Longkumer (2016), nearly every Naga tribe shows this kind of variation, which can be linked strongly to geography or clan.

It may be noted that the linguistic complexity in the case of Nagaland extends beyond just words and sounds; it is closely interlinked with social and cultural aspects as well. It may be reiterated here that language is not only a means of communication but also a marker of identity, a way of preserving oral traditions, and a symbol of collective memory that shapes community belonging (Longchar, 2011). As demonstrated in Tikhir’s (2024) study, the role of language in Nagaland becomes a source of conflict and power struggles when one group tries to impose its language on another, regardless of their historical or cultural identity, even within the same religious context.

Any effort to unify these dialects has been met with challenges. A significant example can be derived from the translation of the Bible into local languages, the translation of the Bible into the Chokri dialect. To date, a consensus on the accepted version remains elusive, despite efforts to create a version of the Bible that incorporates the various dialectical forms. While inclusive in intent, the resulting text has become difficult for many to read because it combines dialects unfamiliar to community sections. This has also sparked disagreements and tensions, as some dialects appear to dominate the text while others are minimally represented. Such linguistic conflicts highlight the broader cultural and identity struggles inherent in standardization efforts (Temsunungsang & Bareh, 2016). Thus, in such complex settings, it is necessary to understand language as a living source of identity, the ignoring of which marginalizes individual groups and causes profound social and emotional consequences.

Even national policies can clash with Nagaland’s multilingual realities. The NEP 2020, for example, promotes mother tongue-based instruction in early education as a way to preserve cultural heritage and promote linguistic inclusion. However, it assumes the existence of a single standardized mother-tongue within each community; an assumption that does not hold in Nagaland’s context. This fails to embrace the complex linguistic realities of Nagaland, a setting where no single mother tongue can represent the state as a whole. Not a single indigenous language functions as the medium of instruction in schools in Nagaland (Longkumer, 2016), and English serves as the medium of instruction. In Nagaland, the identification of “mother tongue” becomes ambiguous as multiple dialects coexist (Dkhar & Kakoty, 2023). The multiplicity of dialects without written scripts makes it challenging to create educational materials or establish effective teaching methods (Hegui, 2024). As Maisuangdibou (2020) and Devi (2019) note, the policy may hinder inclusive education by failing to account for regions like Nagaland’s multilingual and non-standardized realities.

The policy fails to fully consider these local realities, hence creating a mismatch between the goals of the policy and what is possible on the ground (Sen & Panda, 2024). For instance, classrooms in Nagaland often

comprise students from a wide range of linguistic backgrounds, representing each language and sub-dialects. This diversity raises critical questions: How should such classrooms be organized? How many teachers would be required to cater to each language group? How will teaching materials be developed for languages that are not yet standardized? Moreover, the issue of language selection becomes politically and culturally sensitive; which language will be chosen for instruction, and which will be left out? Maisuangdibou (2020) and Devi (2019) argue that the policy may hinder inclusive education by failing to account for regions like Nagaland's multilingual and non-standardized realities. Even transformative pedagogical tools such as translanguaging face limitations. Ticheloven et al. (2021) note the difficulty in applying it effectively, especially when languages are completely unintelligible to each other. Ball (2011) suggests that teachers should be trained to teach lessons in a non-dominant language, but this would require large-scale training and recruitment, which the current education system is unprepared for (Hegui, 2024). Although NEP 2020 states that "teachers will be encouraged to use a bilingual approach, including bilingual teaching-learning materials, with those students whose home language may be different from the medium of instruction" (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020, p. 13), creating such materials in multiple languages will be a challenging task, requiring proper planning and execution.

It may be stated that without substantial structural and pedagogical support, the gap between policy aspirations and ground realities will continue. While the NEP 2020 emphasizes linguistic inclusion, in Nagaland, the multiplicity of dialects, the absence of standardized scripts, and the lack of teaching materials, as highlighted above, make such implementation complex. Unless the policy framework addresses these structural barriers, the vision of inclusive education will remain a goal on paper. The above discussion demonstrates how external frameworks expose the very methodological problem this study aims to explore, highlighting the need for policies designed for Nagaland's unique layered linguistic context. Linguistic inclusion cannot be treated as a one-size-fits-all directive but must instead be framed as a contextualized strategy that reflects local multilingual realities. NEP 2020 is used solely as a contextual example to illustrate how standardized systems may interact with the complex multilingual realities of Nagaland. The case of Nagaland highlights the importance of research methodologies that carefully consider highly complex local realities, particularly in relation to language policy.

Within such a premise, multilingual research in Nagaland cannot rely on broad assumptions. For instance, stating that a study was conducted in "Chokri-speaking" villages can be misleading, as "Chokri" itself encompasses multiple dialectical variations. Without a nuanced understanding of such intricacies, research risks misrepresenting the lived realities of the communities involved. These realities pose critical methodological challenges. This renders data collected in one village non-transferable to another, making generalizations challenging and potentially misinterpreted. The questions of how one accounts for such variations within a single language, which dialect should be prioritized when collecting data, if findings from one village authentically inform one's understanding of another, and many more, need to be carefully examined.

To conduct meaningful, ethical, and accurate research in such a multilingual setting, it is important to have methodologies that are capable of engaging with such complexities. Recognizing that language in Nagaland is not just linguistic but social and cultural, researchers must develop tools that are flexible, inclusive, and grounded in community knowledge systems. In this context, while linguistic diversity enriches culture, it also poses challenges for education, administration, and research. It is therefore worth noting that any study

conducted in such a setting must begin with an understanding of the multifaceted role of language. It is only through direct engagement with such intricate and layered realities that researchers can begin to design frameworks that are not only methodologically effective but also inclusive.

1.2. Problem Statement

While multilingual research is gaining importance globally, it can be observed that most of the existing methods are tailored for contexts with standardized, written languages used in academic purposes (Csata & Marácz, 2021). These methods fail to account for the oral traditions, dialectical variation, and intra-tribal multilingualism that define Nagaland's linguistic context. This unique context challenges the notion of shared linguistic identity, with small variations making it difficult to classify and communicate.

The challenges for researchers, then, lie in the difficulty of accessing communities, translating across different dialects, and representing data that is deeply rooted in culture and oral traditions. Because of this, standard research methods and tools do not work in Nagaland's context. As Emenanjo (2002) rightly states, language policies need to match real linguistic situations. There is a clear need for new, flexible research approaches that respect the region's linguistic diversity and cultural realities. The study addresses the gap by exploring how researchers can navigate meaningfully with the hyper-diverse linguistic nature of Nagaland through adaptive, inclusive, and community-informed methodologies.

2. Literature Review

Language plays a complex and influential role in the research process, particularly in multilingual and intercultural contexts. Although multilingualism is increasingly recognized as an important research concern, qualitative studies involving multiple languages often lack clear methodological guidance. Cross-language research where researchers and participants do not share a common language presents challenges that can affect the credibility, trustworthiness, and accuracy of findings (Edwards, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Decisions about which language to use in interviews, analysis, and dissemination are never neutral (Svensson, 2024); they are intertwined with social, cultural, and political hierarchies that shape access, representation, and power relations.

Global scholarship highlights the ethical and practical complexities of multilingual research, including issues of translation, working with interpreters, and communicating culturally specific academic concepts. Crane et al. (2009) emphasize that research in multilingual "constellations" exposes scholars to not only translation issues but also deeper concerns about the researcher's role, interpretation of meaning, and connecting different cultural ways of producing and sharing knowledge. Temple and Edwards (2002) and Holmes et al. (2013) stress that translation should be treated as a co-creative process that actively shapes interpretation and preserves cultural nuance. Within this concern, a recurring "researcher–interpreter–interviewee problem" reveals the fragility of co-creation through problems such as interpreter qualifications, breaches of confidentiality, and disruption of conversation due to third parties (Edwards, 2013; Edwards et al., 2006; Ekström et al., 2022; Kosny et al., 2014). These issues show that the interpreter's role is never neutral but directly affects the credibility and trustworthiness of the research process (Åberg et al., 2025). They are active co-creators who equalize language access, transmit emotional nuance, and help establish joint legitimacy, while researchers must remain alert to their own linguistic privilege and its impact on knowledge production (Åberg et al., 2025;

Björk Brämberg & Dahlberg, 2013; Edwards et al., 2006). In the same light, Schembri and Jahić Jašić (2022) further highlight the issue of privileging English as the language in academia, though the use of participants' first language (L1) has the potential of producing richer, more authentic data. This invariably raises ethical concerns about power, representation, and loss of cultural identity.

In the context of Nagaland as well, researchers have highlighted the challenges of working in a densely diverse linguistic setting, with over 25 major indigenous languages and more than 70 dialects, many mutually unintelligible (Borah & Gope, 2025). Nagamese is generally viewed as a lingua franca, but it is a pidgin with no standardized script and differs significantly from indigenous languages. Further, it holds no affinity with the indigenous Naga culture. The challenge for researchers, then, is to deal with multiple layers of translation; from participant language to Nagamese to English for academic purposes, raising ethical and methodological concerns around misrepresentation of cultural identity and loss of meaning (Borah & Gope, 2025; Pavlenko, 2005). This may also be attributed to the translators and interpreters, who engage in the study as active participants with their own tribal affiliation, dialect, and social position, which influence how data are interpreted. The accuracy, trust, and cultural sensitivity of the data collection and analysis are also significantly shaped by the involvement of the translators and interpreters (Halai, 2007; Tsai et al., 2004). Squires (2009) highlights how interpreters' choices, training, and personality shape data accuracy and cultural meaning. There are practical challenges that further complicate research in Nagaland, such as geographic, financial limitations, and socio-cultural expectations (Borah & Gope, 2025).

The link between language, identity, and power has been recurrently emphasized by theories of multilingualism and language policy. Multilingualism is growing into prominence as a socio-political issue, as much as a linguistic one, due to factors such as globalization, internationalization, and efforts to preserve linguistic diversity (Anisimova, 2016), influencing identity, intercultural communication, education, and social unity while seeking to protect minority and regional languages. The objectives of multilingualism, particularly its emphasis on how language is not only a means for communication but rather a marker of identity, closely apply to Nagaland as well. However, in practice, the methodological innovations, such as translanguaging and code switching, among many others, remain inadequate for the context of Nagaland, coupled with a lack of research in the multilingual situation of the state (Jami & Keturah, 2022, as cited in Hegui, 2024; Longkumer, 2016). This study is then situated within this gap, highlighting the urgent need for reflexive, context-sensitive, and ethically grounded approaches that can account for the linguistic, cultural, and social realities of the region.

3. Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative approach that is both participatory and context-sensitive in nature. It employs an ethnographic approach with a period of three months, where the authors employed participatory action research (PAR) to engage with the samples involved in the study. The research was independently conducted by the authors and was not supported by any external funding. The sample comprised nine researchers, selected because they were actively engaged in ongoing projects addressing multilingual themes in Nagaland. Four of them were postgraduate students engaged in their dissertation research, and five were doctoral scholars in the fieldwork phase of their research. These nine researchers, who form the core of the study, are not co-authors but participants who shared their research experiences. They represented four major Naga tribes, namely Angami, Ao, Sumi, and Chakhesang, and spoke their

respective local dialects, in addition to Nagamese (the lingua franca) and English. For clarity of reference in this study, the researchers are denoted as R1 through R9, while the community participants they worked with, such as village elders, women's groups, and student unions, are represented as C1 through C23.

The design of the research was iterative in nature, which ensured the accommodation of emerging themes based on the insights gained during the fieldwork. Data on field challenges were collected through in-depth interviews with the nine researchers who shared their experiences and observations of their own participants, providing insights aligned with the objectives of the study. The study drew upon PAR, which has been defined as an approach that is community-driven in nature and allows for a collaborative approach in which researchers and participants work together as co-investigators. In contrast to the standard traditional research, PAR aims to involve marginalized communities and participants in designing research methodology, research questions, and outcomes (Cornish et al., 2023). The emphasis lies on the cycles of action, reflection, and evaluation, which are iterative in nature and aim to address injustices in the world by empowering local voices (Chilisa, 2024). In a hyper-diverse linguistic landscape such as Nagaland, PAR attempts to bridge the gap between power imbalances by embracing oral traditions and indigenous languages in data collection and analysis (García & Tupas, 2024). While the study interviewed researchers rather than community members directly, it remains community-driven in orientation, as these researchers' insights come from their active engagement with local communities during fieldwork. Their experiences reflect the voices and realities of those communities, making this study a reflective participatory research grounded in real community interactions.

3.1. Research Questions

Based on the reviewed literature and problems identified in the proposed research, the following research questions have been framed:

RQ1: What are the key linguistic and cultural complexities that uniquely challenge research efforts in Nagaland's hyper-diverse multilingual context?

RQ2: How and why do existing multilingual research frameworks prove inadequate in addressing these context-specific challenges?

RQ3: What methodological adaptations or innovations are required to develop inclusive, ethically responsible, and context-sensitive research practices suitable for Nagaland?

4. Findings of the Study

4.1. Linguistic and Cultural Complexities in Nagaland's Hyper-Diverse Multilingual Context

Regarding RQ1, the analysis found that research in Nagaland's hyper-diverse multilingual context is challenged by two interlinked domains of complexity: extreme multilingualism and cultural sensitivity, both of which surfaced repeatedly across the accounts of the nine participants.

4.1.1. Extreme Multilingualism

The fieldwork revealed the layered complexity of multilingualism in Nagaland, not only between languages but also within the same language.

Case 1 presents the Chokri-speaking context of a Chakhesang PhD researcher, originally from Pholami Village, who conducted interviews with an elder (Sample C3) in Kikrüma Village as part of a study on indigenous knowledge systems. The elder was recounting traditional practices surrounding the sugarcane plant. An interview excerpt reads as follows (Sample R2):

The elder described sugarcane as one of the most cherished plants in the kitchen yard. It was customarily given to favorite grandchildren, nephews, or nieces as a token of love and affection. He also explained that sugarcane was consumed by field workers who had ingested rice beer, as it was believed to help lower alcohol levels so they could continue working. However, the terminology used in Kikrüma posed immediate challenges. The elder repeatedly referred to sugarcane as *Nyuproprei*, a term completely unfamiliar to me. In Pholami, we call it *Tupuli*, and the semantic difference disrupted my understanding of the narrative. I had to pause the interview several times to clarify with the elder what he meant by *Nyuproprei*. To ensure accuracy, I relied on a local assistant from Kikrüma who was fluent in the village-specific Chokri dialect.

This case shows that village-specific dialectical variations, even within the same broader Chokri language, can create challenges in understanding and accurately documenting indigenous knowledge. The elder's narrative about sugarcane, referred to as *Nyuproprei* in Kikrüma Village, demonstrates how terminological differences within the same dialect can significantly affect researchers' understanding and interpretation of indigenous knowledge systems. The Pholami-based researcher (Sample R2), familiar with the term *Tupuli*, initially struggled to follow the narrative, revealing that even minor lexical divergences can disrupt comprehension and risk misrepresentation of culturally embedded practices. The repeated need for clarification during the interview highlights the limitations of assuming dialectical uniformity. It may be stated that without attention to these micro-variations, even well-intentioned research may inadvertently fail to gain substantial insights into the areas studied.

Case 2 presents the Angami-speaking context of an Angami researcher from Northern Angami Kohima Village (Sample R5), who conducted fieldwork in Chiechama Village, another Northern Angami settlement (Western Angami Village), to document oral traditions and local legends. Although both villages belong to the same tribe and geographical area, their dialects are markedly different, with only a few terms in common. Tonal variations and unique vocabulary made direct conversation nearly impossible.

A village elder (sample C12) began recounting a story inherited from his grandfather about a family of seven and the pig they raised to be feasted upon during the *Sekrenyi* festival. However, the narrative flow was repeatedly disrupted due to dialectal differences. For instance, the elder referred to "rice" as *Tie*, whereas in Kohima Village it is called *Khutie*. Similarly, the term for "pig" was *Thovo* in Chiechama and *Thevo* in Kohima Village. Other kinship terms posed significant challenges, such as *Awuo* for "elder brothers" in Chiechama had no immediate equivalent in Kohima, and *Anyie* ("big sister") and *Anyienuo* ("small sister") were entirely unfamiliar to the researcher. Even minor conversational phrases required mediation. The researcher reported:

Even making small talk before the interview required the interpreter's intervention. During the story, I had to pause multiple times to clarify terms with the interpreter, as direct comprehension was impossible. The tonal differences not only altered pronunciation but also the implied meaning and social nuance. Without the interpreter, the narrative would have been misrepresented or fragmented. (Sample R5)

This case further exemplifies an extreme multilingual scenario even within a single tribal region, highlighting how intra-tribal dialectal variation can significantly hinder the collection of reliable data. Despite shared tribal identity and geographic proximity, the distinct vocabulary, tonal patterns, and semantic differences between Kohima Village and Chiechama Village created barriers that disrupted the flow of oral narratives. Because of these differences, the interpreter accompanied the session but did not translate continuously. The interpreter intervened only when dialectal terms or concepts were unfamiliar, offering brief explanations, for example, clarifying kinship terms such as *Awuo* or *Anyienuo* that lacked direct counterparts in the researcher's dialect. The researcher's repeated reliance on the interpreter emphasizes the critical role of mediators in preventing misrepresentation or misinterpretation of data. However, it also raises a key question: Can mediators ever fully convey information in its original, nuanced form? The effectiveness of interpreters is dependent on their familiarity not only with the language but also with the specific cultural and research context. There is a potential risk of data misinterpretation arising due to the mediators' bias or a lack of complete understanding of the community's culture.

4.1.2. Cultural Sensitivity and Language

It has been recurrently implied that language is deeply tied to culture, identity, and community values in the context of Nagaland. While being culturally sensitive means respecting local languages, traditions, and promoting inclusivity, a lack of sensitivity can lead to misunderstanding, misrepresentation, or exclusion. The following analysis draws on field experiences from different tribal contexts to illustrate how researchers conducted their study within the backdrop of the complex interplay of language, culture, and social norms.

The first case example can be drawn from the research experience of Sample R9 (Sataka Village, Sema Tribe), who conducted research in Chishilimi Village, both Sumi-speaking communities. She attempted to interview a woman leader regarding local governance and customary decision-making. Though she was fluent, many terms in Chishilimi were unfamiliar, creating immediate communication challenges. She therefore had to resort to Nagamese and English to bridge the gap, but the informant exhibited signs of discomfort with this approach, perceiving it as disrespectful, and chose not to continue the interview. She was compelled to engage a mediator fluent in both dialects, allowing the following interview to proceed more effectively. This case example highlights the critical role of language in establishing trust and respect, particularly in relation to local authority and cultural norms.

Another case example may be highlighted here to further highlight the importance of being culturally aware in conducting research. R1, a researcher from a Khezha-speaking Chakhesang village, conducted an interview in Kikrūma, a Chokri-speaking village, with a village elder on the historical account of the Kikrūma War. However, the stark dialectal differences required a mediator to facilitate communication. In an attempt to establish rapport, the researcher casually exclaimed *yikhale*, intending it as a lighthearted remark. The elder, however, reacted with visible shock. R1 later learned that while the younger generation of

Kikrūma villagers had repurposed *yikhale* as a casual expression of humor, in its original usage, it is considered a severe curse.

The case examples highlighted above reveal that in Nagaland, language functions not merely as a communicative tool but as a key marker of cultural identity, social hierarchy, and local norms. Even when researchers are fluent in a related dialect, subtle differences in terminology, tone, and culturally loaded expressions can affect interaction, trust, and the willingness of participants to share information. Misinterpretations such as casual exclamations being perceived as offensive or generational shifts in meaning highlight how linguistic nuances are inseparable from cultural context. These observations demonstrate that multilingual research in such settings extends beyond linguistic competence; it requires cultural sensitivity, awareness of local social protocols, and, where necessary, collaboration with mediators who are both linguistically and culturally competent. The absence of such precautions may lead to the data being misrepresented, disengagement of participants, and the inability of the research to capture authentic data within oral traditions.

4.2. Addressing Context-Specific Challenges With Inadequate Multilingual Research Frameworks

Multilingual research frameworks are usually designed to make studies more inclusive, but in Nagaland, they often do not work as intended. This is because they are based on assumptions such as shared literacy, universal meanings of concepts, and the possibility of direct translation that do not match the local reality. In practice, these frameworks struggle to capture the richness of oral traditions, cultural values, and context-specific ways of speaking. As a result, important ideas may be misrepresented or lost. The following cases show how and why these frameworks fall short when applied in Nagaland's unique context.

4.2.1. Knowledge Systems Based on Oral Traditions vs. Eurocentric Assumptions

Conventional frameworks prioritize written instruments like surveys, questionnaires, and structured digital tools, which are largely incompatible with Nagaland's oral knowledge systems. For instance, R3, a postgraduate researcher from a Chokri-speaking village, reported administering a survey on participants' attitudes toward mother-tongue instruction. Despite a detailed explanation, most participants consistently selected *strongly agree* for every statement. One participant even asked: Which answer is correct? This indicates that the concept of graded agreement was unfamiliar. Even after rephrasing questions in Chokri, responses remained skewed, suggesting that the Likert-scale format was incompatible with local cognitive and evaluative frameworks. In Chokri, concepts of graded agreement or disagreement do not exist; responses are typically binary, with "yes" meaning "yes" and "no" meaning "no." This reflects a deeply held cultural value in which firmness of response is associated with honesty and integrity. Attempting to impose a scale requiring nuanced gradations contradicts these norms and may lead to confusion, misrepresentation, or inappropriate behavior within cultural norms. Similarly, R7, working in a remote Ao village (Mongsen dialect), noted that even when the survey was translated into the local dialect, some elders required clarification for nearly every question. A local mediator facilitated the process by paraphrasing questions in narrative form and providing culturally relevant context. Without mediation, responses were incomplete or inaccurate.

In another example, during focus group discussions in an Angami-speaking village, R4 observed that participants struggled to articulate opinions about education when prompts were delivered in English.

Concepts such as “curriculum integration” or “cultural preservation” had no direct equivalents in the local dialect. Translators reframed questions using culturally familiar metaphors and symbols. For instance, the term “curriculum,” which denotes the entirety of an educational program, has no direct equivalent in Tenyidie. Educational terms are broadly referred to as *mhasi* (“wisdom”), while schooling-related concepts are expressed as *lesü* (“book”) or *lesüki* (“school”). Education is understood as *lesü mhasi* (“book knowledge”), and an educated person is described as *lesü kephrümia*, literally “book reader.” These cases highlight that academic constructs derived from Eurocentric frameworks often do not align with indigenous knowledge systems, necessitating culturally sensitive adaptations to ensure meaningful and accurate data collection.

The cases show a clear gap between Western-style research tools and the oral, community-based knowledge systems of Nagaland. Many research methods assume that people think in written, structured, and abstract ways, but this does not fit well with communities where communication is mainly oral, responses are direct, and answers are usually just “yes” or “no.” In Naga culture, saying “yes” or “no” is linked to honesty and social integrity, so scales that ask for degrees of agreement, like *strongly agree* or *somewhat agree*, do not make sense. The examples also show that important academic terms, such as “curriculum integration” or “cultural preservation,” often do not have direct translations in local languages. Instead, they need to be explained through familiar cultural expressions and metaphors. This kind of adaptation was necessary not only to help participants understand the questions but also to make sure their answers were true to their cultural perspective. It may be noted that Eurocentric research assumptions cannot adequately capture the richness of orally transmitted knowledge.

4.2.2. Inadequate Translation Practices

The data also point to difficulties that arise not from research tools themselves but from the way translation is carried out during fieldwork. Standard multilingual research practices often insist on word-for-word translation, yet this clashes with local modes of communication that depend on metaphor, symbolism, and contextual interpretation. In reality, interpreters often moved beyond literal translation, reshaping concepts so they would make sense within the community’s cultural context. While this adaptive reframing facilitated smoother communication during fieldwork, it also resulted in subtle distortions of meaning that undermined the integrity of research data.

During fieldwork, R8, an Ao doctoral researcher conducting interviews on customary land practices among the Ao community, encountered a significant problem caused by translation. Despite being accompanied by an interpreter, the interaction demanded word-for-word translation, which led to loss of meaning, leading to misrepresentation in the research data. Responding to the open-ended question “How is land shared within your community?” a male elder responded in Ao, describing a system where land is “used and held” by members of the same clan, but not “owned” in the legal sense. The interpreter translated the response in English as: “In our village, we have collective ownership of land.” The expression “collective ownership” failed to capture the original intent of the elder’s statement. Later, through back-translation and consultation with a second local informant, it became clear that the Ao term referred to shared use under customary custodianship, not ownership in the modern legal sense.

This case shows how rigid adherence to dominant translation protocols can result in the distortion of conceptual meanings. Many indigenous concepts about land, kinship, and governance are based on

relationships and traditions that cannot be directly mapped onto single English words. Apart from this, it also exposed a gap in the interpreter's understanding of the cultural knowledge, highlighting that a limited understanding of local nuances can further lead to misrepresentation.

4.3. Methodological Adaptations in Context-Sensitive Research Practices Suitable for Nagaland

To develop research practices that are truly inclusive, ethical, and suited to a region such as Nagaland, important methodological changes are needed both in the way data is collected and in how it is interpreted. The methods commonly used in multilingual research often assume that languages are standardized, written, and mutually intelligible across communities, and such assumptions risk oversimplifying people's lived experiences and misrepresenting cultural realities.

A significant area that needs attention is translation, as seen in the case example of R8, where the interpreter translated the idea of "shared land" into "collective ownership." This translation overlooked the culturally embedded meaning of the term, demonstrating how a lack of cultural awareness can lead to misrepresentation. This can, in turn, affect how indigenous knowledge is preserved and shared. For this reason, selecting translators who understand local cultures and dialect variations becomes essential. Another aspect to be taken into consideration is the problem posed by standard tools like structured surveys and questionnaires, which are designed for structured answers. In communities like the Nagas, people are more comfortable with sharing knowledge through means of oral traditions like storytelling or collective discussions. Researchers must respect these cultural practices for accurate and meaningful data collection. Even in terms of data interpretation, researchers can also involve community participation, such as local knowledge keepers and community members, rather than depending on outsiders who are not aware of the culture. This not only ensures greater accuracy but also guards against the imposition of external categories and values that may distort indigenous realities. One such example was seen during the fieldwork of R3, where data was collected through an informal discussion between participants and village elders on a *kūwhu ba*, which is an elevated traditional platform in a participant's home used for gatherings. This allowed for a comfortable environment. The topic was discussed collectively, building on one another's accounts and clarifying points when needed. Such discussions provided depth and contextual nuances that standard, individual interviews might have missed. This shows how locally preferred forms of dialogue can give more authentic data.

In light of the above discussions, conducting research in Nagaland requires more than just speaking the language. It calls for cultural sensitivity, respect for local knowledge systems, and a willingness to adjust research methods based on field realities.

5. Implication of the Study

This study presents several implications for research in linguistically complex settings. It highlights that standard definitions and approaches to multilingual research are inadequate for linguistically dense settings like the Nagaland language, as variations occur across multiple layers. For such reasons, there is a need for the rethinking and redesigning of tools such as Surveys, Likert Scales, and even strategies like code-switching, as they may not be effective unless they are co-developed with the local community and adapted to the specific linguistic needs. This then makes it necessary for research training programs to

emphasize methodological flexibility in the field, ethnographic sensitivity, and active community involvement, ensuring that researchers are not only academically competent but are also capable of dealing with real cultural and linguistic complexities they encounter in the fieldwork.

There is also a need to understand how data is interpreted and presented in culturally sensitive settings, as language is much more than just a tool for communication. Oversimplifying or generalizing linguistic variations simply for the sake of analysis can cause more harm than good; hence, community co-authorship, collaborative analysis, and culturally informed consent processes in future research should be considered.

Although the study is rooted in Nagaland, the findings can also be applied to other places with similar complex multilingual settings. It contributes to the discourse on decolonizing research methods, especially in indigenous, rural settings with localized complexities. Tailor-made methodologies that are region-specific and allow for dialect-level recognition are essential for accurate and meaningful research outcomes.

6. Discussion

The findings of the present study build upon findings from several studies that have addressed the challenges of research in a similar multilingual research context. For example, a study by Adamo and Marác (2017) highlights the limitations of standardized research tools and policies in multilingual research and emphasizes a reframing of multilingual research frameworks toward more participatory, community-centred approaches that recognize dialectal diversity. They argue that when language policies are too rigid, they often fail to capture the real complexities of multilingual societies. Another study conducted by Csata and Marác (2021) also argues in a similar line, stating that many policies treat multilingualism as a symbol of diversity without looking into how languages are intertwined into the everyday life and culture of the people. When translation is treated as a neutral, word-to-word transfer of a language tool for translation, it can cause harm because it overlooks the intrinsic connection of language to identity, culture, and history. Tikhir's (2024) study reinforces this argument by showing how communities that have faced cultural assimilation actively use language as a means of asserting their identity and protecting their history. These issues reflect the framework of Meier et al. (2024), who emphasize that language choices, including the involvement of interpreters, carry organizational, social, and political importance. Interpreters are not neutral messengers but active co-creators who influence the representation, trust, and legitimacy of the research process. Svensson (2024) further adds that meaning in multilingual interviews is continuously negotiated among the researcher, interpreter, and the participant, making data collection a dynamic, co-constructed process rather than a simple question-and-answer exchange. This strengthens the findings of the study, where in Nagaland, the interpreters shape both data collection and analysis through factors such as tribal affiliations and dialectical backgrounds.

Given the above concerns, within the context of linguistically dense Nagaland, relying solely on academic training is insufficient; researchers must cultivate deep linguistic and cultural sensitivity if they are to produce research that is inclusive and genuinely representative of the communities involved (Svensson, 2024). This study also finds that standard tools often do not work in Nagaland because they fail to deal with the many dialect differences and the unique realities of different communities. Like Csata and Marác (2021) argue, research methods must be redesigned to fit the community's realities and must involve the community itself. This makes the research not only more accurate but also more respectful and meaningful.

7. Conclusion

The findings of the study highlight the challenges in conducting research in a linguistically diverse and culturally sensitive context like Nagaland and the need to rethink research approaches as opposed to standard, conventional approaches that often reflect Eurocentric biases. This lack can be attributed to factors such as prioritizing written over oral knowledge, the uncritical application of standardized tools that lack linguistic and cultural relevance, and the limited practice of collaborative or participatory methodologies.

The study presents alternatives and plausible solutions to these challenges, highlighting innovative methodological approaches such as participatory design, which actively involves community members in shaping the research process, and research frameworks that are flexibly adapted rather than rigidly applied. It also highlights the importance of layered and context-specific documentation where data is collected to capture cultural, linguistic, and contextual nuances beyond literal transcription. There is also an emphasis on collaborative research models that actively involve community members, values, and indigenous knowledge systems, and adhere to ethical standards to add value and authenticity to the study. This kind of shift in the paradigm should not be a mere technical adjustment but epistemologically reflected in recognizing and asserting value and importance to the indigenous knowledge systems.

In conclusion, linguistic diversity in a context like Nagaland is therefore not a barrier to overcome but becomes a vital aspect through which the identification of methodological challenges must not only be acknowledged but also be addressed for research to be conducted in a fair and ethically valid manner. An urgent need for transformation is recommended not just for the sake of advocating for inclusive methodological changes but for research to be valid in a multilingual setting, where it can be looked at as an opportunity rather than a hindrance.

8. Limitations

Several limitations of the study must be acknowledged. The study is deeply rooted in the socio-linguistic context of Nagaland, making the generalizability of the findings highly context-specific; hence, applying the conclusions to other multilingual settings must be done cautiously and with necessary adaptations. Also, given the hyper-diverse and localized nature of dialects, the study may still fail to cover the entire linguistic variation across all tribes, sub-tribes, and villages in Nagaland, leaving some underrepresented. The duration of the study was also limited to three months; however, a long-term study might provide a deeper understanding of the challenges and intricacies involved in a multilingual setting. Finally, the study presented a brief picture of challenges in multilingual research in Nagaland, but it requires an in-depth analysis of power dynamics and other contributing factors.

By presenting limitations in the cross-cultural and linguistic translation and interpretation of reflective notes in collaboration with the community, the authors have attempted to address the various forms of bias, such as academic, urban, generational, researcher positionality, and translation.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The study uses secondary qualitative data from interviews, which are not publicly available due to ethical and confidentiality considerations.

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No LLMs were used in the making of this article.

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From Babel to Bridge: The Challenges of Research Co-Production in Multilingual Spaces

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Abstract

This article discusses emerging findings from a large-scale study undertaken in 12 diverse areas of England focused on reducing health inequalities for refugees, asylum seekers, and migrant populations. Working with multilingual populations has posed both ethical and practical considerations throughout the design and implementation of this co-produced participatory research project. Despite our deep-rooted commitment to working collaboratively with communities of interest and a large team of multilingual academic and community partners who have co-designed the study, the linguistic complexities of operationalising planned activities have highlighted multiple obstacles. We argue that multilingual research presents significant challenges to researchers and has the potential to jeopardise commitments to inclusivity and co-production, even for those teams well-versed in working with refugee and migrant groups. Practical considerations around recruitment in diverse languages, appropriate translations of project documentation, and timely booking of sufficient interpreters repeatedly emerged as challenges, as has gaining informed consent, particularly where literacy and understanding of concepts of research are new to participants. The methodological difficulties involved in achieving linguistic inclusivity are outlined, together with the complexities of interpreting and translating set within a context of negotiating different power relationships between institutions, academic researchers, collaborative partners, community co-researchers, and participants. Whilst community co-researchers and organisations create a vital bridge to enable all participants to communicate effectively within an ethical and collaborative space, we interrogate the challenges inherent in such empirical research and propose methodological practices to address these concerns.

Keywords

asylum seekers; co-production; inclusivity; migrants; multilingual; power dynamics; refugees

1. Introduction

Socially engaged, qualitative research rightly seeks to empower and champion participants' concerns and foreground their lived experience to both ensure validity of findings and as a matter of social justice (Smith & Wool, 2025). The ethos of participation and co-production requires considerable attention to ensure nuanced and meaningful inclusion, particularly when working with diverse, multilingual groups of refugees and migrants who may be perceived as experiencing heightened risk and complex vulnerabilities (Davidson et al., 2024). These essential considerations of ethical research practice entwine with the complex funding and policy landscape in the UK and internationally. This can lead to significant and extensive complexities in project governance and throughout the research process, from planning to operationalisation of activities, and beyond. This article will discuss the challenges of delivering a large-scale research project with participants who speak multiple languages while seeking to ensure inclusivity of experience is both a key objective and guiding principle. Studies in the linguistic fields have begun to grapple with questions of how to engage with speakers of second or multiple languages (Saaida, 2023), yet the migration studies arena is yet to develop a similar attention to its practice, despite the proliferation of multilingual research.

Inclusivity is a guiding objective of this study to enable the active participation of the multicultural and multilingual participants within the research cohort. The research aligns with the UK Government guidance on social research practice (Government Social Research Profession, 2022), which emphasises the need to meaningfully understand the populations participating in the research, ensuring that participants feel welcomed and supported to engage in an equal manner, whilst acknowledging the barriers and enablers to their inclusion. With refugee and migrant inclusion conceptualised as relating to wellbeing and belonging (Dobson et al., 2021), in multilingual research settings this translates to the need to ensure that all participants have the opportunity within that space to be listened to, heard, and understood. The aim of linguistic inclusivity is thus bias-free communication, that attempts to be equally inclusive of people of all ethnicities, gender identities, sexual orientations, religious affiliations, abilities, and ages, by communicating in a non-hierarchical way that makes no presumptions about the receiver of such communication (British Association for Applied Linguistics, n.d.). However, such complexity may make it difficult to give voice to all participants, especially those who are most marginalised, for example those who rely on others to interpret for them, or who experience multiple communication barriers such as sensory impairment, necessitating interventions and filtering of information. Accordingly, such elements speak to the consideration of linguistic power dynamics within the research, explored further below (Zhao et al., 2024).

The project's understanding of culture is informed by the idea of the complex whole formed by shared patterns and behaviours that distinguish members of a group from another (Avruch, 1998; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Multiculturalism captures the overall notion that individuals have the right to have their differences respected (Locke & Bailey, 2013) and that the values of all cultures are valid (Nieto, 1992). Cultural skills deployed by the research team therefore require aptitude and sensitivity to acknowledge and navigate these concepts in practice appropriately. Thus, this article draws upon insights from the fields of participatory research to inform current debates within migration studies about multilingual migrant and refugee inclusivity within research. In bringing these together in conversation, this article aims to reflect upon the challenges for interdisciplinary teams working in these areas and argues for the need to embed long timeframes and better resourcing within research design and funding structures to enable these issues to be sufficiently addressed. This article takes an inclusive framework focusing on aiming to ensure that our

approach to ethical research is guided both by cultural sensitivity and adherence to the principles of meaningful participation (Ullah, 2024). Inclusivity in this multilingual and multicultural research context refers to the commitment that research should be shaped by people of diverse backgrounds from different communities and that different speakers remain equal during the research process at all stages. It therefore reflects a systematic and planned approach to encourage representation of members with different characteristics from our participant communities.

2. Research Methodology

The project at the heart of this discussion is a three-year UK-based UKRI-funded initiative to explore the use of community assets to tackle health inequalities for refugees, asylum seekers, and migrant communities. It focuses on three regions, East of England, North London, and South London, with 12 fieldsites that offer a comparative perspective in terms of urban, rural, accessibility, and population differences. These are Cambridge, Peterborough, Ipswich, Lowestoft, Great Yarmouth, Norwich, Colchester, Wethersfield, Barnet, Islington, Greenwich, and Lewisham. The project focuses on four core asylum-seeking and refugee populations—Afghans, Hong Kongers, Syrians, and Ukrainians—who have been given protection via well-established UK resettlement schemes across the sites, thus facilitating comparability throughout the study. This selection also helps to identify differences in experience dependent on route of entry, subsequent access to housing, designated support and other services, as well as the specific context of the fieldsite location and facilities available therein. Each fieldsite has, in discussion with community partners, and based on administrative data sets and information available, also selected one EU and one non-EU nationality group in addition to the four core groups as research participants. Wethersfield is treated differently as it provides asylum accommodation for single adult male asylum seekers and thus has a dynamically changing population. In total, there are a minimum of 28 nationalities and approximately 44 languages among the project participants.

The collaborative project team includes three universities and eight civil society/community partner organisations. The latter are either embedded within local communities in each fieldsite or work closely with other organisations that provide front-line services. Recruitment of two community co-researchers (CCRs) per fieldsite via community partners has been a key feature of the project structure. CCRs are remunerated on a fee basis for their time. They have had extensive three-day and ongoing training involving practice activities, role-playing, and learning about various research methodologies. CCRs have been recruited to mirror as many participant nationality groups as possible, although given the complexity of the sampling frame, CCRs do not represent each nationality for every fieldsite. Hence on occasion this has led to a “doubling-up” of fieldsite cover by speakers of particular languages as necessary, depending on the required languages for a specific activity. The presence of CCRs is vital to the research process, from recruitment of participants through to delivery of creative activities. Both CCRs, academics, and community partner staff involved in the research (who have excellent or mother-tongue levels of skills in certain languages) perform essential interpreting functions, for example conversations during activities and “consenting” of participants. CCRs were recruited explicitly based on their ability to speak one or more project languages, a competent level of English, aptitude and interest in performing project tasks, as well as meeting requirements for gender balance and a spread of age ranges. They are mentored throughout the project by the team for each fieldsite, which consists of an academic lead and community-based partners, providing a consistent point of contact and support.

Delivering this project across multiple fieldsites has been particularly challenging, requiring a commonality of approach whilst allowing for local variation according to population, area structure (service delivery models etc.), needs, and geography. Thus, for example, for the fieldsite teams working in the East of England, with a less developed public transport system in many cases, travel is far more time-consuming, complex, and likely to experience disruption than for those working in London. As a co-produced endeavour from the initial conception of the project, writing of the bid, and operationalisation of the entire process, fieldsite teams have autonomy to tailor activities as they wish, given their knowledge of the dynamics in each setting, as long as they align with the core pillars of the activity and the agreed timeline. Each fieldsite is tasked with delivering a series of 12 community forums (CFs) across a two-year period. These CFs are the setting where the project participants come together in mixed nationality and linguistic groups to engage in research activities including data collection, creative sessions, and exhibition planning. In some localities it has been identified that activities or forums require additional targeted engagement with “hard to reach” populations or to overcome complexities if specific dynamics pertain around gender, age, or relationships between diverse populations who share a common language. The forum settings have thus brought to light several key methodological challenges which this article will reflect on.

The project seeks to understand the strategies refugee, asylum seeking, and migrant populations employ in their use of community assets to tackle health inequalities, viewed through the three key prisms of housing and accommodation, food and nutrition, and broader services such as health, education, and legal advice; all of which underpin the wider social determinants of health (Marmot et al., 2020; Moustakas et al., 2024). Community assets are broadly defined and include services, activities, spaces, or people that are an integral part of community life. They can be formal or informal assets and include advice and information services, community hubs, community groups, religious organisations, open spaces, food banks, leisure centres, etc. Understanding barriers to access assets and whether these pertain to an individual’s protected characteristics, socio-economic status, linguistic barriers, route of entry to the UK (and thus legally permitted usage of statutory or publicly delivered services), or personal migration trajectory, are all fundamental to the project aims.

In the sections below, the methodological challenges involved in achieving such inclusivity in this study are firstly outlined, given the diversity of participants, the co-existence of different languages, English language ability, education level, and length of time in the UK. The complexities of interpreting and translating within the project are subsequently explored before finally looking at the challenges in seeking to create inclusivity in a context of negotiating different power relationships which exist between institutions, academic researchers, collaborative partners, CCRs, and participants in the project.

3. Discussion

The central argument of this article is that the substantive difficulties that multilingual research poses compound the well-documented methodological and ethical complexities of community-based research (O’Sullivan et al., 2023; Salway et al., 2015), thereby problematising commitments to inclusivity and co-production. Despite having a multilingual project team who are well versed in working with refugee and migrant groups as academics, facilitators, practitioners, supporters, and advocates, many of whom have migration histories themselves, the complexities and tensions of working with such a wide range of linguistic differences are multiple and ever-changing. Scholars have recently begun to consider the importance of

researching multilingually in highlighting the critical need for conscious reflection on the process and effect of such approaches (King, 2023), yet these complexities are not commonly discussed or addressed in research training, ethics processes, or methodological literature (Holmes et al., 2013). However, multilingualism poses direct challenges to the participatory, co-production approaches common to research with refugee and migration populations, and indeed, researchers may overtly downplay the complexities in research with such populations (Holmes et al., 2015). Accordingly, we seek to explicate some of the intricacies of these methodological approaches, while acknowledging that they will be context and situationally dependent.

3.1. Unravelling Hierarchies of Language, Literacy, and Knowledge Within Research Settings

The project team were committed to ensuring that low levels of English and education should not be a barrier to participation. To this end, to ensure representation from our target six participant groups in each fieldsite, partners and CCRs did not assess English ability when recruiting participants for the project. Thus, at each CF, approximately six to eight different languages would be spoken by participants. Teams were prepared for mixed levels of English capability at each fieldwork event, and interpreters were provided accordingly via CCRs and team members. Each CF was run in English with simultaneous translation taking place as needed. In practice, with some participants having moderate to good levels of English, translation was not required in every language. The fluid nature of the forums and different language requirements of each one meant that these events could be chaotic and noisy, impeding efforts to provide sufficient opportunity for clarity and understanding for each participant. At one CF in the East of England, seven different nationalities were represented. The challenges of sensitively managing such linguistic diversity were apparent throughout the initial consent process and into the research activities themselves. Dedicated time was built-in to ensure participants fully understood the activities and tasks, leading at times to frustration from those with more developed language or research comprehension skills who had understood and wanted to move on to next steps, in comparison with those still attempting to understand the explanation and task. However, it was notable that mutual support and cooperation developed over the course of the workshops, with participants typically aiding those with lower English proficiency. It was observed that this collaborative attitude was highly beneficial to the group of participants who appreciated the opportunity to mix and interact with other nationalities in a relaxed setting.

It was fundamental to the inclusive project ethos that researchers engaged participants equally regardless of different migration status, duration of residence in the UK, and English proficiency. English proficiency of participants before arrival in the UK varied greatly. Recent Afghan refugees, for example, include a wide variety of backgrounds, from military drivers with very little English or education, service personnel who had acted as interpreters so had excellent English proficiency albeit potentially low levels of education, to Afghan female judges with very high levels of education but often poorer English language skills. Generally, lower levels of English were associated with gender, with Afghan women (regardless of qualification level) particularly disadvantaged amongst those who had arrived as part of the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy and the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme. These two programmes were run by the UK Home Office to resettle eligible Afghan nationals to the UK and have now been replaced by the Afghan Resettlement Programme. Afghans spoke Dari, Pashto, or Farsi (sometimes more than one), while Syrian participants all spoke Arabic. Hong Kongers spoke Cantonese, and Ukrainians all spoke Ukrainian and sometimes Russian also.

Long-standing shortfalls in ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) funding and dispersed provision mean that many refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants who arrive in the UK without a competent standard of English face great variability in access to such services. Extensive research and scholarship shows that English language acquisition is critical to adaptation and building a new life in the UK (Bell Foundation, 2024; Casey, 2016; Home Office, 2019). Indeed, the Bell Foundation (2024, p. 11) emphasised:

The ability to communicate in the host country's national or official language [English] increases productivity in reducing the costs of communication with others, complement[s] other forms of human capital (e.g., networks, or skills), and can lead to wider integration outcomes (i.e., democratic participation, access to services, or education).

However, the ability of migrants to improve their English is hindered by the current provision of state-funded courses. Research indicates this is characterised by a highly fractured funding landscape (Bradstreet, Marren, et al., 2024; Casey, 2016) where “in general, funding is poorly related to need, with far too many students being offered courses as a result of funding considerations, rather than an assessment of their learning needs” (Lifelong Education Commission, 2022, p. 29). Additional obstacles to progress include a low number of tuition hours per week. A study noted that “while ESOL provision typically begins within the first month, it often falls short of the eight-hour mark, sometimes offering only 1–2 hours of informal ESOL,” and “of the 118 people requiring ESOL, 30% are attending 8+ hours, and 70% are receiving less than 8 hours” (as cited in an East of England Local Government Association/Local Government East internal report from 2024, not publicly available). This low number of tuition hours results in very slow improvements in attainment equivalent to one grade per academic year rather than per term as is common in the private English as a Foreign Language (EFL) sector.

Given the impact of access to ESOL training on the populations in question, the research found immense variability in opportunities to develop English proficiency post-migration. The inability of learners to make progress towards improving their English proficiency is further compounded by significant funding cuts. Although no recent national figures are available to map the reduction in ESOL funding, cuts in provision correlate to falls in the overall Adult Skills Fund (which replaced the Adult Education Budget in 2024), and frequent policy change has compounded the situation (Isphording, 2015; Migrant English Support Hub, 2024). Inevitably, demand for ESOL classes has vastly increased over recent years, which with limited provider capacity leads to long waiting lists for extended periods (as cited in an East of England Local Government Association/Local Government East internal report from 2024, not publicly available). Bradstreet, Stevenson, and Woodhouse (2024, p. 5) reported that “lower-level ESOL courses tend to have the longest waiting lists,” and it is the lower-level courses that have the highest demand. Access varies by status, with some learners, e.g., from Hong Kong, required to pay significant fees for ESOL classes, reducing their ability to participate. Payment for ESOL lessons is dependent on eligibility for funding from the Adult Skills Fund (available after three years plus of UK residence), and although Hong Kongers may be able to access ESOL through the HK Welcome Programme, few providers deliver this targeted service, perhaps through lack of awareness (Bradstreet, Stevenson, & Woodhouse, 2024). Despite plans dating back to 2016 to develop a funded English Language Strategy (see further HM Government, 2018), there is still no English Language Strategy in place for England despite stakeholder pressure.

The findings unsurprisingly noted that length of time in the UK generally correlated to higher levels of working English, although in many cases it is unclear how participants acquired their language skills, e.g., via government-funded language learning, informal learning with voluntary sector organisations, internet-based learning, or simply interactions in daily life. Age at arrival was a clear factor in language acquisition, with young adults, particularly those with some English mandatory schooling, having improved their skills rapidly by interpreting for older family or other community members. In contrast, mature adults (40+) frequently struggled with language learning. These findings correlate with wider ESOL-focused research (Bell Foundation, 2024; Casey, 2016). The children of older community members—whether born in the UK/second-generation migrants or first-generation migrants who came to the UK at a young age—are relied upon heavily by older generations to mitigate language challenges. Importantly for some communities, frustration with language learning challenges (structural and acquisition-based) has resulted in older generations simply failing to continue with language acquisition and accepting that they will never be able to operate in the UK in the same way as in their country of origin (Bell Foundation, 2024).

Whilst all languages were welcomed and included within the project, in practice English was the most commonly spoken language within the participant groups and research team and therefore persisted as the most frequently used. Juggling immense diversity in English proficiency and educational level within the heterogeneity of project participants has been an ongoing challenge, requiring constant reappraisal and readjustment throughout the two years of data collection activity. Fieldsite teams frequently reflected on this barrier to participant inclusivity, which they tackled within fortnightly discussion meetings to adjust the approach as required. One technique used to improve this was to divide participants into groups of broadly equal ability, when enough time could be built into the process to allow for this. Alternatively, the team would sometimes hold extra sessions in a single language where it was recognised that linguistic or cultural factors had potentially affected the detailed collection of participant experiences. However, given the shifting nature of CF composition every time with different participants attending, the fluctuating variables remained a constant unknown to navigate. Towards the mid-point of the project, it was recognised that it would be valuable to hold single-language focus groups to enable a deep dive into the distinctive experiences of the different nationality groups, whilst also accounting for differences in routes of entry within these. The opportunity to share experiences as a group in their native language, supported by interpreters, offered a complementary element to the CFs. Methodologically, supporting such variation was a significant and ongoing challenge for the fieldsite teams throughout the project.

3.2. Working With Community Researchers: The Dynamic Challenges of Multiple Roles

CCRs were recruited from fieldsite areas on the basis that they were members of one of the migrant communities and had deep and well-established networks. Two CCRs were recruited per fieldsite (predominantly selected by language and seeking always to have both male and female researchers in each team); therefore, due to particular needs at certain fieldwork events, CCRs were sometimes asked to work in other fieldsite locations as a result of their gender, or ability to speak a particular dialect or language. For instance, it may be inappropriate for women of a particular community to speak with male CCRs, or if no female members of a fieldsite team have the required language. These elements impact not only meaningful co-production and inclusion at the overall project level but can also have implications for micro-level data-gathering. The CCR has not built the level of trust within the new fieldsite that they have with their usual one, which can impede the research process. At one such event, a male CCR who speaks Dari and

Pashto was asked to attend another fieldsite to translate for several Afghans who had registered to attend the forum. A group of Afghan men had carshared from their isolated rural location where they were housed in ex-military properties in order to attend. Others came separately from the two hotels housing asylum seekers in the area, and some from elsewhere in the town. The CCR spent considerable time assisting some participants to find the location of the event on the telephone, which meant he could not translate some of the proceedings for the newly arrived asylum seekers, one of whom spoke hardly any English. The men who had carshared arrived almost halfway through the allocated time for the event, meaning that the consent process had to be undertaken by team members without disrupting the flow of events for participants who had arrived on time. The team decided to create a separate table for the Afghan participants with a team member who speaks Pashto working with the CCR to carry out the data collection activities to ensure that they felt welcome and included. The team stayed much longer than planned to facilitate this, which the venue was able and willing to accommodate on this occasion. This type of responsiveness is emblematic of the type of situations that occur at each CF. The forums require adaptability and flexibility and all team members to be willing to deviate from the planned approach to one that fits the circumstances of the situation, while simultaneously maintaining the needs and requirements of the project and centring the inclusion and dignity of participants.

Research with so-called “hard to reach” groups frequently relies on the active facilitation of participant recruitment by community partners, gatekeepers, or academics with links into the appropriate communities. In this project, where the diversity of types of migrants spans those with long-established lives in the UK (for instance elderly Italian people in Islington) to very recent arrivals housed in dispersal accommodation, there has been a key focus on recruiting a range of refugees and migrants who capture the spread of official schemes and unofficial routes into the UK. This recruitment stage is subject to the ability and opportunity of sharing materials in appropriate languages, in the right places, at the right time. Concerns over safety (for community organisations and potential participants) in the ever-increasing hostile climate since the riots of 2024 have also limited prospects for circulating recruitment materials more publicly on social media and the internet. The project has therefore relied on a variety of methods at the local level to recruit, including, to an extent, upon the abilities of CCRs to effectively communicate project details to potential participants through word of mouth and their own contacts. Project materials in the form of flyers translated into 25 languages are succinct and contain limited information. The effect of this is to limit the inclusivity of the pool of participants to some extent, potentially capturing only a particular subsection of the desired populations. Recruitment limitation occurred in varying forms despite the issuing of clear guidance as to participant inclusion and exclusion criteria.

CFs with up to 18 participants have had up to seven or eight languages spoken within these groups, and the logistical issues with providing interpreters for so many languages in a group discussion are significant. Due to the methods of recruitment, and despite advance registration (sometimes online and sometimes in person, depending on the fieldsite), it was difficult to ascertain levels of English capability in advance of the session, thereby making it problematic to have appropriate interpreters in the required languages. The mitigation for this situation was the use of CCRs to interpret as needed. In their capacity as members of certain population groups, CCRs also bridged the insider–outsider gap for some of our participants (Court & Abbas, 2013). However, the use of untrained interpreters brings in deeper questions around the accuracy of translation and the nuances of interpretation related to English competency. It also raises issues of the importance of subjectivity and social position on the dynamics within the setting and the research (MacKenzie, 2015), whether translation may

threaten the reliability of qualitative data (Court & Abbas, 2013; Holmes et al., 2013), if interpreters should be perceived as active participants in the study (Temple & Edwards, 2002), and whether their role should evolve from data collection to analysis (Tsai et al., 2004). Having different participants at different CFs meant that language and interpreter requirements changed every time. On some occasions, participants would speak the main language of a nationality group (e.g., Farsi), whereas at a subsequent session a minority language would be required to support participants (e.g., Dari). Therefore, the shifting nature of the participants' spoken languages meant that it was easy to be wrong-footed, notwithstanding preparations having been made to cater for the anticipated linguistic requirements.

CCRs were involved in translations of project documentation, including the participant information sheets and consent forms. They took an active role in supporting the consent process, particularly where literacy and understanding of concepts of research or activities were new to participants. The circular dance between research team, CCR in their role as intermediary/interpreter, and participant took time to coalesce meaningfully and ensure a substantive insight. Here again, the reliance on CCRs to effectively and accurately communicate the demands of the consent form required trust from the academics that CCRs understood what was being asked of the participants. The training programme placed significant emphasis on the rigour of ethics and the consent process, thereby giving some confidence in the CCRs' knowledge and understanding of the importance of this. However, as highlighted, researcher identity matters and affects the research (Lincoln et al., 2016; MacKenzie, 2015), and this applies particularly with regard to community researchers, where they are often acting as informal community liaison (Salway et al., 2015). The dynamics of interaction between CCRs and research participants in their own language is an area that the academic teams observe but are unable to participate in and understand. Therefore, the extent of the influence of the CCR on the participant, the research setting, as well as the interactions prior to—and during—the research process, remains opaque and difficult to untangle.

The length of the CFs was a practical concern that had related effects on interpreting. In seeking to make the forums as inclusive as possible, the times and venues were carefully selected with community partners to facilitate attendance for those with caring responsibilities or work commitments, providing a variety of times and dates where possible. Sessions always provided a meal in recognition of the fact that many of our population groups were confronting challenges around affordability and accessibility of nutritious and culturally appropriate food as well as time and opportunity to socialise. Therefore, the sessions were planned to incorporate sufficient time to accommodate the consent process, data collection activities, and a meal, resulting in events that usually span 2 to 3 hours. The team was already cognisant of the “uncomfortable realities of doing engaged qualitative research” in community settings (Pillow, 2003, p. 193), and the messiness that Pillow urges researchers to embrace is starkly evident in the reflexivities of discomfort that our research team encountered within these sessions. Pressures of time, attention, and commitments elsewhere for participants were all at play, while researchers attempted to balance the demands of attentiveness to research questions and data collection, and to create space for participants and their interpreters to carry out their linguistic interactions and be actively heard within the group.

3.3. Balancing Power Dynamics at Different Scales

The rigours of providing informed consent and the resulting temporal impact on the entire CF illustrates the exercising of institutional power experienced by all, but most acutely by participants with limited English.

Providing explanations of academic concepts and processes in several languages to a range of participants with different backgrounds was particularly difficult and time-consuming, even for experienced researchers. It sometimes took as long as an hour to ensure that all participants had correctly completed the consent forms at community events. The participation information sheet and consent forms were longer than the team had originally planned in order to include all the information required by the approving ethics committee. Despite developing easy-read versions of consent forms in all languages, these still took considerable time to go through in different languages with participants. Having to work through these forms in up to seven or eight languages at each event took time and complicated the flow of the research activity, particularly when participants arrived late. Interpreters were frequently required to ensure that informed consent had been provided. Participants with moderate or above English proficiency would be ready to begin long before others. When the research got underway, the presence of up to 18 participants, two CCRs, sometimes an additional two or more interpreters, and the research team in one room created an environment that was frequently difficult, both literally and figuratively, for participants to be genuinely heard. Creating space for listening actively to different voices, whether interpreters or participants, was a constant challenge within the noisy settings of CFs. Adding to this was the presence of babies and small children accompanying their parents and the fact that activities were typically held in community spaces that were hosting multiple groups at a time.

3.3.1. Power Within Multilingual Research Settings

The research study was designed and largely carried out in English, and the privileging of English as the common language between research team, CCR, and the majority of participants inevitably creates a power imbalance that disadvantages those with less proficiency. Where multilingual discussions occur and default to a lingua franca, it has been noted that conversations tend to be dominated by the individuals most familiar with the language (Nikulina et al., 2019), and thus single-language groupings may yield the richest data within a multi-language setting such as a CF, as long as there is consensus on terminology and concepts to enable comparability. However, conceptualisations and the articulation of processes, particularly if dissent exists, may also be viewed or presented variably in feed-back in multilingual discussion groups, depending on the language skills of the CCR, culture of the participants, and a perceived hierarchy of values or beliefs within the research space. Where multiple partners and CCRs are working in the same physical space to interpret terms and concepts to participants from different language groups simultaneously, there is often a negotiated process between the interpreters and other researchers in the room to reach a consensus and find a term to describe an activity or concept to those for whom they are interpreting. Dynamics of power can come into play here, and it is thus crucial that observation of dynamics and levels of engagement are identified and explored by the research team (including CCRs), to gain an understanding of both (a) the content of the session, discussions, and perceptions of how the session ran, and (b) whether the session was driven in a particular manner, depending on the “power” held by a person or particular groups at the table.

The sharing of a country of origin or cultural background with participants is but one element of the complexity of negotiating power dynamics within multilingual research. For example, a CCR may be perceived as holding a particularly influential position, through their employment with a well-known or trusted agency, their personal social status, their duration in the UK, or perhaps having a greater knowledge of English or both English and the shared first language. All of these elements may influence the data gathered, language used by participants, and the subtle interpretations of linguistic and physical cues, both positively and negatively, as indeed may

the setting of an activity, for example within a trusted community organisation's premises, rather than in a neutral setting or formal and potentially "alien" academic environment (Somerville, 2005).

The necessity of "sub-contracting" CCRs on occasion creates further potential power imbalances and hierarchies of (in/ex)clusion, e.g., depending on an individual's access to transport, caring responsibilities, or position in a household and social or domestic expectations which may impact their ability to participate in additional activities; whether they have the means (practical, temporal, and fiscal) to travel to locations some distance away from their home fieldsite location (particularly in rural or coastal regions); and the organisation of payment for their work by a collaborating project partner other than their main employing agency. More subtle issues, such as the age of an individual, their membership of a particular cultural group which may be "read" or "coded" by participants regardless of the CCR's language skills, or whether it is seen as culturally congruent for participants to discuss or engage in activities such as individual walking interviews with a person of a different gender, age, or even socio-economic or class background, have also required close attention when undertaking these multilingual research activities.

3.3.2. Institutional Power Within Research

The power wielded by the structural dimensions of institutions echoes within the very heart of the research space itself. The institutional requirements of both funding bodies and universities are necessary and essential to ethical and responsible research practice; however, the concepts of ethical approval and the types of methodologies operationalised in research are neither broadly understood nor familiar to many, even native speakers of English (Patten & Newhart, 2016). Given limited familiarity with research practice within some refugee, asylum seeker, and migrant populations, with often poorer English skills or limited formal education, the requirements on researchers to explain pertinent concepts and obtain informed consent are considerable. Despite best efforts to mitigate this within the project, the effect of such requirements has been to reinforce the imbalance of power between researcher and participant, and pose additional challenges to inclusivity.

It was essential to ensure thorough and appropriate communication of all processes. This, combined with the number of diverse language groups within sessions, made the consent process particularly difficult and time-consuming. Syrian participants, who had been in the UK for around five years or more, were resettled to the UK on the basis of a defined set of vulnerability characteristics which typically did not take prior educational level into account, meaning that for some, lower levels of education and resultant limited understanding of research acted as a barrier to comprehension. In contrast, participants from Hong Kong and Ukraine generally had higher education levels and greater English proficiency, which facilitated their understanding of research methods. The broad range of our asylum-seeking participants equated to considerable variation in pre-existing research understanding and English proficiency, creating complex challenges to engagement, e.g., in the time required to explain the study and obtain consents.

The team's reflections on this issue therefore aimed to create a space which acknowledged these particularities and provided both time and opportunity for discussion and clarification. The starting point for this mitigation was that data collection activities were carried out in spaces selected in collaboration with community partners across all our 12 fieldsites, to allow participants to feel at ease. Given that many participants have experienced (or are currently experiencing) precarious, overcrowded, and difficult housing situations, a sense of security

and familiarity was identified as being particularly important, e.g., in supportive community spaces. Detention centres have been well documented as complex sites and spaces that exercise control and carcerality with significant negative effects on mental health (Filges et al., 2024; Moran et al., 2016). In Wethersfield, where the quasi-detention of asylum seekers on a former Royal Air Force site has proved controversial, the vulnerability of the potential participants and their lack of trust initially required a different approach to the one used elsewhere. Researchers did not use the standardised ethics forms and participant information sheet, which required a signature. Instead, they opted for a verbal explanation and recorded and witnessed consent as part of an initial discussion aimed at building trust and assessing the willingness of the potential participant to build a relationship. This required a high level of cultural skills by the research team, but was instrumental in beginning the process of deeper engagement and trust-building with the participants. In several cases, participants were engaged successfully, went on to attend further workshops, and subsequently recruited other participants from the site.

A CCR or community organisation staff member might for example hold high-level academic qualifications, and have lived experience or prior employment as a researcher, but due to embedded power structures, the flow of finances from grant holders to agencies and the requirements imposed by academic institutions and funders, in addition to linguistic or cultural barriers and the geo-physical research setting, can act to disempower that individual or mask their expertise. Accordingly, unrecognised or merely unspoken community and project structures need to be explored in a safe way, led by CCRs (Vaughn et al., 2018) and often interrogated in granular detail if meaningful co-production and shared understanding is to occur at the deepest level. Thus, the realpolitik of research structures may risk the consolidation of power firmly in the hands of academic institutions or well-established and powerful agencies, reducing the potential to maximise inclusive research by limiting the role of community partners to that of mechanistic linguistic interpreters and cultural translators framed by narrow parameters rather than utilising the full breadth of their partnership status.

It is of paramount importance therefore to implement methodological practices that centre the needs and requirements of participants, CCRs, and community partners within such multilingual projects. To achieve this, it is essential to build in sufficient time and resources at the stage of developing the funding bid. Scholars have argued for the need for longer timeframes in participatory studies and stressed the importance of “slow science” (Schoorman et al., 2025, p. 86). Therefore, the provision of *more than adequate* time and *more than satisfactory* staff resourcing is critical to an authentically inclusive practice with reasonable funds to allow for the multiple requirements of translation and interpreting at formal and informal levels, and at different points within the study. Without this, both project and ethics are potentially compromised by the exigencies of time pressures in all phases. Genuine and equal inclusivity of multilingual participants is fundamental to ensuring a positive and productive research environment, thus building in such time and resourcing is critical. It is advisable for funding bodies and universities to be sympathetic and pragmatic regarding the complexities highlighted here and permit research teams to build in such mechanisms at funding stage that realistically account for these.

4. Conclusion

This article has argued that inclusivity as a guiding principle and ethos of community-based research faces significant complexities of resource and delivery in multilingual settings. Linguistic and cultural diversity is a fundamental challenge for migration studies precisely because it presents barriers to the very ability of

researchers to study these phenomena. Unpacking the power dynamics inherent in multilingual and co-produced research is fraught with difficulties and may not yield practical solutions or desired outcomes. Elements of trust and communication are central to understanding how power may be shared and dispersed, and it requires both adequate time and the ability to achieve consensus and co-design a way forward through a shared “language” of research. Even where mutual desire exists for inclusive and co-designed approaches to power sharing, operationalising such practice may not be possible in the light of externally imposed governance requirements which require specified outputs, rigid time-frames, stringent reporting requirements using technical and inaccessible language, limited flexibility over programme design and budget usage, and requirements to utilise expensive and complex legal and contractual arrangements or to demonstrate levels of fiscal accountability.

The article shows that consideration of these complex issues is essential for those engaging in multilingual research. Such projects may turn out to be more complex to deliver than initially anticipated during the planning stage. Community-centred, collaborative, and co-produced research is a key expectation of the current funding landscape (Campbell & Vanderhoven, 2016; Darby, 2017), yet adequate resourcing for such approaches remains a key issue in terms of implementation. This applies equally to projects at different scales and of different funded amounts. Stinting on necessary research time, support, and resourcing for both academics and community partners potentially devalues both the research approach and the quality of the research itself. Whilst these issues can apply to many forms of research, in multilingual settings they prove to be particularly acute.

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What Does Multilingual Research Show Us About Research Ethics? Examples and Challenges From the Field

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Abstract

Ethics review boards (ERBs) often clash with the emergent, iterative, and co-constructed nature of critical and constructivist research. Conversely, these approaches also challenge ERBs, particularly around the role of language in informed consent, knowledge co-construction, and dissemination. Multilingual research makes these tensions especially visible by foregrounding how language shapes research processes. This article examines the overlooked ethical dimensions of multilingual research, especially in relation to institutional ethics review. Drawing on our multilingual work with marginalized communities, we show how language mediates critical aspects of research practice: from obtaining consent and navigating gatekeeping to co-constructing knowledge. We pursue three aims: (a) reflect on how language mediates ethics approval in critical and constructivist inquiry; (b) explore how sensibility toward language fosters epistemic justice, cultural sensitivity, and methodological appropriateness; and (c) raise awareness of the role of language in ethics procedures, research relationships, and definitions of data. We illustrate these aims with fieldwork examples highlighting the challenges of building trust under restrictive ethics protocols; the need for nuanced linguistic practices in contexts of inequality and underrepresentation; and the use of arts-based methods as an alternative to language-based approaches. The article concludes with examples from the formation of our multilingual institute's ERB and recommendations for other boards.

Keywords

arts-based methods; dialogic and oral ethics; discrimination; institutional ethics; Italy; migration; multilingualism; participatory methods; research ethics; Romani; school-based research

1. Introduction

Ethics review boards (ERBs), research ethics committees, and institutional review boards emerged in biomedical research in response to egregious ethical violations. These prompted foundational ethical guidelines like the Nuremberg Code of 1947 (Nuremberg Military Tribunals, 1947), the Declaration of Helsinki of 1964 (amended in 2024; World Medical Association, 2024), and the Belmont Report in 1979 (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979), which emphasized principles of autonomy, beneficence, and justice in research (Speiglman & Spear, 2009). Initially designed to safeguard human subjects in clinical trials, ERBs assessed risks, benefits, and consent for research involving vulnerable populations. Only later, as academic institutions standardized ethics protocols, did ERBs expand their jurisdiction to the social sciences and humanities.

Critics argue that this “ethics creep” has imposed biomedical-esque assumptions of risk, consent, and trust onto approaches that conceived of and handled such questions differently (N. Shore, 2007). As more awareness is generated about power dynamics, rights, and the shareability of information and data (e.g., standards regarding FAIR and Open Science standards), the shortcomings of ERBs have emerged more clearly (Hammersley, 2009). Moving outside of the postpositivist paradigm, applying ERBs to critical and constructivist research often simplifies or undermines the flexible, relational, iterative, and context-sensitive methods that resist ERBs’ rigid proceduralism (Rasmussen & Cooper, 2019; van den Hoonaard, 2011).

Ethics approval procedures vary across institutions, as there is no European legal obligation to obtain formal approval, while compliance with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is mandatory for all research involving personal data. Ethical review for social science studies typically requires an outline of the objectives, methodology, recruitment strategies, and procedures for obtaining informed consent, alongside measures to protect participants’ privacy and data security. GDPR compliance further necessitates details on data collection, storage and sharing, anonymization, and informing participants of their rights to access, correct, or withdraw their data.

This article focuses on three cases hosted by an Italian research institution, in which seemingly straightforward regulations were put to the test due to the multiple languages used in them. While research data were primarily subject to Italian regulations, the projects were conducted across three national contexts (Italy, Croatia, and Sweden), each characterized by distinct cultural, linguistic, and sociodemographic landscapes. We draw on these three cases throughout the article to highlight how ERB procedures, while well-intentioned, need to carefully consider the nexus of language, law, and social norms within and across national contexts. Further, at the time of writing, Sophia Schönthaler is spearheading the development of the ERB at the authors’ research institute, Eurac Research, in the multilingual Italian province of Bolzano/Bozen, and is drawing on these multilingual research experiences to inform the broader ethical and legal frameworks which are being developed for a research institution of over 500 staff in 17 research specializations.

In this article we do not seek to minimize the importance of ERBs, nor do we seek to place critical constructivist multilingual research in its own category. Rather, we draw on our (multilingual) work with (multilingual) marginalized communities in order to:

1. Reflect on how language mediates ethics approval processes in critical and constructivist inquiry;

2. Raise questions about how language allows for epistemic justice, cultural sensitivity, and methodological appropriateness; and
3. Increase awareness about the role that language plays in ethics procedures, in establishing research relationships, and in what counts as data.

We use examples from our research to highlight issues that span all research approaches, but which emerge especially clearly in critical (and/or) constructivist paradigms in or around multilingualism (Jacobs & van Hest, 2024; Meier et al., 2024). Namely, we focus on how informed consent is obtained and on how knowledge is co-constructed (and therefore how “data” is generated). We focus on these key aspects because language is often erroneously treated in ethics reviews as an invisible medium that relays information between researchers and participants. We remind readers, however, that language is always ideologically charged, its use is always politically motivated, and that language and power are inextricably intertwined (Foucault, 1971). It is therefore fundamental, even in less linguistically complex research, to consider the social function and meaning of the language(s) that we use when working with research participants, developing data collection instruments, and generating data.

2. Ethical Challenges of Multilingual (Ethnographic) Research

Critics have increasingly pointed to the rise of what C. Shore and Wright (2024), Pels et al. (2024), and others call an audit culture within academic institutions: an environment where accountability is measured through formal procedures, standardized documentation, and quantifiable compliance, often at the expense of situated ethical judgment. Within this framework, ERBs function not only as instruments of ethical oversight but as mechanisms for institutional risk management, prioritizing the legal and reputational protection of institutions over the needs of research participants (Haggerty, 2004; C. Shore & Wright, 2015). This shift has led to what Strathern (2000) describes as the “tyranny of transparency,” where ethical rigor is equated with procedural correctness rather than with substantive, dialogic engagement. As a result, ERBs tend to favor projects with clearly bounded, low-risk designs that conform to bureaucratic expectations and are more suited to experimental research than to ethnographic, participatory, and arts-based projects that involve emergent or unpredictable dynamics (van den Hoonaard, 2011). Excessive procedural standardization of ERBs risks undermining the very ethical reflexivity they are meant to promote (N. Shore, 2007). Their increasing surveillance and bureaucratic control restrict academic freedom and distort research design (Haggerty, 2004), treating researchers as potential threats rather than as competent professionals (Dingwall, 2008). Together, these critiques suggest that, while well-intentioned, ethics review processes often result in a one-size-fits-all, “tick-box” approach that stifles methodological innovation and critical inquiry (Herzfeld, 2023).

In multilingual research, a set of comparable issues arises. Researchers working across languages and cultures require specialized ethical guidance when navigating issues related to informed consent, the co-construction of knowledge, and data dissemination (Behi & Nolan, 1995). One of the most complex aspects of multilingual research within the context of ethical procedures is obtaining truly informed consent. That is, when working with multilingual populations, translating consent forms is not a simple technical task (Chiocchetti, 2023). Rather, in addition to a range of legal issues, it can open up a range of ethical concerns (Skaff et al., 2002). Subtle language differences, cultural interpretations, and existing power dynamics all influence how consent is understood and whether it is genuinely voluntary (Behi & Nolan, 1995; Sehlirkoglu,

2024). While accurate translation of consent forms is essential, word-for-word accuracy is not always sufficient or desirable. Researchers need to understand the cultural context, social norms, and everyday expressions to ensure the information is both meaningful and accessible to participants (Koulouriotis, 2011), as well as legally sound. In some cases, the very idea of informed consent may not align with local norms, especially in communities where decisions are made collectively rather than individually. This requires researchers to be flexible and respectful, adapting their approach while still upholding ethical standards (Timraz et al., 2017). Ultimately, the choice of translation method should reflect the research goals, available resources, and the need for translators who are not only fluent in both languages but also culturally, methodologically, and legally competent (Cruchinho et al., 2024).

In light of the issues raised above about ethical ethnographic research and ethical multilingual research, it should come as no surprise that multilingual ethnographic research is doubly complex. In this type of research, ERB challenges are given and expected: gatekeeping and consent procedures can take months to complete, may require the collaboration of multiple specialists, and can still risk not being adequate for the needs of the researcher or the participants. This type of research is necessarily more time- and resource-intensive, and risks being dispreferred by researchers and their employers who are increasingly accustomed to short-term research grants. In fact, we often see a kind of “old faithful” consent document appearing and reappearing from one project to the next because it is simpler to continue to re-purpose a document that has already gone through the review process. The language in these documents risks becoming entirely perfunctory, purely procedural, and fossilized. Institutional ethics review procedures thus risk leading researchers toward social reproduction rather than social innovation. These risks have deleterious effects on the quality of research and on the types of realities it represents.

3. Case Studies: Multilingual Challenges Across Research Phases

In the subsections below, the three authors reflect on the language-related considerations we needed to make in our research and what these considerations brought to light about how language informs and impacts ethics review procedures and data collection (which, in our research, is dialogic and co-constructed). In Andrea Leone-Pizzighella’s research on two urban middle schools in multilingual contexts in Northern Italy, she reflects on the institutional obstacles to building trust and gaining the consent of newcomer students and their parents. Sophia Schönthaler then draws on her multilingual fieldwork experiences with Romani women in Croatia, Sweden, and Italy to illustrate the challenges of working with non-standardized languages with a population that is historically mistrustful of institutions like universities. Johanna Mitterhofer then discusses how arts-based methods can be used to supplement or even circumvent otherwise language-heavy data collection methods with participants who have limited knowledge of local official languages, and reflects on the challenges arts-based methods may pose to institutional ethics procedures.

3.1. Institutional and Ethical Barriers to Multilingual Inclusion

Since language is often treated by non-linguists as a transparent medium through which ideas are transmitted, its role in the legal and ethical consent process is often oversimplified. However, language plays a fundamental role in determining who participates in research, how much agency they have in the research process, how data are co-constructed among participants, what types of information and experiences eventually become “data” and which ones get thrown out. This section offers reflections based on STEMCo,

a participatory action research project in two middle schools in Northeastern Italy, starting with Vignette 1 (all names are pseudonyms).

Vignette 1. Fieldnotes—STEMCo:

I take a minute to hand out the consent forms to the students while the teacher is getting set up. Three students asked for consent forms for their parents in English. The support teacher tells me that there is one girl who doesn't really speak Italian: "Actually, she doesn't speak it at all."

Of the sixty families who were invited to an in-person information event about my project at one school, two moms showed up. Five of the forty families at the other school attended the online information event. A few weeks later, every group of students in the classroom has one person who doesn't want to be recorded or who hasn't turned in a consent form yet. I move the recorder to a new place. Two students who haven't turned in their consent forms then sit down next to the recorder. I move the recorder away from them (and will probably have to throw out this recording).

Still weeks later, I told Kamala and Tatiana that I can see they're not comfortable with me recording them, even though they both agreed to everything on the assent form. I reassured them that I'm not trying to listen to their private conversations.

The STEMCo project involved over 400 hours of ethnographic and participatory engagement in five second-year middle school classes over the course of the 2022–2023 school year, during which time audiovisual and textual classroom discourse data were shared back with teachers during quarterly reflection sessions. The critical-constructivist and participatory approach of the project led to unexpected obstacles throughout the informed consent process: Despite the researcher's institution being focused on applied linguistics in a historically multilingual political context, complex language considerations had previously only been made in the post-consent phase. However, given that the middle school student body involved in this project was multilingual (and, in terms of ethical review, in highly consequential ways), STEMCo needed to take language into account from the beginning. While Pasolini Middle School, in the trilingual South Tyrol, was inherently involved in a framework of multilingualism at a structural and political level, this was not the case for De Gasperi Middle School, located in the officially monolingual Region of Veneto (n.b., both school names are pseudonyms). The urban location of both schools, however, meant that the student body was multiethnic, with several newly arrived students and established residents who used multiple languages in their daily lives. STEMCo aimed to explore the different strategies and supports for the accommodation of newly arrived students in a historically multilingual context (i.e., Pasolini in South Tyrol) and in a newly multilingual context (i.e., De Gasperi in Veneto), and was therefore highly attentive to the role(s) of language in the consent process (Leone-Pizzighella, 2023a, 2023b).

The first step of this project was to gauge the schools' interest in participating, a process that took over a year in the case of one school. Once this initial step was taken, the development of informed consent documents and the legal and ethical review process began in tandem. I received a copy of the research center's usual informed consent template, which was typically used for research involving adult participants who are highly literate in Italian, German, and/or English. However, given the interest in non-institutionalized forms of multilingualism and plurilingualism, two aspects of the language used in the template immediately presented the potential for

non- or miscomprehension on the part of the potential participants: (a) the legal register of the consent form per Italian laws, regardless of the language (e.g., English or Italian), and the impossibility of modifying it; and (b) the non-availability of the GDPR in languages relevant to the research aims.

The first issue is that the legal language (that is, the specific phrasing) of the consent form is binding. If it is translated or modified in any way—whether for interlanguage or intralanguage reasons—it becomes legally invalid (Stanizzi, personal communication; see also Chiocchetti, 2023). In STEMCo, a project that sought to involve especially newly arrived adolescent students, this presented a major issue. It was impossible to obtain or create a copy of the consent form that was both legally valid in Italy, in a language that all of the families could read, and in a register that was simple enough for both the children and any parents who were not accustomed to reading legal or technical texts. In this sense, most consent forms follow a one nation, one language ideology: the Italian legalese in these consent forms is meant to cover all potential research participants in Italy, but without taking into account the other languages spoken by or preferred by many Italian residents and citizens. There are some exceptions in the case of, e.g., German in South Tyrol (Italy), but since these texts must be legally approved in each language and in each country, it is nearly impossible to obtain, for instance, a Spanish language consent form for an Italian institution.

In addition to this issue of the consent form language is the fact that the GDPR only exists in 24 European languages, and is not available in the majority of the languages spoken by the parents of students with recent migration histories in Italy (e.g., Urdu, Arabic, Albanian, Russian), nor does it exist in a simplified form (see, e.g., Chiocchetti, 2024). Since the students are minors, their assent alone does not suffice for consent to participate in a research project: Their parents' consent is necessary for their involvement. Even though students may have been able to explain to their parents some of the basic points of the project (e.g., that it involved videorecording, that it was run by Eurac Research, and that it was focused on language in schools), the research team could not, in good faith, consider a signature from a parent based on these basic pieces of information truly informed consent. Many of these students are used to language brokering (Ceccoli, 2021) and are very proficient at understanding the world of adults as a result of this experience with language brokering, but the research team opted not to load the ethical and legal burden of STEMCo onto the middle school students involved in our research.

This meant that many of those students for whom STEMCo was designed ended up being excluded from the project by default. Possibly, since their parents could not fully understand the document sent home for a signature, many of them did not turn in a signed consent form. From five months prior to the start of fieldwork until two months after it was scheduled to begin—with the clock for data collection ticking—the research team attempted to mitigate this issue by providing consent forms in digital and paper formats in both English and Italian. We also provided opportunities for the parents to ask for explanations of the project in other languages, to speak to the research team in person at the schools, as well as to attend online presentations of the project. The research team also circulated a plain-language video about the project to the parents (in Italian and English), with visual aids. However, these efforts were not sufficient to bridge the gap between the research institute and the parents. Therefore, more out of logistical necessity than due to completeness, we concluded the consent process and simply worked around the non-participating students. This already difficult logistical task was exacerbated by a tough ethical decision that the research team made in light of the consent process failing in some key ways: We decided not to inform teachers about who had consented, for fear that teachers would try and “help” the researchers by, e.g., clustering all of the non-participating students

on one side of the classroom while the other side was filmed. We were concerned that teachers' knowledge of the results of the consent process could create, de facto, a segregated classroom, which we decided would be entirely counterproductive to the project as well as detrimental to the students.

One possible way of opening up participation to those who do make it through the gatekeeping and consent processes is to explore more and different ways of closing the gap between researchers and participants. The following sections offer two means of creatively addressing this need.

3.2. Gatekeeping and Research Approval: The Case of the “Stateless” Romani Language

In her PhD research on Romani women's political participation, Sophia analyzed political opportunities for Romani women in three national contexts (Schönthaler, 2025). From 2023 to 2024, 31 interviews were conducted. The reflections presented in this section thereby rely on, first, the process before entering the field, and second, the interviews conducted with politically active Romani women from three countries (Croatia, Italy, and Sweden), many of whom are involved in international advocacy work at both the national and EU levels. All research participants were literate, with many having completed at least secondary education. It should also be noted that the doctoral project was self-funded and not embedded within a larger, externally funded research project. See Vignette 2.

Vignette 2. Fieldnotes—Italy, April 2023:

Elena welcomed me warmly in her hometown in Southern Italy. By car, we drove to the office of the association she leads. At first, our conversation in Italian was light—she laughed often and spoke with pride about her work. But the mood shifted when we began discussing the situation of Romani minorities and their language in Italy. “We cannot preserve our Romani language,” she said, her voice tinged with both frustration and sadness. She pointed out a crucial but often overlooked fact: The Romani language is frequently portrayed as a single, unified language, when in reality “there are various Romani dialects, some of which I cannot understand.” Still, Elena's determination shone through. Her work with the association, rooted in community solidarity and everyday advocacy, offers a quiet but powerful form of resistance—and a reminder that the preservation of language often begins in small acts.

Conducting research in multilingual and marginalized contexts, such as with Romani communities, presents a set of complex ethical and methodological challenges (Barany, 2002; Bhopal & Deuchar, 2015) particularly during the stage of ethics approval, as certain aspects of the research process itself are difficult to predict before entering the field. As discussed in Section 3.1, a concrete example is the language of the consent form, which must be presented in both specific wording and particular languages during ethics approval, and potential gatekeepers must be identified. These ethical compliance challenges are especially acute when working with stateless or non-standardized languages, such as the Romani language, which varies in its recognition from state to state, and is characterized by significant dialectal variation between groups (Matras, 2005, 2015). This variety of Romani dialects, with varying degrees of mutual intelligibility, reflects the community's diverse migratory histories (Matras, 2005, 2015). This linguistic complexity is cyclically bound together with the long-standing marginalization and persecution of Romani populations throughout Europe, fostering collective mistrust toward formal institutions, including academic researchers (Sigona & Trehan, 2009).

This section focuses on three crucial components of the doctoral research process: first, gaining access to the field and the role of gatekeepers in navigating linguistic complexities; second, the development of the consent form; and third, the languages used during the interviews.

Firstly, the author's outsider status complicated the research process, as a non-Romani researcher who does not speak any Romani dialect. The absence of a shared linguistic repertoire meant that Sophia was structurally dependent on gatekeepers to broker access to the field. In this PhD study, gatekeepers were primarily politically active Romani women, as well as Romani men who held visible and influential roles within their communities, such as leaders of grassroots associations, NGOs, or political parties. Their dual positionality as insiders and as public figures significantly shaped the dynamics of access, the framing of research encounters, and the ethical terrain of participation (Andress et al., 2020; Ruhland et al., 2023).

Relying on gatekeepers as linguistic and social intermediaries had major methodological and ethical consequences (Gřundělová et al., 2024): During early fieldwork, each time the gatekeeper translated, paraphrased, or shifted register, the meaning risked drifting. In the absence of a standardized orthography or common written reference point, these processes resembled a "chain of transmission" in which messages could be recontextualized as they passed from person to person (Berman & Tyyskä, 2011).

Nevertheless, gatekeepers were crucial in unfolding the linguistic complexity of the research before entering the field. In Croatia, where Romani people are officially recognized as a linguistic minority, the use of the Romani language in everyday life was more prevalent (Posavec & Hrvatic, 2000). In contrast, Italy does not officially recognize the Romani language as a minority language. Participants frequently noted that this lack of recognition has a negative impact on both the perception and status of the language, resulting in reduced funding and limited institutional support for its speakers. Consequently, the use of the Romani language is more restricted, with many individuals primarily speaking Italian as their first language (Scala, 2020). And finally, in Sweden, Romani dialects were less commonly spoken and largely confined to private, family settings. Swedish was the dominant language used in everyday communication, particularly among younger generations (Hancock, 2021).

Overall, across all three research contexts, several research participants in this project indicated that Romani dialects are predominantly used in oral, private, or intra-community contexts, rendering their deployment in a formal research setting potentially uncomfortable or stigmatizing. Moreover, as different dialects are spoken, one research participant in Italy explained that they speak Italian during meetings among Romani women. Hence, the three national contexts have different linguistic norms, where language proficiency and the appropriateness of its use do not align in predictable ways (Halwachs, 2003).

One of the ethically and bureaucratically most sensitive components of the author's project was the development of an informed consent protocol. Preparing consent materials required navigating not only the ethical and legal obligations for conducting interviews but also the linguistic heterogeneity of Romani communities and the legacies of institutional mistrust (Foster & Freeman, 2013). These challenges varied across the three countries, each with its own socio-political recognition (or lack thereof) of Romani minorities. Because there is no standardized Romani language, and dialectal variation limits mutual intelligibility, providing a single "Romani" consent form was neither technically nor ideologically defensible. Instead, consent materials and interview protocols were prepared in English, Italian, Croatian, and Swedish, reflecting the expectation that participants may prefer to read in one language and speak in another.

This sociolinguistic complexity challenges the assumptions embedded in many institutional ethics review frameworks, which often take standardized, written consent forms and formalized procedures for granted. Such protocols, while designed to ensure protection and clarity, may be ill-suited to the realities of multilingual, marginalized, and historically mistrustful contexts. In this research project, ethical rigor was best achieved not through rigid documentation but through a flexible and dialogic approach that was attuned to the context and relational dynamics. Oral explanations of consent, the use of trusted intermediaries to mediate meaning and expectations, and the framing of research aims in culturally resonant terms were essential to ensuring informed and voluntary participation (see Bhupathi & Ravi, 2017).

As with the consent materials, interviews were not conducted in any Romani dialect. Using interpreters would have required dialect-specific mediation across sites, increasing the risks of inconsistent translation, attenuated rapport, and loss of nuance (Berman & Tyyskä, 2011). This excluded Romani women speaking only Romani dialects, but for this specific research project, all Romani women did speak a second language (national majority language) or English. Sophia's working languages are German, Italian, and English, and the vast majority of politically active Romani women interviewed were already accustomed to discussing political participation in English through involvement in international projects and EU-level advocacy. In Croatia, one interview was conducted in Croatian at the participant's request, and since Sophia does not speak Croatian, a trained research assistant served as language facilitator and conducted the interview. The assistant received targeted training on the interview guide and ethical procedures, and Sophia was present during the interview and asked ad hoc questions, which the translator translated in addition to the questions in the co-constructed protocol. The Croatian interview was audio-recorded, transcribed by the facilitator, and subsequently translated into English through a collaborative process between the facilitator and Sophia. Throughout this time-intensive collaboration, reflexivity was crucial, both in recognizing the translator's interpretive role and in critically engaging with how meaning was negotiated and potentially transformed in the process.

The methodological choices were additionally conditioned by resource limitations typical of doctoral research. These precluded the specialized linguistic and methodological infrastructure that would have been required to accommodate multiple Romani varieties. In multilingual contexts characterized by fragmented dialects and the absence of a standardized orthography, high-quality linguistic mediation would have required multiple dialect-specific interpreters, professional translation and back-translation of instruments and consent materials, and specialized transcription, all of which exceeded the project's budget. Under these constraints, prioritizing majority-language interviews, chosen collaboratively with participants, constituted the most methodologically consistent and ethically defensible strategy to preserve comparability and minimize mistakes during translation.

To sum up, a key challenge in preparing ERB applications is the need to anticipate factors that may only emerge during the research process. For instance, the role and significance of the gatekeeper often become evident only once fieldwork is underway and therefore may remain unidentified at the application stage. Likewise, the linguistic complexity of each research project and process emerges over time and can never be entirely accurately foreseen. It calls for an ethics that is not only procedural but relational, one that is responsive to the lived realities of research participants.

During the process described above, the role of language becomes particularly evident, and it is not without its challenges. The following section will therefore explore an alternative mode of data collection in fieldwork, with a focus on how visual communication can augment data collection with multilingual participants.

3.3. Co-Constructing Knowledge: Potentials and Challenges

Arts-based methods have increasingly been recognized not only for their ability to enrich data collection but also for promoting inclusivity in knowledge production: a central aspect of research ethics in critical-constructivist approaches with multilingual participants. Mitterhofer and Obukhova (2024a) wrote:

We are in a classroom, sitting around a large sheet of paper. There are cards everywhere, some with words, others with scribbles, colors and shapes. Ten young people—apprentices at a vocational school in South Tyrol, Italy—and us: a social anthropologist and a design researcher. We have gathered not for play, but for a crucial conversation about discrimination: Do these young apprentices, about half of them with migration background, encounter discrimination due to their ethnicity, gender or age? Alessandro, Ahmed and Adina have selected the cards they want to place on the big sheet of paper: the scribbles, the colors, the words that best reflect what they associate with the topics written on the paper (e.g., work conditions, relations with colleagues, tasks and responsibilities). “Why did you choose the cards you chose?” my colleague asks. Ahmed laughs, pointing at the red card he just placed on the term “work conditions”: “Red because you have to do what you are told to. You have no choice. [Red] like a traffic light.” He continues joking with his fellow apprentices about the cards they chose. And then suddenly and without prompting, the discussion turns more serious: talks about customers who refuse being served by an apprentice with a headscarf, colleagues who snicker at somebody’s accent, employers giving the worst shift to the person with a foreign surname, teachers who don’t take seriously the child with Pakistani parents.

By incorporating visual elements such as photographs or drawings, researchers can help bring certain experiences into the light. Often, this sharing of experiences is not a question of language proficiency alone, but of taboo, stigma, or fear, which may be further compounded by language proficiency. Arts-based methods allow for the emergence of sensitive and nuanced information that might be overlooked by traditional verbal methods, thus producing different, richer, more diverse, and hence potentially more representative data. Although direct comparisons between verbal and visual approaches are limited, scholarship suggests that visual methods can uncover aspects of participants’ experiences that might remain hidden in traditional research frameworks (Pain, 2012); they allow access to the “unspeakable” and elicit experiences and perceptions that otherwise may be hidden in carefully practiced narratives (Reavey, 2020). Indeed, by serving as a “neutral third party,” visual tools allow participants to articulate intense feelings and challenging memories without speaking directly about a sensitive topic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Thus, especially in contexts where research is conducted in a language in which research participants are not fluent, where a linguistic slip can lead to embarrassment and misunderstanding, arts-based visual methods can provide alternative avenues for self-expression.

Visual methods don’t only broaden the scope of gathered data. In contrast to traditional language-heavy research methods such as interviews, surveys, or focus groups, often characterized by profound power hierarchies between researchers and research participants, arts-based methods may provide the setting for

more equal, participatory research relationships and enhance epistemic justice. They acknowledge research participants as experts in their own lives, fostering inclusivity, empowerment, and collaboration in knowledge production instead of, in addition to, or beyond spoken language. This is impactful particularly with regard to marginalized or underrepresented groups such as migrants, minors, indigenous communities, and other minorities, and in the study of complex or sensitive topics. As such, arts-based methods can be key tools in ethical research practice in multilingual settings.

The potential benefits of arts-based approaches were at the core of the decision that led us to adopt these methods in a study investigating experiences of discrimination of apprentices with a migrant background (Mitterhofer & Obukhova, 2024b; Obukhova & Mitterhofer, 2025). Together with social designer Kseniia Obukhova, Johanna, an anthropologist, organized participatory, arts-based workshops with young apprentices in addition to traditional expert interviews and a survey. The workshops were composed of two parts. First, a collective activity was designed to stimulate a subsequent group discussion on apprenticeship-related topics. The initial task involved a large sheet of paper positioned centrally in the classroom, which outlined various macro-areas pertaining to the apprenticeship experience (Figure 1). Participants were asked to choose one of the 86 cards containing adjectives (in Italian and German) and various graphic elements, such as shapes, scribbles, and colors, selected to evoke specific emotional experiences (Enzmann, 2024; Jonauskaitė et al., 2020). The subsequent individual activity aimed to explore participants' individual feelings and emotions related to different aspects and moments—past, present, and future—of their apprenticeship. Using a printed timeline, participants were encouraged to use the cards, stickers, and graphics as scaffolding to articulate their thoughts in a spontaneous, silent manner (Figure 2).

Although the group discussion that followed the arts-based activities relied on oral interaction in one of the official local languages (Italian), the activities themselves enabled participants to engage with the themes on their own terms. Participants with limited knowledge of Italian and/or those who might have been hesitant to speak during the discussion were nonetheless able to contribute in meaningful ways, and their perspectives formed an integral part of the data. The activities also provided a valuable means of articulating otherwise



Figure 1. Workshop participants placing cards on a poster during the collective activity.



Figure 2. Workshop participants selecting and placing stickers during the individual activity.

“unspeakable” or difficult experiences of exclusion, discrimination, and racism within a relaxed and informal atmosphere, first in a non-verbal manner and then, if the participant so desired, verbally. By rendering verbal expression optional and allowing extended time for individual and collective engagement with the themes of the study, the design-based visual methods broadened participation beyond linguistic constraints, fostering a more inclusive and empowering research environment, and, ultimately, generating richer data.

Arts-based research, with its innovative and often experimental methods, introduces an additional level of complexity to the already complex landscape of research ethics procedures in multilingual settings. Unlike more conventional research approaches, such as structured interviews or focus groups, where the boundaries between researcher and research participant are clearly delineated, the dynamics within participatory approaches are much less straightforward. In such contexts, participants may shift fluidly between different roles: at times they are positioned as the passive “subjects” of research, while at other moments they act as co-researchers, actively shaping the process by contributing ideas and co-producing knowledge alongside the academic investigator. This fluidity, while enriching the research process, also complicates questions of consent, authorship, and responsibility.

For this reason, it was crucial to ensure that the aims of the participatory, arts-based workshop and the intended use of the resulting data were clearly communicated to participants both in written consent forms and during the workshop itself in the two local official languages (Italian and German). Use of these two languages, which are also used at school and in their apprenticeships, was a less-than-perfect solution, but they were the closest option we had to a common lingua franca. Ethical transparency required not only clarifying what participation would involve in practice, but also outlining how participants’ contributions would be integrated into the broader research project. Equally significant was the need to carefully manage participants’ expectations regarding the scope of their involvement and, therefore, not to simply present them with a consent form for them to sign, but to engage in substantive and clear dialogue with them. While participatory research is often framed as collaborative and empowering, it is not always possible to fully co-create research with participants, particularly in projects where participatory elements form only one component of a larger, researcher-led design, such as the case study presented here. Here, researchers must navigate a delicate balance: acknowledging the value and agency of participants’ contributions while also

making explicit the structural and institutional limits of co-creation. Failing to do so risks both ethical misrepresentation and the disillusionment of participants who may feel their role was overstated.

The use of arts-based methods was therefore not merely a methodological choice, but a central component of striving toward a more ethical and reflexive research practice, which takes seriously the voices of marginalized young people, no matter what language they are in. However, the integration of these methods required the researcher to reflect critically on their implications at multiple levels. On the one hand, there were practical considerations: ensuring informed consent in a multilingual setting, navigating issues of authorship and credit, and safeguarding participants from potential risks linked to sharing personal or sensitive material in a relaxed and informal setting. On the other hand, there were institutional and epistemological considerations: how such non-traditional, fluid methodologies fit within the rigid frameworks of ERBs described above, which often privilege conventional research designs, and how they challenge dominant hierarchies of knowledge production by validating creative, experiential, multimodal, and translinguistic forms of knowing.

Ultimately, the arts-based approach used in this case study served both as a means of generating situated knowledge and as an ethical stance that sought to redistribute, even if only partially, the authority and authorship of research. At the same time, the researcher's responsibility was to remain critically attuned to the limitations of such an approach, ensuring transparency with participants via constant creative feedback and accountability within institutional review structures via standardized consent procedures. This dual awareness of the opportunities and constraints of the method used was essential to ethically sound and epistemologically robust research practice.

4. Towards Ethical Multilingual Research: Implications for ERBs

The following section brings together key insights from our research and proposes six concrete aspects for enhancing the ethics review process in light of issues raised during our multilingual research experiences. Based on the development of our institution's own ERB, these suggestions highlight how institutional ethics can evolve beyond bureaucratic standardization toward a more responsive, inclusive, and ethically grounded practice. These ideas are not meant as rigid prescriptions, but as starting points to invite reflection on how ethics oversight can be more attuned to the complexities of language, power, and context.

We identify the following areas for improvement:

1. Institutional flexibility through iterative review and researcher feedback;
2. Inclusion of ad hoc (linguistic) experts;
3. Oral and dialogic ethics application processes;
4. Recognition of linguistic diversity as an ethical domain;
5. Support for multilingual dissemination and reciprocity;
6. Building researcher capacity through training and mentorship.

4.1. Institutional Flexibility: Revising Protocols Through Iterative Review and Researcher Feedback

Our case studies show that rigid ethical frameworks risk (further) marginalizing particular populations and risk rendering impossible research that does not fit conventional biomedical or post-positivist designs.

To counteract this, ERBs should be governed by living protocols—ethical guidelines that are revisited on an annual basis and revised in light of researchers’ vastly diverse experiences, fieldwork dilemmas, and disciplinary innovations. “Complex” cases should be treated as the rule rather than as the exception, and ERBs should take seriously the emergent ethical concerns that researchers encounter when engaging with new research contexts. As the research projects discussed in Section 3 demonstrate, language-sensitive ethics particularly benefit from flexibility: Multilingual settings are rarely predictable or reducible to a single standardized application process, and many linguistic specificities only become apparent once fieldwork is underway.

At our host institution, annual review meetings invite feedback not only from board members but also from researchers whose projects were reviewed in the prior year. These discussions highlight recurring tensions, gaps, and good practices, enabling the ERB to evolve in step with the realities of multilingual (and) ethnographic fieldwork. This practice fosters a culture of learning rather than auditing, aligning ethical oversight with principles of reflexivity and responsiveness. It also counters the bureaucratic inertia often associated with institutional ethics by normalizing procedural adaptability.

4.2. Inclusion of Ad Hoc (Linguistic) Experts

One major shortcoming of many ERBs is their lack of linguistic expertise. Our case studies highlight the importance of treating participants’ languages with care and considering the role that language plays in generating data. To address this, we recommend that ERBs establish procedures for inviting ad hoc experts, including sociolinguists, translators, legal terminologists, and/or regional specialists, whenever projects involve languages unfamiliar to board members or contexts where language plays a critical role in ethical decision-making.

A concrete example is the role of gatekeepers discussed in Section 3.2, who may become pivotal actors in the research process yet are not always anticipated or explicitly identified in the ERB application. The deep sociolinguistic knowledge and communicative competence of these gatekeepers are often the bedrock of ethnographic research, especially when it is also multilingual.

In our own ERB, this approach has been particularly practical in research involving minoritized or stateless languages such as the Romani language. Linguistic experts have helped board members understand not only translation and consent challenges, but also culturally specific norms of communication, naming, and representation. This has led to more nuanced, contextually grounded assessments of ethical risk and participant agency. Crucially, such consultation helps ERBs avoid imposing dominant-language assumptions on multilingual projects and participants.

4.3. Oral and Dialogic Ethics Application Processes

Written application forms often fail to capture the complexity of research carried out in multilingual contexts. To address this limitation, researchers at our institute are invited to present and discuss their projects at ERB meetings. This provides space to clarify language practices, consent procedures, and collaborative dynamics that may not be easily conveyed in a written document. Such oral presentations shift the ERB process from a gatekeeping model to one based on co-reflection. In multilingual and critical research, where field relations

evolve and ethical challenges are ongoing, direct dialogue between the ERB and researchers helps to build trust and recognize the legitimacy of ethical decisions made in the field.

4.4. Recognition of Linguistic Diversity as an Ethical Domain

ERBs must move beyond seeing language as a mere logistical concern and begin treating linguistic diversity as an ethical domain in its own right. This means explicitly including questions about language in ethics application templates—e.g.: What languages will be used in the research? Who will translate? How will consent be negotiated across languages? Who controls the interpretation and dissemination of multilingual data?

By foregrounding these questions, ERBs can encourage researchers to reflect on power relations embedded in linguistic practice, such as who speaks for whom (e.g., parents for children, or vice versa), which languages are legitimized in academic dissemination, and how translation affects knowledge production. Recognizing both language proficiency and speaking rights as sites of potential vulnerability and coercion can help better conceptualize the inclusion of participants who might otherwise be excluded due to age, language proficiency, and/or lack of written literacy in dominant languages.

4.5. Support for Multilingual Dissemination and Reciprocity

Ethics does not end with data collection. ERBs should encourage researchers to plan for multilingual dissemination and feedback to participants, particularly in projects involving historically marginalized communities, such as the Romani minorities, where returning knowledge in a locally meaningful form is part of ethical reciprocity and contributes to enhancing trust.

Our institute's ERB encourages researchers to outline how findings will be shared across linguistic boundaries, for example, through bilingual reports, community workshops, or translated summaries. Benefit sharing is one of the key points of research; in some projects, this has taken the form of visual or audio materials adapted to the linguistic repertoire of participants, particularly when participants are minors, have limited knowledge of the dominant language, or do not use written language regularly. Recognizing such efforts as part of the ethical process validates researchers' commitments to inclusion and community engagement.

4.6. Building Researcher Capacity, Training, and Mentorship

Finally, integrating multilingual ethics into ERB work also means supporting researchers themselves. Across all three case studies, sensitivity to linguistic and cultural contexts proved fundamental to the quality of the research. Such support may include training in linguistic ethics and culturally sensitive consent processes, as well as mentorship programs that connect early-career researchers with experienced scholars who have navigated similar ethical and linguistic challenges. Within our ERB, members also offer one-on-one consultations beyond the formal review process, providing tailored guidance as ethical questions emerge throughout the research lifecycle.

Such initiatives contribute to a broader shift toward an ethics culture rather than an ethics bureaucracy. They acknowledge that ethical expertise does not lie solely in policy documents or institutional procedures, but also in the lived experiences and reflexive practices of researchers on the ground.

Ethical multilingual research demands more than minor adjustments to existing ERB processes—it requires a rethinking of the principles and procedures by which ethical approval is granted. Through flexible regulation, expert consultation, dialogic processes, and recognition of language as an ethical concern, ERBs can evolve into more inclusive, equitable, and context-sensitive institutions. Such transformation is not only possible but urgently needed to ensure that ethical review keeps pace with the complexities of critical, multilingual, and participatory research.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we focus on the often-overlooked ethical dimensions of multilingual research, particularly as they intersect with institutional ethics review processes originally designed within biomedical paradigms. Drawing on detailed case studies, we explored how language mediates critical aspects of research practice: from securing informed consent to navigating gatekeeping structures and co-constructing knowledge. In each of these phases, linguistic dynamics are central to how research relationships are formed and how ethical commitments are enacted. In particular, we first reflected on how language mediates ethics approval processes in critical and constructivist inquiry by showing how the register (e.g., legalese), language (e.g., Italian), and modality (e.g., textual) of consent forms, while legally sound, risk alienating potential research participants. Second, we explored how language allows for epistemic justice, cultural sensitivity, and methodological appropriateness by showing that greater flexibility and creativity during the research process can move participants' experiences from the margins to the center of areas of social interest (e.g., education, political activism, employment). Third, we aimed to increase awareness about the role that language plays in ethics procedures, in establishing research relationships, and in determining what constitutes data by sharing the risks, limits, and benefits of using paid or voluntary local linguistic experts in gatekeeping, data collection, and data analysis.

Our analysis suggests that ethical rigor in multilingual and critical research contexts cannot be reduced to procedural checklists. Instead, it calls for a flexible, dialogic, and relational approach, one that acknowledges cultural and linguistic nuances, power asymmetries, and the lived realities of research participants. Ethics, in this sense, becomes not only a matter of compliance, but also of negotiation, co-construction, and responsibility. Critical and constructivist multilingual research makes visible the limitations of current frameworks, which are rooted in assumptions of linguistic homogeneity, universal consent protocols, and standardized risk assessment. These pose barriers for any critical research project that engages deeply with social complexity, plurality, and marginalization.

By foregrounding language as an ethical concern in its own right, ERBs have an opportunity to move beyond one-size-fits-all procedures and toward more context-sensitive and responsive forms of oversight. Our institutional experience demonstrates that such change is not only necessary but also quite feasible—through practices like iterative review, inclusion of linguistic expertise, dialogic application processes, and support for multilingual dissemination.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Portions of STEMCo data will be published at www.projectstemco.eu.

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Research Guided by Gaps in Understanding: Multilingual Qualitative Research in Translations

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Abstract

Due to its very subject matter, research on transnational migration inevitably involves multiple languages. As a result, such research cannot be reduced to research where the researcher’s first language is English, but the interviewees’ first language is not; it needs to be expanded to interviews where the researcher and the interviewee speak the same language. Even then, however, their (class, race, gender) background may become an obstacle to understanding each other. In my research project on family life worlds under Jordanian citizenship law, I conducted semi-structured interviews in Arabic without an interpreter. Arabic was the first language of my interviewees, but my third foreign language, which I speak and understand well, but not perfectly. This special interview situation seemed challenging and was initially due to a lack of financial resources for interpreters, which is often recommended (van Nes et al., 2010). In the course of my research, conducting interviews without an interpreter proved to be a helpful approach in order to take into account the co-constitutive process of reality generation in qualitative research (Finlay, 2002). Grounded in feminist and intersectional methodologies, I developed a reflexive approach on how to deal with languages, (a lack of) understanding, and the corresponding power hierarchies in research processes. I argue that the balance of power between researchers and interviewees is changed by the fact that the interviewee is in a linguistically more capable position and thus may develop a different perception of his or her own agency. I propose epistemologically that an interview outside the interviewer’s first language can be a constant reminder of gaps in understanding and the different realities of the interviewer and the interviewee in the subsequent transcription, translation, and analysis steps (Larkin et al., 2007).

Keywords

family; intersectionality; interview; Middle East; reflexive qualitative research; translations

1. Introduction

Research in the field of transnational migration inherently involves multiple languages due to the nature of the subject matter. From the research context to the data collection language, decisions regarding the use of consecutive interpreting or subsequent translation, and the language(s) of publication, languages are central to the generation and analysis of meaning in every research step (Bahji et al., 2023; Hoppe, 2018; Inhetveen, 2012; Temple & Young, 2004; Treiber et al., 2020). Unfortunately, critical reflection on the relationship between languages and their translation often remains unaddressed in sociological, linguistic, and ethnographic literature (Al-Amer et al., 2015; Jacobs & van Hest, 2025; Juschkat et al., 2025; Paneka, 2025; Schittenhelm, 2017).

This article seeks to address these silences from a sociological perspective. By focusing on languages, their understanding (or lack thereof), and their translation(s) within reflexive qualitative and interpretative research, I approach languages both from a methodological and epistemological perspective, as well as from a feminist and intersectional perspective.

Semi-structured interviews with mixed-status families form the empirical foundation for these discussions. These interviews were conducted in Jordan as part of my research on family life worlds under Jordanian citizenship law. As a speaker of Arabic at a proficient but non-native level, I chose to conduct the interviews in Arabic, the native language of my interlocutors, without the assistance of an interpreter. The decision to personally conduct and translate the interviews was initially driven by cost considerations but quickly became a deliberate methodological choice.

Despite the challenges of language barriers, misunderstandings, and translation dilemmas throughout the research process, I advocate for the value of this approach by acknowledging these obstacles as central to feminist reflexive-interpretative research. Drawing from intersectional frameworks, particularly those of feminist researchers in the United States (Crenshaw, 1989; Harding, 1991; Hill Collins, 1990), I propose that the multidimensional positioning of a researcher significantly influences the research process, acknowledging that their perspectives, biases, and experiences shape both data collection and analysis (Bettmann & Roslon, 2013; Bittner & Günter, 2013; Folkes, 2023; Sian, 2022). In contrast to the notion of an objective truth to be uncovered in research data (Temple & Young, 2004), reflexive-feminist research treats language as a tool for constructing and understanding realities, recognizing the distinct positionality of reality for each individual (Larkin et al., 2007; Mijic, 2013).

Struggling to understand the realities of people whose social position is so different from that of the researcher is thus not a deviation in terms of feminist social research but an epistemological norm. I argue that encountering these challenges while conducting interviews and research outside the researcher's native language serves as a valuable reminder of this constructivist research paradigm and the inherent lack of understanding that emerges when qualitative researchers seek to comprehend diverse realities.

The following section will explore the epistemological and theoretical foundations of reflexive feminist research. Next, I will present my own qualitative-interpretative research project conducted in Jordan. The fourth section will address the methodological and epistemological implications of interviewing and the experience of (non-)understanding. In the fifth section, I will explore the challenges and considerations

involved in understanding and translating the interviews for data interpretation. Finally, the article will conclude with a summary of how conducting research in a language other than the researcher's first language serves as a continuous reminder of gaps in understanding. Through this structure, I aim to provide a comprehensive insight into both the methodological and epistemological implications of my research approach.

2. Reflexive Qualitative Research in a Multilingual, Postcolonial Context

This section outlines the theoretical foundations for the empirical research, specifically focusing on feminist paradigms of reflexive research. Reflexive qualitative research in general is concerned with the interviewees' construction of reality and their ways of making sense of their situation (Ganz & Hausotter, 2020; Hitzler & Honer, 2007; Labelle, 2020). The objective during the research process is to reconstruct the participant's perspectives (Inhetveen, 2012), acknowledging the subjective and context-dependent nature of human experience.

Two crucial foundations for a reflexive approach in qualitative research are derived from both the theoretical and empirical work of American feminists. The first premise is a social-constructivist and interpretivist understanding of knowledge, which Donna Haraway refers to as "situated knowledges" (Haraway, 1988). This concept emphasizes the context-dependent nature of knowledges. For interpretative research, this means challenging the positivist assumption of an objective truth that can be "carved out" during the inquiry. In sociology, quantitative methods based on this positivist assumption continue to be highly valued and widely used today. In contrast, interpretative research assumes a dynamic, socially situated, co-constructive process of reality generation between the researcher, the participants, and the social context (see also Finlay, 2002; Folkes, 2023). The second premise, closely intertwined with Haraway's concept, draws on Sandra Harding's standpoint theory (Harding, 1991). Harding complements Haraway by highlighting the power relations in which knowledges are produced, communicated, and perceived. She argues that epistemologically, knowledge produced by subjects in particular social (power) positions is inseparably connected to the subject producing it.

These feminist epistemologies have several methodological consequences, although the specific form of interpretative research varies considerably. The methodological focus centers on reflecting on one's own position and the research context. Reflexivity, in this sense, refers to the researcher's critical engagement with their own social-cultural positionality, values, and assumptions throughout the research process. This critical engagement transcends the performative practice of what Folkes (2023) calls "shopping list" positionality, referring to Macfarlane's (2022) critique of reflexivity that stops at a mere listing of the researcher's positioning within the triad of race, class, and gender. Reflexivity beyond the "shopping list" is not an end in itself but an opportunity for the researcher to critically examine their own (power) position and research approach at every stage of the research, questioning how a particular positioning and decisions may have influenced data collection and analysis (Ademolu, 2024; Hoppe, 2018). Davis and Lutz (2023) provide a reflexivity guideline for intersectional research, building on Mari Matsuda's notion of "asking the other question" (Matsuda, 1991, p. 1189). At every stage of the research, they emphasize the importance of continually re-examining questions of (self-)positionality, power, and one's own pre-assumptions.

Possible reflection strategies include research diaries, reflexive exchanges with other researchers, or deeper engagement and mutual reflection with research participants (Bass et al., 2020; Folkes, 2023; Hoppe, 2018). Decisions regarding research locations, methods, or procedures can also be part of reflexive interpretative social research, as can the critical examination of language throughout the research process (Ademolu, 2024; Lutz, 2009; Meinhof & Boatcă, 2022; Onwuzuruigbo, 2018).

The reflection on the use of different languages and their translations requires special attention in the context of multilingual (migration) research (McKenna, 2022; Treiber & Kazzazi, 2020; van Nes et al., 2010; Young & Temple, 2014). Therefore, it is crucial to specify the (sociological) concept of language and translation, drawing on linguistic and translational studies (Holmes et al., 2013; Jacobs & van Hest, 2025). Referring back to a constructivist epistemology, languages both constitute and shape realities and identities (Lutz, 2011). Therefore, different languages and their speakers create distinct realities in interaction with the socio-cultural context, realities that cannot be congruently transferred into another language and thus into another reality (Larkin et al., 2007; Treiber & Kazzazi, 2020). This insight is reflected in contemporary translational studies under the so-called “sociological turn” (Korak & Schögler, 2025). Translation is no longer seen as the accurate transmission of a statement into another language without interference or loss of meaning (Bahadır, 2020; Biagini et al., 2017; Brandmeier, 2025; Schittenhelm, 2017). Instead, it is increasingly recognized that different languages construct different realities, and translation represents the (often imperfect) search for a corresponding system of meaning (Bittner & Günter, 2013). Jacobs and van Hest (2022, 2025) show in their important work on spaces of linguistic non-understanding the significant role non-understanding plays in research contexts, even when translation is present.

Acknowledging these assumptions, the goal of reflexive multilingual qualitative research cannot be to find a single correct translation and analysis of a text or interview (Temple & Young, 2004). Instead, it is about analyzing and reflecting on the entire communication situation and understanding the communicative constructions and interpretations of meaning within the research context (de Fina, 2011; Holzinger & Draxl, 2024). Following this perspective, the data collection, translation, and analysis processes are intrinsically connected to the subject engaged in these tasks. Not only language, but also the class, race, and gender backgrounds of the speakers involved shape the communication process as a whole. The paradigm that communication and social action always occur within spaces conditioned by power dynamics also applies to the reflection of languages in the research process. Drawing on standpoint theoretical assumptions regarding the production of knowledge, Spivak (2008, p. 122) poses two guiding questions for this reflection and methodological reconsideration: “who speaks?” and “who listens?” (see also Lutz & Tuiider, 2018, p. 104).

Spivak’s questions, as a core element of feminist and postcolonial research, are important tools for power-critical research in general. They are particularly relevant in the context of reflexive research within postcolonial settings. Postcolonial research acknowledges that colonial power hierarchies between the Global North and the Global South continue to persist today (Bass et al., 2020; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2010; Hoppe, 2018, p. 103). These hierarchies are rooted in colonial legacies of epistemic violence (Bass et al., 2020, p. 149; Baumann & Rehbein, 2025; Giraldo Herrera, 2018; Hoppe, 2018) as well as in the social positioning of both the researcher and the participants (Ademolu, 2024; El-Qasem, 2025). As a White researcher from the Global North conducting research in postcolonial Jordan, Spivak’s questions guided my feminist qualitative research process. They influenced decisions regarding research methods, translation(s), and the construction of relationships with interview participants, as demonstrated in the following text.

3. Research Project

The empirical foundation of this article is a sociological PhD research project on mixed-status families in postcolonial Jordan. Jordan is one of 28 countries worldwide (Frost, 2022) that have retained a colonially inherited patrilineal citizenship law. This means that Jordanian women cannot confer their citizenship to either their foreign husbands or their joint children (Kingdom of Jordan, 1954; Massad, 2001). This legislation has significant implications for the daily lives of these families, as the status of so-called *ibnaa urduniat* (English: children of Jordanian women) is associated with numerous social disadvantages compared to the general Jordanian population, such as the lack of access to social security systems or health insurance for individuals over 18 (Nasser, 2010; Zayadin, 2018). In addition to these socio-economic challenges, research highlights how children are affected emotionally, as this patriarchal citizenship norm denies a materialized sense of belonging to people who have been born and lived their entire lives in Jordan (Arab Women Organization, 2013; El-Abed, 2021; IRCKHF, 2014).

Building on my previous research (Kawalla, 2025), my goal was to conduct a sociological analysis of the situation of mixed-status families in Jordan. The project focuses on the question of which intra-family practices and negotiation processes shape the lifeworld of these families. This includes examining both affective questions of belonging to the country of Jordan, as well as how families navigate the daily challenges associated with the lack of Jordanian citizenship and their strategies for responding to these challenges. To address these questions, I conducted 14 semi-structured interviews (Rosenthal & Loch, 2002) in both individual and family settings (Wohlrab-Sahr, 2019). The interviews were analyzed using reflexive evaluative methods such as reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). As this research is a PhD project funded by a scholarship, I heavily relied on my own resources and personal network to conduct this fieldwork, without any on-site institutional support or additional funding.

The following sections outline specific methodological decisions and procedures related to interviewing, transcribing, translating, and analyzing the data. To ensure accessibility to the journal's international readership, all quotes from the data have been translated into English, with the original language indicated for each quotation.

4. Interviewing and Non-Understanding

Multilingualism played a significant role in my interviewing process from September to December 2024. I decided to offer interviews in both Arabic and English to my interlocutors. Ten out of fourteen participants chose Arabic, their first language. In many of these interviews, English would not have been an option as Arabic was the only language spoken by the participants. Despite knowing that conducting interviews in Arabic might pose comprehension challenges for me, I chose to proceed without an interpreter, a decision that is either not discussed or rejected in the literature from various sides (Brandmeier, 2025; Senft, 2012). Whether with or without an interpreter, ensuring mutual understanding in any communication relies heavily on establishing a relationship of trust and communication (Holzinger & Draxl, 2024). A successful communication relationship requires mutual understanding, not only in terms of linguistic comprehension but also in fostering trust between the researcher and the participants (Freedman et al., 2024). This mutual understanding can be difficult to establish in multilingual communication, as the following analysis illustrates.

The section below describes the linguistic and relationship-related challenges I encountered during the interviews. I also reflect on my methodological decisions in dealing with these challenges. The empirical examples presented here come from my field notes and interview transcripts, which I translated from Arabic into English. All of the names used are pseudonyms.

4.1. Building Trust

The field work note below was written after my interview with Mohammad and his extended family, one of the very first interviews I conducted:

First of all, it was important to the family that I don't work for an institution or anything like that. I didn't quite understand it, they did not know at the time that I'm German, so it's probably not about reservations about Germany but about something else. Later it turns out that they had spoken to journalists before (the last "interview" was years ago, now nobody is interested in the topic anymore in their perception), but it is not clear whether they had bad experiences. For them, the fact that I come from "outside" is rated rather positively (because I could raise awareness for their situation?!). The fact that I speak and understand Arabic is also rated positively. (Field work note of the interview with Mohammad)

Mohammad inherited his Egyptian citizenship from his father, although he was born and raised in Jordan by a Jordanian mother. He himself married a Jordanian woman, so his children face the same exclusion from Jordanian citizenship as he does. This fieldwork note reflects two important aspects of my experience. The first aspect was my "outsiderness" in relation to the Jordanian context; the second pertained to my ability to communicate in Arabic.

Concerning my "outsiderness," my participants could clearly tell that I did not have a Jordanian background, both phenotypically and linguistically. This created an initial challenge in establishing trust, as different backgrounds and life experiences can complicate mutual understanding (Mijic, 2013, p. 106). For a long time, anthropological research followed the "going native" paradigm (Malinowski, 1922; Senft, 2012), in which the researcher sought to become an insider in the research setting to understand the emic perspective of the field (Förster et al., 2011). However, informed by postcolonial epistemologies, "going native" was neither possible nor desirable for me. To acknowledge this power imbalance, it was important for me to reflect on my position as an outsider, which proved to be a more appropriate and power-sensitive approach to dealing with the different contexts in which both my research partners and I were socialized (Juschkat et al., 2025; Zingg & Robin, 2025).

My foreignness helped me not to be perceived as an accomplice of the Jordanian state (Juschkat et al., 2025), but it also opened up opportunities for honest conversations about power differences, various backgrounds, and our respective social positioning. For example, the most striking power imbalance concerned the fact that I possess a (powerful) international passport while most of my interlocutors did not have any valid passport or travel document. Talking about this injustice in and around the interviews was one way to acknowledge this power imbalance. In this context, I learned that sincere listening and empathy often build much more trust and overcome differences than repeatedly addressing power imbalances or one's own privileges. Another effect of reflecting my own power position was, i.e., in the research relationship with Nabil, a young Egyptian

man without a valid passport. Over time, we developed a relationship where he felt comfortable enough to request my help to find ways to emigrate from Jordan because of my knowledge of living in Europe. Using the knowledge I had about the German immigration procedures, while at the same time being very open about my limited knowledge of other countries and my even more limited capacity to support his emigration process, was my way of carefully navigating these conversations.

The second factor that influenced the establishment of a relationship of trust was my use of the Arabic language. Even though I was open about the fact that I do not speak Arabic fluently, my use of the Arabic language facilitated many stages of the research process. As the field note from above shows, speaking Arabic not only allowed for communication and research with people otherwise left out of my sample, but it was also appreciated by my research partners. It did not matter whether I made conjugation mistakes or if it took me longer to find the appropriate word: being able to communicate in Arabic was seen as an effort I had made to be able to enter into their world (El-Qasem, 2025). The following quote from an interview with Halime and her daughter Farah is a good example of how many conversations started, either in the interview itself or the establishment of contact beforehand:

Interviewer: You speak Arabic, and if I have a question, I will ask you. I understand a lot, I don't speak very well, but it will be fine.

Halime: Okay, God willing. God bless you. [Transcript Halime and Farah, Pos. 1–3]

In the conversation with Halime and Farah, it was not only my ability to speak but also that I was a woman, had the same age as Farah, and had a small child that also influenced (maybe even more than my linguistic skills) the establishment of a relationship of trust. The fact that my presence and my questions were not perceived by the two of them as unusual or even dangerous became particularly clear to me when both of them dared to address sensitive and very intimate family issues in the interview (transcript Halime and Farah, Pos. 430–464).

Being able to understand and communicate in Arabic mitigated some of the sense of unfamiliarity I experienced during the interview context (El-Qasem, 2025; Hoppe, 2018). As outlined above, I was unable to hide my outsider status. However, potential reservations toward me may have been mitigated by my ability to speak Arabic and by my prior experience living and conducting research in the Middle East. Particularly amidst the charged discourses surrounding the events in Gaza, following October 7, 2023, my proficiency in Arabic, as a German researcher, facilitated conversations about emotionally sensitive topics and, consequently, the development of trust-based relationships. Specifically, this meant that I was often confronted with accusations about Germany supporting Israel's war in Gaza, and I was asked, in a very direct manner, to distance myself from this topic. Distancing myself from German politics verbally was one part of building relationships of trust, especially in the interviews with mothers, with whom the reference to seeing children suffering—as a mother myself—made for a more powerful shared moment than simply making a point.

It is crucial to acknowledge, however, that although I felt that my ability to speak Arabic helped build trust, this dynamic is deeply entangled with racialized linguistic hierarchies, often referred to as linguistic racism (May, 2023). Although Arabic is a global language spoken by several hundred million people, it is not commonly learned as a second language by individuals in the Global North, a pattern shaped by enduring colonial legacies.

Whereas, for example, in Germany, people are expected to learn and speak German when living in the country, this expectation is different for Western people in Arab countries. Here, the ability to speak Arabic is seen as an effort worth acknowledging and not as self-evident. This serves as a compelling illustration of how linguistic hierarchies and colonial continuities shape the dynamics of the research encounter, even as both research participants experienced the trust-building impact of communicating in Arabic.

Openly acknowledging my limited proficiency in Arabic had an additional trust-enhancing effect: It placed me in a linguistically subordinate position relative to my research participants. This asymmetry influenced the power dynamics between us (Temple & Young, 2004; Treiber & Kazzazi, 2020). In light of Spivak's inquiries into "who speaks" and "who listens," this positioning rendered me more inclined to listen, as my receptive language skills surpassed my productive abilities. Consequently, the interview setting shifted away from the artificial framework of an encounter orchestrated, initiated, and moderated by me as a White European researcher, towards a more reciprocal dynamic in which both parties exercised agency: I, in shaping the initial thematic framework, and my interlocutors in the (linguistic) enactment and leadership of the interview. I deeply valued this shift, as it appeared to foster more engaged participation and a shared commitment to mutual understanding. The following excerpt is drawn from a family interview with Hassan, a Sudanese truck driver, and his wife Rania. In this passage from the beginning of the interview, I asked them in which parts of their daily life they experience difficulties due to the lack of citizenship:

Rania: And education. And the schools....For the A-levels. When they are sons of Jordanian women, they don't have to buy books.

Hassan: Stop it. That's not a school issue.

Rania: Do you understand us?

Interviewer: Yes

Hassan: Oh yes, she understands. (Transcript Hassan, Pos. 23–28)

This passage illustrates how Rania and her husband Hassan took care of my linguistic understanding throughout the interview, both worrying about and valuing my language skills. An opposing interpretation might be that what I perceived as taking care of me was influenced, on the one hand, by Arab norms of politeness and, on the other, by my position of power, me being the one asking questions and coming from an academic institution. Of course, these three possible interpretations cannot be clearly separated from one another, and it is important to keep them all in mind when it comes to analysis.

4.2. Comprehension Issues

The second challenge I encountered was linguistic comprehension. For a mutual understanding, a shared language is crucial. However, when both parties do not speak the same language equally well, a process of translation at some point in the research process is necessary to facilitate understanding (Schittenhelm, 2017). In my research, I decided against using an interpreter, choosing instead to rely on my own understanding and the willingness of my research partners to ensure mutual comprehension. Building on

Haraway's notion of situated knowledges, my own social positioning as a White European researcher was central to this decision. I was concerned about how this positionality might be reframed or refracted by the presence of an interpreter, particularly one with a different social position, such as a Jordanian interpreter. My intention was not to hide my outsider status, but rather to acknowledge it transparently and potentially leverage it to hold space for questions that a "native" interviewer might not (dare to) ask (Juschkat et al., 2025, p. 294). Here, I was not just interested in cultural issues that I would have wanted to ask about as an outsider. I also wanted to make sure that any reservations people might have had about me, i.e., as an unveiled woman (in terms of religiosity or lifestyle) or as a German (in terms of my assumed position on Gaza), would be expressed directly to me.

This decision, by default, created room for both communicative success and failure (Mijic, 2013). Two patterns emerged consistently across the interview encounters. First, the pauses I took before asking questions were notably longer than in English-language interviews, as it took me additional time to formulate questions appropriately. In retrospect, I found this delay to be beneficial, as it allowed for more spontaneous contributions from my interview partners, which I might otherwise have interrupted with a new question. Second, in several situations, interviewees adapted their language to accommodate my comprehension level. Temple and Young (2004), in their discussion of translated research involving American Sign Language users, reflect on this kind of adaptation. Drawing on Harris (2002), they weigh the benefits of direct communication, where both interlocutors must actively work toward mutual understanding, against the potential burden of the added cognitive and emotional effort this requires from participants. Based on my field experience, both within and outside formal research encounters, I would underscore the advantages of such direct engagement. I experienced this mutual effort toward understanding as generative, not only for building a relationship of trust but also for deepening the substance of the conversations.

Throughout the fourteen interviews, the most frequent instances of communicative difficulty arose from misunderstandings or an unfamiliarity with specific phrases, words, or idiomatic expressions, on either my part, that of the interviewee, or both. One such instance occurred during a conversation with Mahmood, a middle-aged man whose family had migrated from Gaza to Jordan, as we discussed his experiences as a Gaza Camp resident interacting with Jordanian institutions. At one point in the interview, I was unable to recall the Arabic word for 'contact' and instead used the English term, which Mahmood did not understand:

Interviewer: You have experience with the Jordanian government, I mean in....I forgot the word for contact with the government.

Mahmood: Problems with the government, you mean?

Interviewer: Problems or I don't know... (Transcript Kareem and Mahmood, Pos. 231–234)

This passage illustrates how, as the interviewer, I was unable to articulate my question in the neutral and precise manner I had intended, due to my inability to recall the Arabic term for "contact." Mahmood, not understanding the English substitute, independently rephrased the question, shifting the focus toward "problems" with the government. On one level, this could be interpreted as a loss of control over the direction of the interview, as I, the researcher, momentarily relinquished my role of steering the conversation. However, Mahmood's rephrasing, centering the discussion on problems, also offers valuable insight into the associations and connotations he brings to discussions of governmental institutions.

Conversely, a comprehension issue also emerged when my interlocutors used words or idioms unfamiliar to me. In such instances, I typically responded with follow-up questions, initiating a collaborative effort to find an alternative wording, provide clarification, or rely on gestures and facial expressions to bridge the communicative gap. The following excerpt illustrates such a moment: The interview was conducted with Farah and her mother Halime. While Farah primarily spoke English and Halime Arabic, both understood English. In this segment, Halime described in Arabic her experience of renewing her children's passports. The verb she emphasized, marked in bold, was the term she sought to clarify:

Halime: The Secret Service for the passports, I really had to fix things...fixing things, how do you call it? [laughing] What is fixing things?

Farah: I can't actually say. There is no specific word [all laughing, gesturing "a lot of work"].

Halime: That's it. That's another addition. They have a big problem because they are here [laughing]. (Transcript Halime and Farah, Pos. 163–168)

None of the three of us was able to find an English equivalent for the Arabic verb *marmatet* (loosely translated as "I fixed things") during the interview. However, through the use of gestures and contextual cues, this moment did not mark a breakdown in communication; rather, it became a shared experience of mutual understanding despite linguistic limitations.

In another interview, we did not manage to solve a communication problem, first of all because I did not catch the misunderstanding during the interview, but only when I listened to the audio. In the family interview with Joumana and her daughter Nour, communication was challenging due to various factors. Joumana did not hear very well and was also blind in one eye. Therefore, during the interview, her daughter Nour repeatedly rephrased things for her mother. I was very grateful for this support, and apparently, I therefore missed the moment in which, somehow, both agreed that I was a journalist writing for an international newspaper:

Interviewer: What do you think would be the best way to change the situation? What would be the way to change?

Joumana: You, you are writing for an international newspaper, not here. International. (Transcript Joumana and Nour, Pos. 304–306)

This quote shows how serious this misunderstanding is, as Joumana expresses subsequently that nowadays the social movement she was active in has become very silent and that now, she is placing her hope primarily on external pressure. Unfortunately, due to my lack of understanding at the time, I was unable to clarify that, as a scientist, my role is very different from that of a journalist when it comes to quickly bringing her story to the public's attention.

This process of negotiating meaning was not confined to the interviews themselves. Throughout my four-month research stay, I attended Arabic language classes twice a week and participated in a weekly language tandem session. These occasions provided opportunities to reflect on interview encounters, discuss linguistic challenges, and acquire new vocabulary in preparation for subsequent interviews. As a

result, I observed a marked improvement in my language skills over time, with a noticeable difference between my first and last interview, a developmental trajectory similarly noted by El-Qasem (2025, p. 352) in his own Arabic-language research.

5. Transcribing, Translating, and Interpreting Between Languages

This second empirical chapter focuses on methodological challenges in post-interview phases of multilingual research. First, I offer insights into my reflections and decision-making processes regarding the transcription and translation of the interview audio recordings. Second, I examine the (linguistic) difficulties encountered during the data interpretation phase, highlighting how language-related complexities continued to shape the analytical process.

5.1. Making an (English) Text out of an Interview

Typically, transcription marks the initial data interpretation state, as nearly all qualitative research methodologies require a (partly) written transcript of the recorded audio material. These transcripts later form the foundation for developing codes and, consequently, for making sense of the insights shared by research participants (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In a multilingual research context such as mine, transcription also plays a pivotal role, yet its execution is fraught with specific challenges. On one hand, transcribing colloquial Arabic in the Jordanian dialect is uncommon, since the dialect is primarily spoken and seldom written (El-Qasem, 2025, p. 353). Consequently, transcribing audio with the support of artificial intelligence tools and the assistance of a native speaker would have required substantial time and financial resources. On the other hand, I was unable to transcribe the interviews entirely on my own, because I frequently encountered words I did not understand or was uncertain how to spell them, particularly given that the written form of Arabic words cannot always be readily inferred from their pronunciation.

For these reasons, I decided to combine the transcription and translation processes. Since the beginning of the research, I was aware that publication in English-language journals would require translating the interviews into English in order to utilize the empirical material in my scholarly work (Mijic, 2013; Schittenhelm, 2025; Stockemer & Wigginton, 2019). Translation was needed not only for the purposes of academic publication, but also because there were passages in each interview I had not fully understood during the live conversation. Jacobs and van Hest (2022, 2025) call these moments spaces of linguistic non-understanding. In their work on these spaces, they encourage researchers to openly analyze these spaces as constitutive parts of reflexive research and not to hide them (Jacobs & van Hest, 2022, pp. 14–15). In my research, I often did not recognize spaces of linguistic non-understanding until I listened to the recordings. It was in that context that I realized I had missed a word or idiomatic expression, such as the bolded term in the following excerpt from my interview with Hamza:

Hamza: I have been suffering from tachycardia since, not last Ramadan but the one before, I applied for the exemption, but I have not received it since last Ramadan, although I have a report and everything. (Transcript Hamza, Pos. 117–119)

Hamza is the father of a family residing in a closed camp in the north of Jordan. In this excerpt, he discusses the inadequacy of the healthcare he has access to due to his citizenship status as a so-called “son of the Gaza

Strip" living in a camp. While the precise meaning of his illness was not critical for the overall understanding of the interview, an accurate translation was necessary for the transcript (Iacono et al., 2024). To address this issue, I relied on the parallel transcription and translation process I had developed. I listened to the audio and translated everything I understood directly into English. Reflecting on my decision to translate the interviews myself, I drew on the insights of Qoyyimah (2023) and Temple and Young (2004). All of them advocate for researchers to translate their own interview data. Epistemologically, they argue that translation is not merely a technical step but an integral part of engaging with the data, emphasizing that the social positioning of the translator inevitably shapes the translation process.

At the same time, I recognized the need for help in certain areas of translation, first, because I knew there were passages that I could not adequately translate on my own, even with the assistance of dictionaries. Second, because collaborative translation helps uncover errors, misunderstandings, and ambiguities, thereby allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the data and accommodating possible variations in meaning (Holzinger & Draxl, 2024, p. 285; Temple & Young, 2004, p. 171). I transcribed (when possible) in Arabic all the words, phrases, or idiomatic expressions I was unsure of, or could not understand at all, and later discussed and translated them into English with two Jordanians who assisted my research. Both individuals signed confidentiality agreements and were compensated for their work, which significantly contributed to the success of my research. These translations were not solely based on my Arabic transcript but were also cross-checked with the original audio recordings. This process seemed to be an effective strategy for ensuring high-quality translations (Al-Amer et al., 2015; McKenna, 2022) as well as a pragmatic solution to the practical challenges posed by limited resources (Brandmeier, 2025, p. 277), my language proficiency, and the need to publish in English. This invaluable translation support was a crucial reminder of the embeddedness of research and the dependence on individuals with different social positions within the field (Burger et al., 2024).

5.2. Making Sense of an Interview

This section focuses on data interpretation and the linguistic and socio-cultural challenges inherent in understanding this interpretation. Once again, my approach was guided by reflexivity and the belief that interpretation cannot be a search for a singular truth (Lutz & Tuider, 2018; Temple & Young, 2004). The fact that I am critical of an objective understanding of truth did not imply the abandonment of quality criteria in qualitative research, which was especially important to me as I navigated the interpretation process. Regardless of the specific evaluation methods employed, two key aspects were central to my analysis to ensure quality and make my interpretation process transparent.

First, I always analyzed both the content of the interview and the interview situation, including its power dynamics, together. Rather than focusing solely on what my research participants said, I broadened my inquiry to consider how and in response to what my interlocutors constructed their narratives and stories (Nohl, 2017; Schittenhelm, 2017). For this interpretive process, I used both the English transcript and the recorded Arabic audio to ensure I did not overlook linguistic nuances, variations in language use, or specific idiomatic expressions. Conducting the interviews myself was particularly beneficial in this regard (Juschkat et al., 2025). On the one hand, it allowed me to recall the atmosphere and nuances of the interview situation. On the other hand, it enabled me to continue reflecting on how my own socio-cultural positioning influenced the interview process, and, by extension, the realities my research partners chose to share, or not share, with me.

The following quote from the interview with Tarek shows a striking moment in the conversation where Tarek asks me to stop the recording when being asked about his thoughts about why the Jordanian government is maintaining the patrilineal citizenship law:

Tarek: Yeah. It's really sad, like, how still government's acting in that way, especially Arabs to each other, as Muslims to each other. Like, we are Muslims, bro, never mind the law. That's Islam, how it tell you to treat your brother?

Interviewer: Why do you think the government is doing this?

Tarek: [laughing] shut down the/ (Transcript Tarek, Pos. 270–275, conducted in English)

The interview with Tarek took place in a public café, with recording equipment. Prior to the interview, we were strangers to one another, and at various points before and during the conversation, he expressed reservations about my German nationality, particularly regarding my supposed stance on Palestine. When I analyzed the interview, it was essential for me to keep this context in mind, reflecting on how, perhaps, he may have struggled with discussing topics like the war in Gaza with a German interviewer. His reticence was tangible in the interview. I assume that, because Tarek presents himself as a very political man and is married to a German woman, he was particularly aware of the German public, often pro-Israeli-discourse, and wanted to protect himself by stopping the audio or only briefly answering questions. I interpret these actions as a means to counter my position of power, me being the one asking the questions and using the interview passages for my research.

As Matsuda (1991) suggests, “asking the other question” in this context meant for me to explore the conversation from perspectives beyond our social positioning. This led me to consider additional factors that may have influenced the power dynamics of our exchange. In Jordan, there is no freedom of expression, and especially criticism of the government is met with violent reprisals. The public setting of the interview, therefore, might have shaped his responses to my question about his experiences with the authorities.

Second, I actively sought discussions with others to critically engage with my interpretive approaches. Framing my interpretations as approximations, potentially more or less accurate, opened the door for valuable conversations with individuals both familiar and less familiar with the Jordanian context (Folkes, 2023). One such exchange took place with my friend Asma, who was born and raised in Jordan. We discussed a particular quote from Kareem, where he was asked whether his wife's family could support him and his wife. This conversation became central to one of our reflections on the complexities of interpretation within the context of my research:

Kareem: Eh, the first thing with aid support, we as an oriental society, we have a shame that your wife's family sends you money or sends you something, I don't accept it, I don't accept it from my wife's parents if they sent me aid....And, as a custom, for example, it's their daughter. They bring her something, they bring vegetables, things like that. It's not like it's an obligation to send you something. No. Either he wants to visit his daughter and get something for his daughter, or he wants to visit her and check on her and get her something like a cup set....It's a normal thing, it means that he's going to visit his daughter and check on her. (Transcript Kareem and Mahmood, Pos. 311–321)

Following this portion of the interview, Asma and I engaged in an enlightening discussion about the appropriateness of (financial) support from extended family members. She suggested that for Kareem, accepting financial support might be perceived as humiliating, as it could point to his inability to provide for his family. This analysis seemed very plausible to me during my conversation with Asma. Looking back, I also wondered how Kareem and his family perceived my question about family support and how inappropriate Kareem, in particular, might have found this question. For linguistic reasons, I would not have been able to address this issue effectively, either in the interview situation itself or afterwards. This clearly shows how linguistic barriers and cultural differences can intertwine in certain critical situations, making relationships and communication more difficult.

6. Research Guided by Gaps in Understanding

Anna Mijic's observations on understanding in transcultural research contexts will serve as the foundation for my concluding reflections on qualitative research in translation:

For example, you should never be under the illusion that you can easily *understand* your counterpart just because he or she supposedly speaks the same language. (Mijic, 2013, p. 95, author's translation, italics in original)

The illusion of effortless understanding seems less apparent to me in multilingual research, particularly in situations where one speaks, writes, and translates languages that are not one's first tongue. Below, I will explain why I consider feminist multilingual research to be a valuable research approach from both an epistemological and a methodological-practical standpoint. Clearly, these reflections are not self-evident when engaging in multilingual research; they require conscious and ongoing decision-making. However, rather than avoiding research in contexts where the researcher is not fluent in the language(s), I hope this article can offer potential pathways and reflections on how meaningful research can be conducted under such conditions.

Epistemologically, I argue that feminist multilingual qualitative research encourages researchers to confront their own limitations in understanding. Acknowledging these limitations does not necessarily require multilingual research. However, the fundamental assumption that full understanding is rarely immediate in multilingual research is hard to dismiss when the researcher is not perfectly fluent in every field language. In my experience, the intrinsic motivation to try to understand, nonetheless, and to make sense of the surroundings remains present in multilingual research. I argue that this tension between recognizing the limits of understanding and the drive to understand can serve as a productive foundation for reflexive and power-critical qualitative research. Reflecting on one's own difficulties to understand and interpret the environment can help acknowledge the positionality of knowledges (Haraway, 1988) and their entanglement with power, as well as the interwoven nature of data collection, analysis, and the standpoint of the people conducting these processes.

Methodologically, situations involving non-understanding clearly influence the research process. The acts of questioning, understanding, and translating impact every multilingual research step. Being fully aware of this fact can serve as a reminder that our own approach to the world is neither the only nor the objectively correct approach. During the interview phase, the courage to speak the language of the interviewees, even

with mistakes, can transform the relationship between researcher and research participants into a more mutual, “caring” dynamic, thereby influencing the power relations inherent to the situation. At the same time, it also means risking lacks of understanding and misinterpretations, which can lead to halting conversations, the heaviness or inappropriateness of which may only become apparent when the interview is subsequently translated. In the transcription and translation phases, linguistic challenges often prompt further investigation and analysis of linguistic varieties. Seeking support from individuals positioned differently within the (linguistic) field can also broaden the researcher’s understanding (Baumann & Rehbein, 2025), as it was in my case with two Jordanian friends. This can also challenge the assumption of the “lone wolf” researcher, emphasizing the need for collaboration and support from others (Burger et al., 2024). When analyzing data, the examination of (non-)understanding, languages, and the associated realities can add an entirely new layer to the interpretation (Aloudah, 2022). The process of writing up insights for publication purposes can confront the researcher with the “non-translatibility” of data into scientific English. Being attuned to how languages shape different realities can further refine the researcher’s awareness during this process (Baumann & Rehbein, 2025).

Ultimately, this article is intended to be an invitation to engage in qualitative, feminist research that is guided by the gaps in understanding. This guidance does not entail an expectation of completely filling these gaps, but rather encourages moving forward with, and despite, these gaps in understanding.

7. Conclusion

In this article, I examine the methodological and epistemological consequences of conducting qualitative research in a language that is not the researcher’s native tongue. I build upon the considerations and practices developed by feminist theorists, who center the reflection on power and the positionality of knowledge. I explore how these principles influence various multilingual qualitative research steps, from interviewing to data interpretation. Drawing on my own research in Arabic on mixed-status families in Jordan, I argue that reflexive research conducted outside the researcher’s linguistic comfort zone can serve as a continual methodological and epistemological reminder of the presence of non-understanding and power hierarchies in research. Consequently, I emphasize the significance and potential value of gaps in understanding throughout the entire research process.

As the focus on the steps of translation and understanding in qualitative research remains underexplored, this article contributes a profound reflection on these practices within multilingual research. By elaborating on the challenges of conducting research outside the researcher’s linguistic comfort zone, this article seeks to encourage reflexive research beyond the Global North, where the majority of global research funding is concentrated. Future research could investigate the extent to which multilingual research without interpretation can or cannot be applied to different research methods. Additionally, comparisons and reflections on various modes of translation offer another potential direction for extending my methodological and epistemological insights into multilingual qualitative research.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data cannot be shared publicly due to a confidential agreement with all the interviewees. Access requests must be sent to the author.

LLMs Disclosure

The author used GPT-5 for polishing English grammar. All content was verified by the author.

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Navigating Power and Language: Methodological Reflections on Biographical Research in Transnational Contexts

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Abstract

Transnational research settings create shared linguistic spaces between researchers and participants that are framed by global power relations, postcolonial constellations, and unequal access to resources. Against this backdrop, our article highlights methodological, ethical, and practical research issues in biographical research in multilingual settings, arguing for power-sensitive perspectives in all stages of the research process. We discuss methodological decisions and research dynamics from two transnational research projects in which biographical narrative interviews were conducted by native German speakers in the national contexts of Morocco and Turkey. The interview languages—French and English in Morocco and Turkish in Turkey—were learned by the researchers as foreign languages, while some of the interviewees’ first language was Arabic or Kurdish. We argue that in this transnational and multilingual context, biographical research can have specific potentials to reflect on (hidden) aspects of social power relations that might be inherent in the designs of our projects. We therefore propose to understand multilingual research settings not as a burden for knowledge production but rather as an opportunity to engage more deeply with how meaning is produced in interview settings and with contextual complexities.

Keywords

biographical research; language; methodology; multilingual research; power relations

1. Introduction: Language, Global Inequalities, and Knowledge Production

Transnational knowledge production promises a range of benefits: Not only does it break with latent or sometimes even open methodological nationalism that has been criticized since the early 1990s (Amelina &

Faist, 2012; Wimmer & Schiller, 2002), it can also demonstrate the border-crossing nature of social phenomena as well as enable comparisons between various local contexts. Researching in a transnational space may also include moving between and navigating different languages. This becomes particularly challenging in qualitative biographical research based on the production and interpretation of narrative data (Palenga-Möllenberg, 2018). Focusing on two studies in sociology and educational sciences based on biographical narrative interviews, we will discuss two different transnational and multilingual research projects. In the first study, eight interviews were conducted in Morocco with young adults of binational origin. They were carried out in French and English—both foreign languages for the interviewer—while the participants' binational backgrounds meant that they spoke a wide range of languages and were usually fluent in French. The second study is based on nine interviews in Turkey conducted in Turkish, also learned as a foreign language by the researcher. The interviewees being Kurdish women in this case, some of them, too, had acquired Turkish only as a second language.

Transnational research constellations like those sketched above do not erase the power of national constructs and the hierarchies they imply. As “the national is not the opposite of transnational” (Keßler & Szakács-Behling, 2020, p. 187), such settings urge us to critically reflect on our research agendas as to how they are structured and possibly enabled by the categorization of the world according to national boundaries. This spans from overarching questions of the global politics of knowledge (production) in a postcolonial world to concrete questions of conducting interviews in multilingual research settings, entailing questions of language and power.

Interpretive and constructivist approaches argue that the positioning of the researcher influences the way data is collected, analyzed, and presented (Devereux, 1967/1998). As a consequence, language choices made during the research process inevitably influence its outcome. While the use of language has been predominantly researched in the field of linguistics, findings are hardly transferred to interpretative approaches in the social sciences (Resch & Enzenhofer, 2018; Schembri & Jahić Jašić, 2022). A multilingual context raises some concerns for a language-oriented research method such as biographical research (Schembri & Jahić Jašić, 2022; Temple, 2006).

Drawing on specific examples from two transnational research projects in which biographical narrative interviews were conducted by native German speakers in the national contexts of Morocco and Turkey, we discuss how the linguistic constellation influences power relations between interviewer and interviewee, how it frames the biographical narratives produced in a multilingual setting, and which methodological issues gain relevance in the process of interpreting and communicating the data. To this end, we first address challenges of understanding in transnational multilingual research from a postcolonial perspective. Secondly, we link these issues to the biographical research approach. Thirdly, we present our two specific research contexts in order to zoom in on three methodological issues encountered during our research process: navigating language during the narrative interview, producing understanding in the interpretation process, and addressing challenges in translation related to representation. We argue that biographical research holds specific potential for considering social power relations inherent in transnational and multilingual research settings. While working across multiple languages can present challenges for biographical research, we suggest viewing them not as obstacles but rather as opportunities to engage more deeply with contextual complexities and the ways in which meaning is co-constructed in interviews.

2. Understanding Transnational Multilingual Research as Powerful Knowledge Production

The fact that Western-positioned researchers generate and circulate supposedly “true” knowledge about non-Western regions of the world must be understood as an expression of the geopolitics of knowledge that has its origins in European colonialism (Hall, 1992; Said, 1978/2003). This violent exploitation of entire parts of the world was accompanied and facilitated by a production of knowledge that constructed non-European people and regions as backward and uncivilized. As such, they could legitimately be subjugated, while “the West” was able to produce itself as developed and progressive (Hall, 1992). The role of science, in particular, is of central importance for the production of valid knowledge due to its socially recognized position.

Since poststructuralist and postcolonial theorists have drawn attention to the fact that language does not primarily depict the social world, but rather powerfully produces it in a specific way (Foucault, 1969/2002; Said, 1978/2003), an understanding of social and cultural scientific practice has been established that particularly emphasizes the constructive, i.e., reality-creating character of science. This insight, known as the “crisis of representation,” also points to the involvement of researchers in creating the social reality that they investigate.

Taking this seriously means asking the question who speaks about whom and how, and who can speak—and be heard (Spivak, 1988)—within global relations of inequality. It points to the fact that, depending on their social position, speakers can assume different positions of power: While it is possible for subjects in privileged positions to speak for themselves and about others and to be heard, subjects in less privileged speaking positions cannot effectively represent themselves—and are thus described, explained, analyzed, in short: re-presented by those in privileged positions. With Spivak, we can understand the problem of representation as rooted in its dual nature: Representation inevitably involves representing (as in “speaking for”) as well as re-presenting (as in “speaking about”; see Spivak, 1988, p. 275). In this sense, representing something does not only mean depicting what is represented, but first and foremost bringing it forth and reifying it: Representation creates the object or the person to be represented.

While the question of powerful representations produced through research concerns general questions of scientific knowledge production, it becomes relevant in a specific way in the context of transnational multilingual research constellations. For example, conducting and interpreting interviews as Western researchers in a non-Western country in a local language that is not the researchers’ first language raises the question of what they can “understand” and make “understandable” from the interview data. What are the language abilities and cultural concepts available to them to represent those to whom they have spoken? How are they able to make sense of what has been said and where are their limits of understanding? How are those limits in turn linked to their (privileged) position in a postcolonial world? Thus, the transnational, multilingual interview setting makes visible what is often invisible, albeit valid for all data interpretation: Processes of supposed “understanding” should be understood as processes of situated interpretations. As Haraway (1988, p. 583) points out, knowledge and knowledge production have to be understood as “situated and embodied knowledges,” i.e., every interpretation takes place from a specific standpoint. Applied to transnational multilingual research, this means that we can only make the articulations of our interviewees—in the concrete research situation in the field as well as in the scientific analysis of their interview texts—intelligible with constructs and interpretations that are available to us in our linguistic, cultural, biographical, scientific, etc. situatedness. A power-reflexive research strategy that breaks with

colonial continuities of producing quasi-neutral knowledge about “non-Western Others” thus aims to render visible how this precise situatedness structures the whole research process.

Understanding knowledge and interpretations as situated and not universal also means casting doubt on the scientific category of “understanding” what somebody “means.” Again, we know from poststructuralist thinkers that meaning can never be fixed, but is constantly in motion (Derrida, 1982). This means that a statement (whether in the first language or a foreign language) can never be completely understood, grasped, fixated. While this can also be regarded as fundamentally true for any research operating with language, the problem becomes obvious in transnational multilingual interview research: The illusion of being able to “understand” each other (seemingly without difficulty; see Kruse & Schmieder, 2012) becomes apparent. In consequence, Kruse and Schmieder (2012) argue that multilingual research settings are particularly conducive to reconstructive social research, so that “making it strange” is an important methodological principle.

Against the background of the complexity of postcolonial entanglements, research designs are needed that allow for the possibility to critically question relationships of dominance. While it is impossible to resolve the tensions associated with transnational research in postcolonial power constellations, we argue that the biographical research approach has the potential to ease this asymmetry to some extent.

3. What Questions Does a Multilingual Setting Raise for Biographical Research?

The biographical approach is generally traced to the Chicago School, notably the groundbreaking study on Polish migrants by Thomas and Znaniecki (1918–1920/2007) that employed a mixed-method approach of narrative interviews, ethnographic observations, archival research, and analysis of letters and diaries. Subsequently, biographical research developed in the 1970s as a new paradigm in different national contexts, always in contrast to other research traditions (Bertaux, 1997; Neyzi, 2016; Nurse & O'Neill, 2018; Pape, 2018). In the German-speaking context, it has been shaped by various epistemological lines such as ethnomethodology, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and grounded theory (Apitzsch & Inowlocki, 2000). At the core of the narrative-qualitative approach of German biography research is the reconstruction of the subject's biography and its inherent subjective realities. In this context, biography is understood as a reconstruction of the processual and active engagement of the subject with societal and social conditions (cf. Apitzsch & Inowlocki, 2000; Gilliéron et al., 2018). On the one hand, biography refers to the individual historicity (Schütze, 1983/2016) of a person's life. On the other hand, the individual life story is always a positioning in the social space over a lifetime and embedded in collective-historical processes (Rosenthal, 2005). A biography, therefore, reflects one's own biographical interweaving in a specific social space that is structured by social contexts of power and domination (Gilliéron et al., 2018).

In social science, biography is generally understood as a social and linguistic construction (Alheit & Dausien, 2009, p. 298) because it relies on the biographical narrative produced by the subject in a specific situational context. The aim of biographical research is to analyze the subjective meanings individuals attach to particular courses of experiences. A key element is the elicitation of a spontaneous and autonomous narration of personally lived experiences (Schütze, 2008)—an interview form that refrains from interrupting or directive questioning (e.g., semi-structured interviews). The methodological principles of communication and openness require the interviewer to engage with the interviewee, enabling the latter to develop their

own perspectives on their lives (Schütze, 2008). This allows the interviewer to analyze which areas of life are relevant to the interviewee in relation to the research question.

However, a life story is not a random sequence of events; rather, it follows a recognizable *Gestalt* (Rosenthal, 1995) or process structure (Schütze, 1981) that can be analytically reconstructed. The sociolinguist Schütze discovered that in a trustful environment, where the interviewees can surrender to their narrative, so-called narrative constraints (*Zugzwänge*) of extempore storytelling (*Stegreiferzählung*) shape both the content and form of what is recounted. These constraints are based on the rules of everyday communication and serve to present narrative contexts in an understandable and comprehensible way (Schütze, 1983/2016, p. 79). Schütze (2008) distinguishes between four forms of narrative constraints: the constraint of closing the textual form, the constraint of condensing, the constraint of grading the events, and the constraint of going into detail: “[They] serve...as a device to recapitulate only the central knots of the experienced life history and its biographical process structures” (Schütze, 2008, p. 43). These narrative constraints have the epistemic power to reveal socio-biographical processes that may stay unnoticed in semi-structured interviews because they enable the interviewee to address events that usually are avoided in conventional conversational situations.

At the same time, the narrative is always shaped by the present context of its production. Biography emerges in the situated interaction between narrator and listener and is influenced by their respective interests and roles (Dausien, 2006; Rosenthal, 1995). Told at another time, in a different setting, or to a different listener, the same life story may emphasize different aspects. Moreover, what is narrated is always shaped by considerations of social desirability—by prevailing social norms, expectations, and the boundaries of what can be said within a given interactional framework (Dausien & Mecheril, 2006).

This reconstructive understanding of biography leads to a sequential analysis that simultaneously considers past events, the individual's meaning-making processes, and the influence of the present situation on the narration. The analysis focuses on how the narrative is constructed, with particular attention to word choice and textual structure (Schütze, 2008). As we will demonstrate, transnational research can pose challenges to this analytical approach.

While Schütze stresses that biographical narrating follows universal principles, biographical studies looking at non-Western contexts (Hangartner, 2012; Matthes, 1984) argue that biography as a concept relies on Western (as well as bourgeois) ideas of structuring one's life. Accordingly, the assumption that people “have” an individual biography can be understood as a cultural assumption, because “narrative traditions, patterns of interpretation and images on which biographical narratives are based...have not emerged in a ‘vacuum’ but have developed from a specific cultural context” (Lutz, 2010, p. 122, authors' translation). As such, Ndhlovu's critique of Western mainstream methodologies also applies to the German biographical research: It is not a neutral approach but deeply embedded in “specific contextual and cultural conditions in the Global North” (Ndhlovu, 2021, p. 194).

Building on these insights, we observe several challenges for transnational biographical research: conducting narrative interviews in a non-native language (either for the interviewee or the interviewer), interpreting multilingual or foreign-language interviews, and translating theories and transcripts for analysis or publication. In the first case, it can be argued that individuals may struggle to develop an autonomous narrative that reflects their own system of relevance when speaking in a foreign language, as they might be

unable to recount their experiences in an authentic and nuanced way (Brandmaier, 2015; Palenga-Möllenberg, 2018). The analysis of multilingual interviews can also be constrained by the researcher's language proficiency, which can lead to misunderstandings or an unawareness of cultural and socio-historical references embedded in the narrative (Brandmaier, 2015; Jukschat et al., 2025; Kruse & Schmieder, 2012). Moreover, transposing Western theories in non-Western contexts carries the risk of reproducing Eurocentric assumptions rather than capturing participants' lived realities (Goodnight, 2017). And finally, translating transcripts into another language may result in a loss of information, as linguistic subtleties and context-specific nuances might disappear—with consequences both for the analytical process and for the eventual reader (Küsters, 2009; Riemann, 2003; Tuijthof, 2009).

At the same time, the biographical approach holds significant potential for research in multilingual settings. In their study on foreign language use in qualitative research, Kruse and Schmieder (2012) emphasize that multilingual research contexts require “linguistic-pragmatic reconstructive approaches” in order to “truly understand the foreign linguistic meaning” (p. 251, authors' translation). According to the authors, content-analytic methods are problematic in foreign-language contexts because they treat language as an objective vehicle of information rather than a system of meaning. As a result, meanings tend to be translated into the researcher's own system of relevance without being adequately reconstructed in their specific societal and linguistic context (see also Janusch, 2011).

In contrast, the language-sensitive and heuristic nature of biographical research shifts the analytical focus to both *how* something is said and *what* is said within a particular situational and interactional framework. It acknowledges that meaning is co-constructed through language and shaped by the context in which narratives are produced.

From this perspective, working with multilingual data not only poses methodological challenges but can also enrich the analytical process. It compels researchers to adopt multiple interpretive positions and to engage more consciously with the interplay of language, culture, and subjectivity. The necessity of navigating diverse linguistic, cultural, and narrative codes fosters a heightened reflexivity regarding one's own interpretive position. By referring to our two research contexts in Turkey and Morocco, we will show in the following how the biographical approach helped us to navigate our multilingual contexts.

4. Navigating Transnational Research Contexts

In the following we present our respective research context and how we navigated the ambivalences arising from the multilingual research context. Gwendolyn Gilliéron did research with young adults of binational origin in Morocco, while Marie Hoppe did research with Kurdish-positioned women in Turkey. While for both researchers the first language is German, it was not a shared language in our respective research fields. We therefore learned one language of our research contexts—French for Gwendolyn and Turkish for Marie. Moreover, both researchers were confronted with a context that is multilingual in itself.

To facilitate readability, the excerpts below follow a simplified transcription system (see also Table 1) indicating paralinguistic and interactional features such as emphasis, interruptions, or laughter.

Table 1. Transcription guideline.

(Comment)	Paralinguistic elements like laughter, hesitation, emotions or others
(.) or (3)	Short or longer pause
CAPITAL LETTERS	Indicate emphasis on a word or syllable
/	Marks a sentence interruption or unfinished utterance
[word]	Word retained in the original language when the translation is uncertain or contextually significant

4.1. The Research Contexts

4.1.1. Morocco—Gwendolyn Gilliéron

I, Gwendolyn Gilliéron, conducted research on the identity negotiations of young adults of binational origin in Switzerland and Morocco (Gilliéron, 2022a). Between 2014 and 2018, 23 biographical narrative interviews were conducted (15 in Switzerland and eight in Morocco) with young adults between 16 and 28 years and analyzed using Schütze's (1983/2016) narrative analysis. Language emerged as an important layer of identity construction and a key element in how young adults navigate processes of othering (Gilliéron, 2022b).

In Switzerland, language use is territorialized and, as I did my research in the German part, the participants and I shared the same first language, Swiss German. In Morocco, by contrast, Standard Arabic, Tamazight, Moroccan Arabic (Darija), Hassani, and the colonial languages French and Spanish coexist in everyday life. The colonial rule during the French protectorate (1912–1956) profoundly shaped the social hierarchy in postcolonial Morocco (Wyrzten, 2016). Unlike in Algeria, France did not follow a policy of assimilation in Morocco but instead established social divisions along ethnic and religious lines (Varro, 2003; Wyrzten, 2016). After independence in 1956, the nationalist movement sought to reunite the population under the *umma*—the Muslim community—yet these colonial hierarchies remain present in the social imaginary today (Wyrzten, 2016). As a result, adopting a Western-oriented lifestyle is associated with social prestige, with French serving as a key language for educational, social, and professional mobility. Given this background and the binational origins of my participants, I met young adults with multilingual repertoires—speaking Bahasa, English, French, German, Hassani, Italian, Moroccan Arabic, Russian, Spanish, and Pulaar. A striking particularity of this setting is that not all of my interviewees were proficient in Arabic, nor was I, as the researcher.

Consequently, most interviews took place in French, with one in English and another in German. While I myself had to conduct the interviews in a second language, most of my interviewees in Morocco attended a French private school or had a parent who was French-speaking and were therefore more fluent in the respective interview language than I was. Moreover, the interview language was not just any language, but one of the languages they speak in their everyday lives (see Riemann, 2003, §7).

4.1.2. Turkey—Marie Hoppe

In my dissertation project, I, Marie Hoppe, analyzed the schooling experiences of Kurdish students in the national context of Turkey from the perspective of racism theory (Hoppe, 2023). Between 2016 and 2017,

I conducted nine narrative-biographical interviews (Schütze, 1983/2016) with young women in Istanbul who positioned themselves as Kurdish and interpreted them using grounded theory methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). I conducted these interviews in Turkish, which I had learned as a foreign language both in formal and informal settings in both Turkey and Germany, and in which I had developed solid everyday language skills. However, I do not speak Kurdish (Kirmanci) apart from very few expressions and was therefore not able to communicate with my interviewees in the language some of them had acquired first. Thus, while with Turkish we certainly shared a language, my interview partners were able to use the interview language with much greater ease.

Although Turkey, strictly speaking, does not look back at a history of colonization, it nevertheless stands in a hierarchical relationship to the “West.” Critical analyses have shown Turkey’s complex and ambivalent relationship with the “West,” which, on the one hand, functioned as a role-model for modernization, and was, on the other hand, rejected due to orientalist stereotypical representations of Turks in Western discourses (Ahiska, 2010; Ergin, 2017). At the same time, internal colonial dynamics have been part of developing and securing a modern identity in Turkey, historically including “civilizing missions on a supposedly backward and traditional Anatolian society enslaved by the retrograde influence of Islam” (Zeydanlıoğlu, 2008, p. 158) and racialized productions of “white Turks” and “Kurdish others” (Ergin, 2017). In the nation-state context of Turkey, Turkish is the hegemonic language and has been a powerful tool of nation-building and cultural homogenization since the founding of the republic in 1923 (Coşkun et al., 2011). The systematic exclusion of other languages from all areas of society is also reflected in the monolingual education system. For some of my interviewees, Turkish was their first language, while others acquired it as a second language after the family language, Kurdish. It became clear in the interviews that my interviewees perceived language skills in Kurdish as an important part of their self-understanding as Kurds.

The multilingual setting of both research projects framed every step during the research process, from finding interview partners, data collection and preparation, analysis, theory choices, and presentation/publication of the research. Focusing in turn on the interview situation, interpretation of interviews, and translation, we will now give insights into our strategies and decisions with which we navigated our biographical studies in our respective transnational and multilingual research settings, Morocco and Turkey. All examples that we present in the following use pseudonymized names for the interviewees.

4.2. *Negotiating Language During the Interview*

When conducting narrative interviews in a non-native language (either for the interviewee or the interviewer), one could argue that linguistic nuances are not accessible to the researcher, or that interviewees may be less able to express themselves in a nuanced way if they cannot speak in their native language. A valid reason could be to collaborate with interpreters, but it also brings up a whole new set of questions (Holzinger & Draxl, 2024; Resch & Enzenhofer, 2018). Due to pragmatic choices such as the high financial cost of interpreters, we chose to rely on our and the interviewees’ language competences in our respective studies.

First of all, the decision to have the interviewees speak in a language they are familiar with is closely linked to the biographical research approach. Especially in biographical research (in German-speaking countries), the proportion of speech of the interviewee and interviewer is highly asymmetrical: While the interviewer sets a narrative impulse at the beginning of the interview, the interviewees ideally unfold their detailed

self-presentations afterwards, talking about past experiences and different phases of life (Schütze, 2008), so that their share of speech is much greater than that of the interviewer. Our decision to speak with the interviewees in a language they are very familiar with was therefore also based on the idea that they should be able to express themselves as naturally as possible. Furthermore, at this stage of the research, it is not a problem if we do not immediately grasp everything in all its facets, as we may understand it later on, during the interpretation process (see also Section 4.3). The biographical method explicitly requires the researcher to set aside their own assumptions and be open to the perspectives and interpretations of the interviewee. The aim is to reconstruct their reality.

In our specific projects, however, it is also important to reflect that the assumption that our interviewees would move effortlessly and without conflict through French or Turkish cannot be generalized in the context of powerful language relations. It is important to notice, for example, that French is a colonial language in the context of Morocco, and that Turkish is an instrument of linguistic and cultural homogenization in Turkey. In both projects, the interviews were conducted in a language that the interviewees had learned through the state education system, if not earlier, but which in many cases was not their first language. Especially in the context of political struggles of Kurds in Turkey for visibility and recognition, language (both Kurdish and Turkish) is an emotional category associated with biographical experiences of othering and invisibility. The reinstallation of the linguistic hegemonic norm via Turkish can also put the interviewees under pressure. For example, Dilan Sezer, who was interviewed by Marie in Istanbul, interjects almost apologetically at one point in the interview:

D: Şu an çok cümlede Türkçe olarak bozuk kuruyorum bu arada (gülüyor) Çünkü

I: sıkıntı yok (gülüyor)

D: ben de sizin gibi Türkçeyi SONRADAN öğrenmiş bir insanım.

D: By the way, I'm forming broken Turkish in many sentences right now (laughs) because

I: no problem (laughs)

D: like you, I am a person who learned Turkish AFTERwards.

Here, Dilan both articulates an apology for her linguistic “mistakes” as well as parallels herself with the interviewer. Although the reasons and processes of learning Turkish in the case of Dilan and the interviewer cannot be compared in any way, the parallel drawn by Dilan creates a shared in-between space and can be read as an element connecting the interviewee and the interviewer in a linguistic “between.” It becomes clear that both are part of the creation of an “interlinguality” (Haverkamp, 1997, p. 12, authors’ translation) that enables their communication.

Although our interviewees generally had a high level of language proficiency in French and Turkish respectively, we were often able to observe that the transnational framing and multilingual setting of our research acted as a connecting and trust-building element in the interview situation. Establishing an atmosphere of trust is crucial, especially for the narrative interview, where quite personal and intimate information is shared, and it

is even more important when the life stories include experiences of discrimination or violence. In our projects, the fact that we, as the interviewers, had learned French (Gwendolyn) or Turkish (Marie) as foreign languages, also stressed our outsider position to the national orders of belonging: It highlighted the fact that we were (just like our interviewees) not part of the national majority, something which was perceived as mostly positive by our interviewees.

Besides the challenges for mutual understanding that may arise from this setting, we also observed that the subjective meaning of the narrative must be more explicitly articulated in foreign language contexts, as we can rely less on common-sense constructions (Kruse & Schmieder, 2012; Riemann, 2003). Thus, understanding in a multilingual context should be seen as a double process, because the interviewees must also think about how they can tell things to the interviewers in a way that they can understand. As such, multilingual interviews lead to a “bilingual-hermeneutic interpretation process” (Wettemann, 2012, p. 112, authors’ translation) that can ultimately support a deeper overall understanding of the material (see also Enzenhofer & Resch, 2011; Resch & Enzenhofer, 2018; Riemann, 2003).

The uncertainty as to whether the interviewer can understand everything that is said is also dealt with quite explicitly in Marie’s interviews. Often, the interviewees include brief explanations of terms, historical developments, or political events, indicating that they are unsure how familiar Marie is with history, society, and language in Turkey. However, according to Riegel and Kaya (2002), an outsider position to a cultural context can also be seen as an advantage. The authors observe that explanations in interviews are more detailed when the interviewee and interviewer do not share the same cultural knowledge and repertoire (Riegel & Kaya, 2002), which is particularly valuable for biographical research.

While the “primacy of autonomy” (Kruse et al., 2012, p. 33, authors’ translation) and its assumed positive effects on the social situation in the interview encouraged us both to conduct the interviews independently and without first-language help, we also hoped that it would potentially relativize the inevitably hierarchical relationship between researcher and interviewee in favor of the interviewees. According to our considerations, the fact that our interviewees have a much better command of French and Turkish than we do has the potential to reduce the asymmetry in the relationship between researcher and interviewee, as they are at least linguistically in a more powerful position. In this context, Marie in particular, noticed the varying speech rates among her interview partners and the gradations of linguistic complexity (syntax, vocabulary), which she understood as a reaction to the others’ assessment of her linguistic competence.

4.3. “Understanding” During the Interpretation Process

Analyzing foreign-language interview material is challenging because one is constantly confronted with the limits of one’s own language skills. Everyday expressions, regional variations, allusions, humor, etc., may be difficult to understand despite good foreign language skills (Brandmaier, 2015). In the biographical approach, we take a close look at what and how something is being said. Is it then possible to analyze word choices and the structure of narration when the narration may be influenced by a limited knowledge of the language? And the other way around, how can we analyze the interview in its nuances if we are not native speakers?

These challenges notwithstanding, we would like to argue here that analytical work with texts in foreign languages also holds the potential to guard oneself against hasty attributions of meaning and interpretations.

For example, Peter Stegmaier emphasizes that, while one may overlook things due to a lack of language proficiency, it is just as possible to discover things more precisely, because working with a foreign language encourages one to pay closer attention (Stegmaier, 2013, p. 248). Hence, multilingual contexts may constitute an opportunity for interpretative and reconstructive research, as they open up new ways of understanding (Jukschat et al., 2025).

Despite the need to engage (more) intensively with the interview material ourselves, it was invaluable for us to be able to discuss interview sequences in their original language with others. We turned to people in our circle of friends and colleagues who were familiar with the respective linguistic and socio-cultural contexts to discuss selected interview passages with them. The readings of friends and colleagues proved to be particularly helpful, as they were able to provide us with information about emotional meanings or specific milieu—or discourse-related connotations of individual expressions, which were not always clear to us due to our limited cultural frame of reference. Moreover, we presented our analyses at local research institutes in Rabat and Istanbul. Marie was also lucky enough to be able to discuss her empirical material in interpretation groups in which the co-interpreters had acquired Turkish, partly as a first language, partly as a second language, but with a biographical connection to Turkey, and partly, like herself, as a foreign language without a biographical connection to Turkey. It was precisely this joint discussion from different positions about certain expressions in the interviews that proved to be very valuable.

“Understanding” the interview material, however, does not only mean making sense of what is said in a language that we, the researchers, know. It also means reading the interview text by means of scientific concepts. Doing research in the dominant language without a language-sensitive approach may reinforce “perspective[s] com[ing] from another cultural orientation and a position of power and privilege” (Janusch, 2011, p. 85). As the following example will show, the analytical concepts with which we approached the material at times did not seem to fully grasp the specific local context. Rather, it unveiled the analytical tools as concepts developed in Western academia, and thus not universally applicable (Goodnight, 2017).

Unfortunately, we were both unable to include the Arabic or Turkish academic discourse in our analyses. Hence, the sociological concepts we used in our research, such as “biography,” “adolescence,” “othering,” or “race,” are concepts that were developed in and for the Western context. These theoretical frameworks cannot be transferred easily to another national context with its own specific socio-historical context (Goodnight, 2017; Reuter & Villa, 2010). The analysis of the category “race,” for example, in Gwendolyn’s interview with Abdoulaye of Moroccan-West African descent, proved to be a revealing moment to question the researcher’s own understanding of racialization and othering processes. From the outset of the interview, “being Black” is a structuring category for Abdoulaye. He describes himself as “Black” before our meeting, indicating that this information might make it easier for Gwendolyn to find him in the crowd. Further, he narrates about how, at school, he was “the only Black kid,” and how he became very turbulent in order to deal with this situation. He further explains how this label made him increasingly insecure around Moroccan girls. However, “race” does not seem to be a fixed category in the Moroccan context as the analysis of Abdoulaye’s further experiences indicates:

A: à chaque fois que je dis un mot en arabe, même personne qui parle mal de toi et dès que tu parles un mot en arabe il il s'excuse voilà il tour/comment ? ntz il y deux choses, soit il te considère comme un étranger soit il te considère comme un Marocain.

I: mhm

A: *initialement il te considère comme un étranger mais dès que tu parles un mot en arabe hop! tu fais partie des Marocains. si tu es noir ou pas noir tu es parmi d'eux. tu vois ? donc ce qui m'arrivait.*

A: Everytime I say a word in Arabic, the same person who spoke badly about you and when you speak a word in Arabic he he apologizes, you see [voilà], he tur/how? ntz there are two things, either he considers you a foreigner or he considers you a Moroccan.

I: mhm

A: initially he considers you a foreigner but as soon as you speak a word in Arabic hop! you're part of the Moroccans. if you're black or not black you're one of them. you see? so that's what happened to me.

As he has grown older, Abdoulaye has noticed that the language he uses—French or Arabic—can change the first impression that people may have of him. In the Moroccan context, language thus enables him to negotiate and cross social boundaries (Gilliéron, 2022b).

Abdoulaye's experience raises the question of whether Western European conceptions of racism can be directly 'translated' to the Moroccan context, or whether we must pay closer attention to the subjective meanings attached to terms such as "Black" and its intersection with other context-specific categories (Goodnight, 2017; Lundström, 2014). Therrien (2020) emphasizes that the term *azi* (Black) carries different connotations for Moroccan family members compared to migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. The author shows how alienation of mixed couples and their children intersects with social class, gender, accent, and name. Similarly, El Hamel (2013) cautions against simply imposing Western concepts of race onto the Moroccan context without examining how racist structures and ideologies have developed within its unique historical and social context. His socio-historical research demonstrates that, while the idea of race exists in Arab societies—despite the Islamic principle of equality—it is a flexible construct, shaped by factors such as ancestry and class. In Abdoulaye's case, both social upward mobility and his accent-free Arabic lessen the processes of racial othering. His mixedness seems to become a resource to negotiate the rigid social hierarchy (Gilliéron, 2022b; see also Sales & Carvalho, 2025; Therrien, 2020).

Disregarding this specific socio-historical background risks reinforcing dominant forms of knowledge production in our interpretations. In this regard, the biographical method offers a valuable heuristic tool, allowing us to reconstruct and understand the meaning of "Black" within its particular context and through the lens of individual experience.

4.4. Translation: The Fixing and Un-Fixing of Meaning

Translation is not an unproblematic undertaking (Asad, 2010; Temple & Young, 2004; Tuider, 2009); however, it is hardly reflected upon in biographical research (Brandmaier, 2015; Palenga-Möllennebeck, 2018). It represents a powerful operation, historically linked to colonial practice, as it was used during colonialism to represent the "New World" in hegemonic perspectives. In this sense, the act of translation constructs others and their

supposed “culture” by objectifying the “other” language and culture to be translated (Tuider, 2009, p. 179). Translation is therefore a cultural and linguistic appropriation practice in which the translator and analyzer “has final authority in determining the subject’s meanings” and thus “becomes *the real author*” (Asad, 2010, p. 162, emphasis in original) of meaning. In this sense, translation is understood as a form of data processing in which meaning is always slightly shifted: “Translation, in effect, packages the data into a form that fits the tools we have for handling it” (Temple & Young, 2004, p. 166).

During the process of translation, a loss of information may be noted (Küsters, 2009, p. 189), since sentence structure and word choice are altered in translation and no longer correspond to the flow of speech of the biographical subjects. This question of equivalence is at the very heart of translation studies (Bittner & Günther, 2013), yet neither of us is a trained translator, which raises ethical issues about the adequacy of the translated citations and the interpretation process, but also bears practical challenges. Gwendolyn, for example, was not sure about the right way to translate the sentence *je suis issue d’une famille franco-marocaine*, which may be translated as “I’m from a French-Moroccan family,” “I come from a French-Moroccan family,” or “I was born in a French-Moroccan family.” All three versions have slightly different meanings, which are crucial in a language-based interpretation.

From the problems associated with translations, we drew an important consequence for our specific research projects: We decided to work with the original language interview transcript for as long and as often as possible. Thus, the step of translating excerpts from the interviews was taken predominantly in order to make the empirical material accessible to the scientific community in our field of research, for example, for publications, conferences, or work in mostly German-language interpretation groups.

As already mentioned, we often consulted colleagues and friends who had a better command of the interview language than we did, or who had grown up and been socialized in Turkey or Morocco, when faced with linguistic uncertainties. Time and again, it became clear that there is not just one (convincing) equivalent for a linguistic phenomenon. It happened that different people suggested different translations and interpretations of the same linguistic phrase. This proved valuable in the interpretation process, as the different options allowed us to consider alternative meanings within the context of the specific terminology and to experiment with different interpretations (for a similar research strategy, see Bittner & Günther, 2013, who worked with bilingual interpretation groups). In this sense, translation becomes an integral part of the analysis.

In view of the fact that linguistic ambiguities have traditionally been smoothed out in the direction of the historically and currently hegemonic target languages (Asad, 2010, p. 158), the practical research question arises as to how the surplus and deficit in meaning can be taken into account when the foreign-language material does not fit into the German linguistic and semantic system. In short: How can untranslatability and ambiguity be represented?

In the translation, we both tried to translate as literally as possible and not to smooth out linguistic peculiarities in the direction of German. We preferred a “documentary translation” (Wettemann, 2012, p. 110, authors’ translation), i.e., a word-for-word translation. The challenge here was not only to find the right choice of words, but also the accurate placement of hesitations or stresses (Riemann, 2003) or to deal with words and sentences that were broken off midway. For terms that allow for different meanings, we decided to place

further translation options in square brackets and included them in the analysis (see citation of Abdoulaye's case above).

It was particularly important to us to emphasize the “unsmoothness” and unruliness of concepts and specific expressions that would have lost some of their meaning if they had been translated into German (e.g., the case of ‘Hoca,’ see below). This has the effect that the translated interview text actively breaks with the illusion of seamless equivalence across languages. As can be seen in the following interview excerpt, Marie has also chosen to leave Turkish filler words (*yani, hani, işte, ya, şey*) mostly untranslated in order to repeatedly pull the reader out of an overly ‘harmonious’ and coherent reading experience:

B: Ya sınıfta öğrencilerde bir şey vardı, hani bir yabancılık, böyle bi ı yani hoca, yani öğretmen karşısında otuz kırk tane öğrenci, hatta sınıflar çok kalabalık oluyordu, bazen, altmış yetmişe çıktığı da oluyordu, tabii hani öğretmen olmadığı dönemlerde.

B: Ya, in the class there was a thing among the students, *hani* a foreignness, like a *uuh yani* opposite the *Hoca yani* the teacher there were thirty to forty students, the classes were very crowded even, sometimes also up to sixty, seventy, of course *hani* in times when there was no teacher.

The inevitable disruptions created by untranslated words are intended to remind the audience that a translated text is, on the one hand, not capable of and, on the other hand, does not want to claim to fully represent another linguistic and cultural system. However, this translation practice and its representation in translated interview sequences come with the price that the translations produced do not necessarily and always fit in with the speaking and listening habits of a target-language audience.

Both of us decided to present both the original sequence and a translated version of it in the publication of our studies (Gilliéron, 2022a; Hoppe, 2023). This approach not only reveals the process of translation but also enables intersubjectivity. It reduces the extent to which the researcher monopolizes the process of meaning construction. Furthermore, as Schembri and Jahić Jašić (2022) and Temple (2006) note, displaying the multilingual context of the data highlights minority languages and acknowledges further that readers themselves often live in multilingual contexts. Thus, the bilingual presentation of the interview material also means making visible languages that tend to be marginalized in academic discourse. However, journals are not yet sensitive to this aspect and rarely accept citations in languages other than the dominant one.

5. Conclusion

Linguistically sensitive research approaches should not be viewed as obstacles but rather as opportunities to engage more deeply with the contextual complexities of multilingual settings. Each such setting presents specific challenges, particularly because they are embedded in broader global power relations. Issues of representation, visibility, and voice take on different meanings depending on the sociopolitical and biographical location of the participants. In this respect, biographical research offers a valuable framework for understanding how meanings are produced and negotiated in a specific context.

As Kruse and Schmieder (2012) remind us, epistemological understanding is never fully achievable in any language; it always remains an approximation of the other's relevance system. Research, particularly in

multilingual contexts, makes this ongoing negotiation of meaning especially visible, as words are not fixed or universal, but situated, shifting, and deeply contextual.

Our studies also highlight a central ethical limitation: Our interview partners were ultimately unable to access or validate our translation and hence interpretations, as these were formulated in German—a language they do not read. This underscores the asymmetries inherent in knowledge production and highlights the power dynamics inscribed in acts of translation and research production in multilingual settings. At the same time, by offering perspectives grounded in research in Morocco and Turkey, our analyses enrich discussions with contexts often not represented in German-speaking academia. By showing the potential of multilingual research for tracing and describing social phenomena across national borders, our studies specifically contribute to a deeper understanding of racism as a “travelling” concept and transnational phenomenon, taking shape in various forms in different (national) contexts (Said, 1983, pp. 226–247).

In sum, our methodological reflections underscore the necessity of negotiating language choice and embracing the fluidity of linguistic repertoires within biographical interviews. Here, the biographical approach enables us to situate individual narratives within broader sociopolitical and transnational contexts, thereby helping us to better understand how power relations are enacted and contested through language. Adopting a language—and power-sensitive approach not only enriches biographical research but also addresses the methodological and ethical complexities inherent in interpreting and communicating multilingual data. Certainly, biographical research could profit from the insights of translation studies and sociolinguistic studies, which have already addressed these issues (Busch, 2016; Palenga-Möllnbeck, 2018).

Based on our empirical experience, and in line with Jukschat et al. (2025), “we advocate for a methodical procedural knowledge that adheres—especially in multilingual and cross-cultural contexts—to the core principles of qualitative research: openness, reflexivity, and the strategic use of ‘making it strange’” (p. 204, authors’ translation). Only by embracing these principles can we critically navigate the tensions between language, meaning, and power in qualitative and multilingual research.

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The Construction of Researcher Positionality Through Language Practices in Multilingual Contexts

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Abstract

Ethnographers immerse themselves in the lifeworlds of their participants—including their language practices—through participant observation. In this process, researchers’ linguistic repertoires, along with the language choices and practices they enable, play a central role in co-constructing positionality within emergent interactions. These interactions both shape and are shaped by locally situated meaning-making, reflecting the dynamics of the research context. This article examines the dynamic construction of positionality in multilingual research contexts. Drawing on four linguistic ethnographies conducted at a metal foundry, a preschool, a secondary school, and dairy farms, the analysis identifies four key dimensions through which researcher positionality is constructed via language practices: attuning to, engaging in, translating, and recognizing participants’ linguistic practices. Multilingual research contexts, we argue, introduce additional layers of complexity to the construction of positionality and call for critical reflection on the language practices of both ethnographers and participants.

Keywords

linguistic ethnography; multilingual practices; outsider–insider continuum; researcher positionality

1. Introduction

“What is going on here?” This question is a common starting point for ethnographers as they begin data collection (Anderson-Levitt, 2012). To find out, ethnographers immerse themselves in the lifeworlds of their

participants through participant observation, becoming part of the research site themselves. One aspect that is always “going on here” is some form of language variation: Participants may use different languages—or choose not to—they may shift registers, employ multimodal resources, or speak with different accents, to name just a few examples. These language practices do not occur in a vacuum; they carry social meaning, shaped by language ideologies and intertwined with broader social practices such as positioning oneself and relating to others (Heller, 2007).

When engaging with research participants in multilingual contexts, ethnographers inevitably become part of these linguacultural dynamics. During participant observation, they are far from being “flies on the wall.” Rather, they are always visible and audible, bringing their own linguistic repertoires into the field and using them to co-construct relationships with participants (Costley & Reilly, 2021). This process of relationship-building is inherently complex, and language variation adds yet another layer: Ethnographers must navigate decisions about which language(s) to use, how to use them, and how to proceed when their linguistic resources do not align with those of the participants (Van Hest & Jacobs, 2022). Given the language-ideological dimension, these decisions can influence access to the field, shape interactional dynamics, and affect how the ethnographer is perceived. In other words, they contribute to the construction of the researcher’s positionality.

In this light, it is worth extending the question “what is going on here?” to consider how researcher positionality unfolds specifically in the context of multilingualism. In the following, we explore researcher positionality through the lens of multilingual practices, approaching it not only as a methodological concern, but also as a potential opportunity to gain insight into the social realities we aim to study. Our examples from four different linguistic ethnographic research projects will highlight four different dimensions of positionality construction in multilingual research settings: attuning to, engaging in, translating, and recognizing participants’ language practices.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The Notion of Positionality*

In ethnographic research, the notion of positionality—how researchers situate themselves and are situated in relation to the communities and contexts they study—has long been recognized as central to the research process (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Davies, 2012). As such, reflecting on one’s own positionality, and on how it is constructed through language practices, is a crucial aspect of ethnographic research, particularly when employing participant observation (Pritzker & Perrino, 2021). Traditionally, this reflection focused on relatively stable aspects such as age, gender, nationality, or biographical background (England, 1994). More recently, researchers call for a more nuanced, situational approach to positionality, highlighting that positionality is not stable but dynamically constituted throughout research (Folkes, 2022; Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015; Lønsmann, 2016).

Whereas positions of “insider” and “outsider” are classically seen as rather static membership statuses, critical scholarship reconceptualized these as multifaceted and fluid, shifting on a continuum (Merriam et al., 2001). Recognizing this dynamic character of researcher positionality, Kohl and McCutcheon (2015) prominently made a case for “kitchen table reflexivity,” an approach to positionality rooted in everyday talk that is always

embedded in wider power dynamics, in their case specifically regarding race. In their original conceptualization, Kohl and McCutcheon (2015) argue for an understanding of positionality as shaped in talk with academic colleagues. Building on this, Folkes (2022) extended the idea to include informal talk with participants in the field, further moving the perspective from fixed roles toward an understanding of positionality as “situational and relational, adapting over the course of the research” (p. 1318).

As a concrete illustration of such a self-reflective understanding, Lønsmann (2016) discusses how she variably positioned herself as an independent researcher, a consultant, and a (PhD) student, among other positionings, influencing which people and places she could get access to as an ethnographer. Similarly, Rickert and Platzgummer (2025) emphasize the co-construction of positionality in local contexts, showing how researchers and participants jointly shape their positions through interaction. Drawing on two linguistic ethnographies in early childhood education and care, they illustrate how participants collaboratively define emergent situations, co-constructing “frames” (e.g., research, educational, or play frames; see Goffman, 1974). In their study, these frames were often laminated, leading to layered and sometimes ambiguous positionalities that the researchers and other participants dynamically constructed.

2.2. The Notion of Multilingualism: Insights From Linguistic Ethnography and Related Fields

Linguistic ethnography brings together the methodological strengths of ethnography and linguistics, allowing researchers to “tie down” broad ethnographic observations using linguistic tools, while also “opening up” linguistic analysis through attention to social and contextual dynamics (Maybin & Tusting, 2011, p. 437). Multilingualism is a prominently explored phenomenon within linguistic ethnography, examined both as a lived reality and an interactional practice (Gardner & Martin-Jones, 2012; Martin-Jones & Martin, 2016). Multilingualism, however, is not only a research focus, but it also shapes the research process itself. Notably, it may be part of data generation and impact on researcher-participant dynamics, amongst other research facets (Costley & Reilly, 2021).

This is demonstrated, for example, by Ganassin and Holmes (2013). They describe a community-based research project involving a multilingual research team and multilingual refugee women as participants. The use of “flexible multilingualism” during interviews yielded data that represented participants’ funds of knowledge. However, especially in institutional settings, researchers may also be exposed to local language policies restricting “flexible multilingualism” to some degree. This was the case in Gallego-Balsà’s (2020) ethnography of an international university in Catalonia. While she often accommodated her conversation partners, using Spanish or a lingua franca, university staff asked her to only use Catalan during university activities. She reflects that resorting to other languages, despite speaking Catalan as an L1, contributed to positive research relations with the students while setting up tensions in research relations with teachers.

Sharing a language can impact—and at times situationally mitigate—power dynamics during data collection, but researchers’ and participants’ languages do not always align (Holmes et al., 2013). From Giampapa’s (2011) ethnography with Italian-Canadian youth in Toronto, it becomes clear that participants have their own ideas about what counts as alignment: Giampapa, herself identifying as Italian-Canadian, born in Canada but raised in Australia, experienced that her research participants did not see her as Italian-Canadian, partly because of her Australian accent and her Standard Italian which was marked in relation to participants’ regional varieties. In the context of ethnographic research among the Grecanici in Southern Italy, anthropologist Pipyrrou learned

the minority language Grecanico to build rapport with the local community, many of whom were initially reluctant to admit to an “outsider” that they spoke a language often regarded as inferior on both societal and political levels (Pipyrou, 2016). In these instances, multilingual abilities functioned as a resource within the research process, not with a fixed meaning, but one that required local negotiation (see also Blackledge & Creese, 2010, p. 105).

Recognizing the affordances of multilingual research practices, Holmes et al. (2013, 2016) developed the researching multilingually (RMly) framework. This framework emphasizes the cultivation of researcher awareness regarding the possibilities and challenges of multilingualism, as well as deliberate, reflective decision-making across all stages of the research process. These considerations span two dimensions: research spaces (e.g., field sites, universities) and research relationships (e.g., with participants, collaborators, and academic audiences). This call for methodological attentiveness has been recently echoed in the field of linguistic ethnography. Costley and Reilly (2021, p. 1035) argue that “more attention must be given to how multilingualism affects each aspect of the process of actually doing linguistic ethnography,” underscoring the need for considerations of multilingual language practices and their meanings in linguistic ethnographic research processes.

By including multi-species interaction in this article, we extend the concept of multilingualism into a broader framework of meaning-making in contexts where a fully shared linguistic code is absent. Drawing on both multilingualism research (e.g., Gumperz, 1964; Pennycook, 2017) and multispecies studies (e.g., Haraway, 2007; Meijer, 2019), we argue that both contexts require participants to negotiate interaction through semiotic repertoires such as speech, gesture, gaze, facial expression, posture, touch, proxemics, objects, and so forth (Kusters, 2021), embodied practices (Keevallik, 2018), and situated co-construction of meaning (Mondada & Meguerditchian, 2022). Insights from multispecies encounters—particularly the focus on attentional alignment, responsiveness, and multimodal coordination—are directly applicable to understanding how meaning is produced in multilingual research contexts with high asymmetries in language proficiency (Jacquemet, 2005). As such, multilingual and multispecies interactions are part of the same broader communicative ecology.

3. Method: Drawing the Lines Between Different Ethnographic Projects

The present study synthesizes insights regarding the construction of researcher positionality from four linguistic ethnographic projects conducted in multilingual settings: Marie Rickert conducted research in a pre-school in the region of Limburg in the Netherlands. Limburg is a multilingual region where approximately 48% of the population speaks the regional minority language, Limburgish, alongside the national language, Dutch (Schmeets & Cornips, 2022). Other languages are also present, amongst others linked to migration and the geographical location in the borderland (Hovens, 2021a). Connecting to educational institutions, Pomme van de Weerd draws on insights from her ethnographic research in a secondary school in Limburg where pupils engaged in social categorization through multilingual interactional practices and banter. Daan Hovens’ project, in turn, focused on linguistic diversity and power dynamics within a highly mechanized metal foundry in Limburg. Lastly, we take a look beyond human-human interactions to a farm in Limburg, based on Leonie Cornips’ insights from her research with cows on farms. In her project, she investigates how cows engage in meaning-making, drawing on diverse semiotic resources.

Table 1. Overview of research projects.

	Marie Rickert	Pomme van de Weerd	Daan Hovens	Leonie Cornips
Location	Preschool	Secondary School	Metal Foundry	Farms
Time	Between autumn 2020 and spring 2021	Between January 2017 and March 2018	Between July and October 2017	Ongoing since 2018
Participants	23 children between 2 and 4 years of age and their 2 teachers	27 students between 14 and 17 years of age	Around 300 production workers and around 200 other workers	Cows on about 16 dairy farms, a cow sanctuary, a petting zoo, and a small herd wandering outside all year round
Research methods	Participant observation; audio recordings; video recordings	Participant observation; audio recordings	Participant observation; audio recordings; video recordings	Participant observation; video recordings; artistic methods
Research focus	Children's participatory language practices	Multilingual practices and social categorization in interaction	Language policy, power dynamics, human-machine interaction	Meaning-making of (dairy) cows

All of the projects are of a linguistic-ethnographic nature, meaning that we each engaged in long-term data collection (at least three and a half months and up to several years), where we employed participant observation and conducted audio or video recordings (see Table 1). We each documented our process and observations through fieldnotes, which include our own reflections.

In each individual project, ethical aspects were carefully considered before and during data collection. Importantly, all projects discussed in this article have received ethical approval by academic institutions in the Netherlands (PvdW, MR, DH: Ethics Review Committee Inner City faculties/Maastricht University; LC: Academy's Ethics Review Committee/KNAW). All participant names below are pseudonyms. Given the amount of ethnographic studies discussed in this article, a detailed description of ethical research procedures for each project is out of the scope of this article. Please see Rickert (2024), van de Weerd (2020), Hovens (2021b), and Cornips (2025a) for details of the specific projects.

For the study at hand, we engaged in joint discussions about the construction of researcher positionality in our multilingual research projects. To ground these discussions empirically, we each reviewed the linguistic ethnographic data of our own project, identifying pieces of data that illustrate the ways in which we as researchers engage in diverse language practices with participants when constructing researcher positionality. For the study at hand, we selected two vignettes and two transcripts of audio recordings. While vignettes lend themselves to capture the researchers' lived experience (Creese & Takhi, 2016), transcripts foreground naturalistic interaction, two important dimensions of linguistic ethnography that we aim to include in our study.

The selected data all concern "key incidents" in our research journey (Emerson, 2004). Key incidents raise researchers' immediate interest in the dynamics of a situation that could appear ordinary to participants.

According to Emerson (2004, p. 439), “this ‘interest’ is not a full-blown, clearly articulated theoretical claim, but a more intuitive, theoretically sensitive conviction that something intriguing has just taken place,” which requires subsequent analytical unpacking. Our selected key incidents are context-sensitive, i.e., they uniquely occurred locally and temporally embedded in each individual research project, representing pivotal moments of the dynamic construction of researcher positionality in a multilingual research context.

Joint discussions of our analyses yielded four central dimensions of constructing researcher positionality through language practices in multilingual research contexts: attuning to, engaging in, translating, and recognizing participants’ language practices. In the following results section, we will introduce these dimensions based on the relevant ethnographic data.

4. Empirical Examples of the Construction of Researcher Positionality in Multilingual Research

4.1. Attuning to Participants’ Language Practices as Positionality

As described above, Marie Rickert’s research is set in a preschool in Limburg, the Netherlands, focusing on children’s participation in and through language practices in early childhood education and care. Marie herself speaks German as a first language and entered the field site with a solid command of Dutch and a “good enough” passive understanding of Limburgish, mainly due to its shared roots with German and Dutch.

Vignette 1 demonstrates how Marie, as she was becoming part of the field, also became part of the prevalent language dynamics there through attuning to participants’ language practices.

Vignette 1. First day of Marie’s fieldwork—Lunch break at the preschool:

The children have gone home and I sit down together with the two teachers for lunch and a chat. Teacher Helena turns to me: “*Dan zal je vast ook je Nederlands gaan verbeteren als je hier zo lang rondloopt*” [“You’ll probably improve your Dutch if you’re here for quite a while,” in Dutch]. I agree with her, saying that I hope to do so. Shortly after, the conversation shifts to the teachers’ private plans for the afternoon and just as seamlessly, the language shifts from Dutch to Limburgish. I let the teachers talk and quietly focus on my cheese sandwich again.

Importantly, such attuning interrelates with recognizing the language practices and engaging with them throughout participant observation. As had been reported in the literature (Cornips, 2018; Morillo Morales & Cornips, 2023), and as Marie would experience more and more in the upcoming months of the project, the national language, Dutch, is prioritized in preschools in Limburg. From a language-ideological perspective, Dutch is linked to institutional language practices and education, while Limburgish is commonly seen as pertaining to the emotional, more private domain (Cornips, 2018). In the situation at hand, Marie’s own language background became relevant. Interestingly, Helena commented on Marie’s emergent Dutch while her lack of Limburgish was met with indifference. This fits with broader language ideologies that regard Limburg “locals” as the only “authentic” speakers of Limburgish and restrict new speakers in their use (Cornips, 2025b). In the course of the interaction, Marie co-constructed this language hierarchy by attuning to the teacher’s sole focus on Dutch and leaving Limburgish out of the picture as a language of interest.

Her situational positioning was multidimensional: While the focus on her ongoing learning of Dutch might suggest that she was still somewhat of an outsider in the field, looking at the vignette from a practice perspective demonstrates that Marie's learner status did not stand in the way of a meaningful conversation between teachers and researcher. Marie attuned to participants' language practices by co-creating the focus on Dutch as a societally meaningful language.

In this light, the languages in which the interaction at lunch unfolded also deserve a closer look: The teacher interacted with Marie in Dutch. In the discussion of afternoon plans, the two colleagues switched to Limburgish and Marie focused on her lunch again, momentarily taking a less active part in the conversation. Marie's positionality situationally shifted towards the "outsider"-side of the dynamic insider-outsider continuum, not being a speaker of Limburgish and not choosing to actively engage with, e.g., a *lingua receptiva* approach and take part in the conversation in Dutch while the teachers speak Limburgish (cf. ten Thije, 2013). As Marie would later observe, similar dynamics emerged during fruit breaks with the children: Joint group interaction between teachers and children occurred in Dutch while teachers co-constructed personal conversational frames among colleagues in Limburgish. In these situations, the children continued their own interactions, focusing less on what the teachers were doing (Rickert, 2023). In this way, Marie, as a newcomer in the field, experienced a similar language socialization that children attending the preschool experience, and attuned to the ways in which the teachers' constructed their interaction as more intimate through the use of Limburgish. During her research, her experience of becoming part of the language dynamics herself, and the accompanying reflections in the field diary, drew her attention to the intimization of the teachers' interaction through the use of Limburgish in front of the children, which became a relevant focus of her ethnographic inquiry later on (Rickert, 2023). Consequently, she focused more on teachers' switches from Dutch to Limburgish in teacher talk in front of the children during subsequent data collection.

In this case, attuning to participants' language practices enabled the positioning of the researcher as a learner of the institutionally relevant language, Dutch (in contrast to the regional minority language), as well as that of a bystander when the teachers use the regional minority language in their more "private" talk. While Marie aligned with the teachers by attuning to local language dynamics, this simultaneously meant exclusion from more "intimized" parts of the interaction that took place in Limburgish. Attuning to participants' language practices was thus the basis of emerging positioning practices together with participants, which contributed to the researchers' becoming part of the pre-school in compliance with the logic of local lingacultural dynamics. The next example shows a case in which the researcher engages much more actively in participants' language practices by participating in their banter through borrowing resources from "their" linguistic repertoire.

4.2. Engaging in Participants' Language Practices as Positionality

Extract 1 below comes from the research project by Pomme van de Weerd in a secondary school. The researcher conducted ethnographic research with a single secondary school class (students aged 14–17). During the interaction, the researcher was sitting at a table with three students, who were leafing through magazines to search for photos for an assignment. There was a light atmosphere with lots of chatting and laughter. Five minutes before the transcribed interaction, one student (Amira) had said the word *hachouma*, meaning something like "shame on you" in Moroccan Arabic, and explained its meaning to the researcher. Minutes later, another student (Dounia) encountered a photo in her magazine which showed

a woman with jeans where the back pockets were missing, showing her bare backside through the pants. That is when the interaction below took place. The first line shows the original, the bold-faced line below the English translation. Further marks are explained below.

Extract 1. Hachouma—23 January 2018 (participants: Dounia, Amira, and researcher):

Unmarked = associated with Dutch

Italics underlined = associated with Moroccan Arabic

WORD = Emphasis

[word] = Additional information provided by transcriber

- | | | |
|----|------------|--|
| 1 | Dounia | [wijst naar foto] kijk, Amira over een jaartje
[points to photo] look, this is Amira in about a year |
| 2 | | [Dounia and researcher laugh] |
| 3 | Amira | Eh wollah qoran schaam je, dat gaat te ver
Eh <u>I swear to God by the Quran</u>, shame on you, that's going too far |
| 4 | | [Dounia and researcher laugh more] |
| 5 | Amira | [lachend] wollah je krijgt echt klappen
[laughing] <u>I swear to God</u> you will get beaten |
| 6 | Researcher | <u><i>hachouma!</i></u>
<u><i>hachouma!</i></u> |
| 7 | | [Dounia and Amira start laughing more] |
| 8 | Dounia | [lachend] ik ga stuk, u bent gestoord
[laughing] I am dying, you [formal pronoun] are crazy |
| 9 | Researcher | IK ben gestoord?
I am crazy? |
| 10 | Amira | [tegen Dounia] JIJ bent gestoord
[to Dounia] YOU are crazy |
| 11 | Researcher | ik leer het alleen maar van jullie hoor!
I am just learning from you, you know! |

Extract 1 shows how the researcher used a word (*hachouma*, line 6) she had just learned from the research participant, in a playful banter situation. Coming from Moroccan Arabic, this word was previously not part of the researcher's linguistic repertoire. As such, she was engaging in a language practice that research participants did not consider hers (nor did she, herself).

At the beginning of the research project, students had asked Pomme "what she was," referring to whether she had a migration background. Finding out she had no (known) migration background, she was categorized as a "Dutch person." In the class, about half of the students had a migration background, and all students in the interaction did as well. Almost all these students had been born in the Netherlands, but they commonly referred to themselves as "foreigners" and to peers without migration backgrounds as "Dutch people." Use of these social categories in interaction had several functions (see van de Weerd, 2019), but relevant here is that they were also associated with multilingual practices. Although elements of Turkish, Moroccan Arabic, and Berber were used widely by all students, including those without migration backgrounds, these forms were not

neutral. Students with migration backgrounds sometimes mocked their peers without migration background for misusing them, signaling that these linguistic practices were socially marked and (semi-) exclusive to those categorized as “foreigners.” So, the researcher’s use of the word *hachouma*—her engagement in their language practices—could have been interpreted as a transgression as it was not considered to be part of her repertoire as a “Dutch person.”

Pomme’s use of *hachouma* was furthermore delicate because it connoted her active participation in a playful banter situation. As with the use of “other” languages, students associated the use of banter with social categories. Banter, in this context, is closely tied to forms of jocular language play—instances where language is used humorously or creatively, often through teasing, and interpreted as amusing by those involved (Haugh, 2017). This frequently took the shape of a rapid back-and-forth of teasing and playful provocation. This practice, while lighthearted, was not socially neutral. Students with migration backgrounds constructed the practice as a category-bound activity, pointing out that they enjoyed “joking about each other,” which they said they could not do with students without migration backgrounds. In the extract, the researcher—a “Dutch person” and an adult—engages in this practice.

Despite the delicacy of the researcher’s engagement in the interaction, her contribution was taken up positively by the participants. Their reactions show surprise (lines 7 and 8), but the laughter also shows alignment. In line 8, Dounia laughs and calls the researcher “crazy,” albeit using the formal pronoun *u* instead of the more informal *jij* (“you”). This can be seen as a sort of transgression-in-return: The participants did not usually call the researcher, or any adult in this context, for that matter, crazy. Paired with the laughter, this continues the play frame established throughout the interaction. After the transcribed exchange, the conversation shifted to other topics.

In this interaction, Pomme engaged in (what is associated with) her participants’ language practices, borrowing elements of Moroccan Arabic and adopting their style of banter. However, this was not something she usually did during the project. The light atmosphere, co-construction of humor in that specific moment, and the rapport that they had built up in the year prior to this exchange, allowed for this interaction to take place. It affirmed and strengthened researcher-participant relations within this project. This example, then, shows how positionality is not fixed but continually renegotiated in and through interaction, where engaging in participants’ (multilingual) interactional styles can be a resource to relate to the participants.

4.3. Translating Participants’ Language Practices as Positionality

Extract 2 shows an example of a daily work interaction in the Finishing Department of a metal foundry in the Dutch province of Limburg, near the Dutch-German border. The researcher, Daan Hovens, conducted linguistic-ethnographic research in the foundry for 3.5 months in 2017. Over 300 people worked in the foundry’s production departments at the time, the majority of them on a temporary basis. Many of these workers were cross-border commuters living in Germany, and many were first-generation migrants with a different first language than Dutch, German, or the regional minority language Limburgish, such as Arabic, Polish, Russian, and Turkish.

Extract 2. Work interaction in a multilingual metal foundry in the Dutch-German borderland in Limburg, 15 August 2017 (participants: Kamil, Maxim, and researcher):

Unmarked = associated with German

Underlined = associated with Dutch

Italics underlined = associated with Limburgish

(xxx) = Unintelligible speech

(word) = Transcriber unsure

WORD = Emphasis

[word] = Additional information provided by transcriber

- | | | |
|----|------------|---|
| 1 | (Kamil) | (xxx)
(xxx) |
| 2 | Maxim | bitte?
pardon? |
| 3 | Researcher | huh?
huh? |
| 4 | Maxim | was bitte?
pardon, what? |
| 5 | Researcher | uh weiß ich auch <u>neet</u> , ich hab es nicht verstanden
uh I don't know <u>either</u>, I haven't understood it |
| 6 | Maxim | hehe (du muss ihm)
hehe (you must him) |
| 7 | Kamil | (xxx)
(xxx) |
| 8 | Researcher | <u>huh? wat zei je?</u>
huh? what did you say? |
| 9 | Kamil | <u>(jij spreekt) nederlands jij spreekt nederlands</u>
(you speak) dutch you speak dutch |
| 10 | Maxim | ja <u>dat kan</u> AUCH
yes <u>that is possible</u> TOO |
| 11 | Kamil | <u>ja</u>
yes |
| 12 | Researcher | hehehe
[hehehe] |
| 13 | Kamil | <u>ik zeg van hem, ik zeg, ben jij boos?</u>
I say of him, I say, are you angry? |
| 14 | | [approximately two seconds pause] |
| 15 | Researcher | ah oké oké
ah okay okay |
| 16 | Maxim | kannst du übersetzen?
can you translate? |

- 17 Researcher eh, bist du sauer?
 eh, are you angry?
- 18 Maxim nein, (xxx)
 no, (xxx)
- 19 Researcher ahaha
 ahaha

Maxim was a younger (<40) but relatively experienced production worker. He belonged to a group of workers in the foundry who had migrated from Kazakhstan, and who spoke fluent Russian and German (not Kazakh). Maxim sometimes also used a few words that can be associated with Dutch (as in line 10), which he might have picked up in the foundry. Kamil was a younger (<40) and relatively inexperienced production worker. He had come to the Netherlands as a refugee from Iraq, and he had started working in the foundry only recently. His first language was a variety of Kurdish, and he had learnt some Dutch (as shown by the extract). Daan did not observe him speaking any German or any other language, such as English. One specific feature of Kamil's speech was that he tended to speak rather softly, which was challenging in a loud environment like the foundry's Finishing Department, where one could hear many sounds from tools, machines, people, and radios.

Daan was a younger (<40) researcher from the Dutch province of Limburg, who spoke Dutch and Limburgish as his first languages and German as one of his second languages. Therefore, he was in a position to act as a Dutch-German interpreter for Maxim and Kamil, but that was not in line with his research agenda. Daan wanted to find out how the linguistic diversity in the foundry was managed and experienced on a daily basis, especially in situations where there was little overlap between people's individual language repertoires (see also Hovens, 2021b). On the one hand, his participation as an extra worker (who would, for example, help people lift heavy materials) enabled Daan to capture more intimately what it was like to work and communicate in the foundry as an "insider." On the other hand, he had to maintain a somewhat unnatural "outsider" position by not involving himself too much as a translator or interpreter, as he wanted to observe what people would do in situations where he was not present. Implicitly, people might have recognized Daan's outsider status in this regard, as he was only asked to translate/interpret two or three times during the 3.5 months of his data collection. Extract 2 shows the only time that Daan agreed to do this, albeit after a brief hesitation (line 17).

Daan's data collection in the foundry also meant navigating conflicting discourses on linguistic diversity. Many production workers from the Netherlands considered this diversity a major obstacle to good working results, and they criticized the fact that the foundry hired many people who could not speak Dutch (see also Hovens, 2021a). Other production workers, especially temporary staff from Central and Eastern Europe, did not consider linguistic diversity a particularly urgent problem that required special attention (see also Hovens, 2020). They might have recognized intuitively that discourse on language problems often serves as a proxy for discriminatory practices against migrants (see, e.g., Kraft, 2019). Hence, it was not in their interest to endorse or reproduce such a discourse, and Daan did not feel like reproducing a discourse of language problems either. The fact that no "diversity critic" was present during the interactions between Kamil, Maxim, and Daan might have made it easier for all participants to acknowledge that there was a linguistic obstacle that required attention. Nevertheless, Daan could have refused to go along with the binary choice between either translating or doing nothing at all, for example, by suggesting other solutions, such as gestures. Clearly, all these options would have had consequences for his situated research

relationships in this linguistically diverse work environment, his situated position on the insider-outsider continuum, and the research data that were recorded after this. Thus, it is clear that there was no such thing as a neutral linguistic choice without consequences for the research relationships and data.

The final empirical case examines multispecies interaction, expanding the concept of multilingualism into a broader framework of meaning-making that operates without a fully shared linguistic code.

4.4. Recognizing Participants' Language Practices as Positionality

Vignette 2 reveals a nexus of positionalities that are situated and shift momentarily depending on Leonie Cornips' position as, for example, a linguistic researcher, a multispecies ethnographer, an interpreter, and a tourist. She is on holiday, away from the industrial dairy farms where she conducts most of her ethnographic observation and participation since mid-2018. However, as an ethnographer who approaches the self as a research instrument, lines between private life and research life may blur, as observations outside the official research locations can become part of ethnographic inquiry and impact on the research process (Leibing & McLean, 2007). The research question Leonie is orienting herself around is how we might reconceptualize the concept of "language" in such a way that whole-body activities including sound production by nonhuman animals are included, hence, revealing not a human multilingual but a more-than-human multilingual society. Can we, as human animals, come to understand how dairy cows, among themselves and with humans, engage in meaning-making?

Vignette 2. Mother and calf (fieldwork notes end of May 2021):

It is the holiday season, during the height of the Covid pandemic. Fortunately, we have managed to reserve a last-minute spot at a small campsite attached to a cattle farm specializing in beef production. We arrive late in the afternoon and begin searching for a location on the property where the overpowering stench of manure is less pervasive. We do not succeed. Driven by curiosity due to my ongoing research, I walk toward the barn where the cows are housed. To reach the entrance, I have to round a corner. The inside of the barn, shielded from the harsh sunlight, appears pitch-dark and slightly elevated. As I make the turn, I hear a cow utter a brief, tense nasal sound—"mm." I immediately recognize this as a vocal prompt: a mother urging her calf to come closer or stay nearby. This mother cow has already sensed my presence before actually seeing me. What strikes me even more is the realization that such alertness likely stems from prior negative experiences with humans. I step into the barn. The air is thick with the acrid smell of manure—so intense it is difficult to breathe. In the dim light, I can just make out the mother cow and her newborn calf nestled beside her. I am overcome by a powerful emotion; for perhaps the first time, I am able to meaningfully interpret the vocalization of a cow without being present with the cow or the calf myself—that is, I can predict the meaning of the sound, who produces it and for whom it is intended in which context.

It is a deep-litter barn—neglected and heavily soiled. The mother sinks to her knees in the slurry; her udders are submerged in it, and the calf is nearly swallowed by the muck. Everywhere I look, there is nothing but manure. I feel an overwhelming urge to leave, but first I speak with the woman who runs the campsite—who is also the farmer. I mention the need for a fresh layer of straw in the barn. "Too inefficient now," she replies.

Because Leonie was outside the institutional context in which she “officially” conducts research with cows, she was able to position herself differently than usual in this situation. She chose to enter the cowshed attached to the campsite. She chose to address the farmer—also the campsite manager—about the extreme filth of the deep-litter stable. And she chose to leave the campsite (and thus the barn) as quickly as possible after that conversation. This would not have been possible while doing ethnographic research within Leonie’s usual field sites. She does not uninvitedly confront farmers about problems she observes; instead, she asks them in advance whether or not they are open to receiving advice, or she will try to tell stories when seeing problems, informing them of how other farmers may solve these. Without the farmer’s consent, cooperation, and knowledge, it would not be possible to conduct research in the barns or to gain insight into the (limited) possibilities cows have to initiate social activities with each other. Nor would it be possible to understand which activities and material conditions are imposed upon them. Farmers consider themselves, and are societally regarded, as the owners of the cows; without the owner’s permission, no research with the cows can take place. This section, therefore, focuses on Leonie’s positioning vis-à-vis the farmers as gatekeepers in addition to the animal participants. Such focus is necessary because access to the private barns—and thus to the cows’ lives and their interactions—depends on the farmers’ consent.

In this sense, Leonie’s positioning is negotiated not only through her actions but also through her linguistic choices and communicative styles. In her usual fieldwork interactions, she switches between registers, tones, and sometimes language varieties—using, for instance, local dialect features—to maintain trust and openness. These multilingual and context-sensitive practices enable her to stay attentive to farmers’ sensitivities while still engaging critically with the conditions of the cows. What is required in a multispecies ethnography with production or food animals is a cautious and nuanced positioning—one that allows for advice, discussion, dialogue, storytelling, collaboration, and shifts based on rural or urban background, gender, age, living with a companion dog, love for animals, and so on, to remain possible in interactions with the farmers. These requirements of carefully positioning oneself at research sites through language and other related social practices became clear to Leonie through reflecting on this experience outside the usual research sites.

Leonie’s positionality as a linguist is completely different, being shaped primarily by a profound lack of knowledge of how cows interact with each other and with humans. Early in her observing and participating, it quickly became apparent that while she was observing the activities of cows in barns, she had no sense of how to interpret what she was seeing, hearing, feeling, touching, perceiving, and smelling. The question “what is going on here” was completely impossible to answer. Gradually, however, by simply being present attentively with the cows, trying to participate in what they were doing, she began to develop some sense of awareness about their meaning-making. Through ethnographic research on farms where calves are allowed to stay with their mothers for extended periods, she learned how mother cows use the “mm” vocalization, as described in the vignette, to call their calves even closer to them. She also came to understand that humans can often approach a mother cow and her calf without the mother cow eliciting this sound—provided the relationship between human and cow is one of trust. In such cases, the mother does not produce the “mm.” That is why, as Leonie turned the corner toward the barn at the campsite, she immediately knew that the mother cow perceived any approaching human as threatening.

This encounter had the effect of strengthening her confidence that the vocalizations of cows in interaction with other cows can be understood on the basis of sustained ethnographic fieldwork across a wide range of contexts, and that such fieldwork and an open mind, also outside of official research sites, truly informs

analysis. Moreover, it was at that moment that she became acutely aware of the cow's own agency, her capacity to initiate action independently of humans. In this case, the cow vocalized to call her calf towards her, away from the approaching human, underscoring the relationality of her communication. Finally, this encounter once again confronted her with the realization of how poorly cows can be cared for within human-dominated environments.

As Leonie's understanding of cows' meaning-making processes has gradually deepened, she has come to occupy a dual position as both insider and outsider. Cows undoubtedly perceive her as an outsider, with the possible exception of those with whom she has built particularly intimate relationships over the years. She is gaining what could be considered insider-knowledge in the process of trying to make sense of their linguistic practices. Interpreting the "mm" sound in the vignette is a highly (inter)subjective act. In this context, the ethnographer becomes both translator and author of the sound production being analyzed, as she ultimately decides what the cow's utterance means. This interpretive process is embedded in unequal power relations, with the human observer holding epistemic authority over how the cow's actions are understood and communicated.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

How do ethnographic researchers' language choices and practices shape research relationships in multilingual contexts? And how do they impact the kinds of data they collect and analyze? Through a juxtaposition of four cases from multilingual research contexts, we have highlighted different dimensions in the construction of positionality in multilingual research contexts: attuning to, engaging in, translating, and recognizing participants' language practices. These dimensions can interrelate: For example, engaging in participants' language practices, as Pomme did in the case of multilingual banter at school, requires prior attuning to the pupils' language practices to recognize such banter as an in-group social practice among pupils. Marie's attuning to local language dynamics leads to active engagement in one moment in Dutch, and non-engagement in the next moment, in Limburgish. Consisting of these different dimensions, researchers' linguistic choices are not merely methodological, but constitutive of the relational and epistemic possibilities of multilingual ethnographic research.

Hence, the researchers' multilingual practices are central means through which positionality is negotiated and constructed (Martin-Jones et al., 2016). When researchers attune to the meanings of participants' use of their linguistic repertoire, engage with their repertoires and styles, translate utterances, or acknowledge diverse language practices, they actively position themselves vis-à-vis their participants. These decisions are never neutral; they carry ideological weight and communicate messages about who they are as researchers, but also impact on the data that they collect, the social and linguistic patterns they can analyze, and the ways they do so. The researcher Daan, for example, when translating for Maxim and Kamil, unavoidably positioned himself vis-à-vis discourses linking multilingualism to communication barriers within the foundry. At the same time, translating allowed him to build rapport, assuming more of an insider status among the colleagues. Leonie's fieldwork has, over the years, gradually increased her understanding of dairy cow-human interaction, starting from analyses of only vocal greetings and later including more complex multimodal repertoires with gaze, bodily orientation, and material engagement.

Researchers' multilingualism, and their overlap (or lack thereof) with participants' multilingualism, can be a valuable methodological resource (see also Holmes et al., 2013). To that end, Marie's vignette demonstrated that, even when researchers do not share the same repertoires as their participants, insights can be gained from analyzing what such variation in repertoires might entail for interactions with participants. In Marie's case, she was positioned as someone adhering to local language dynamics by foregrounding the acquisition of Dutch, and therefore aligning with the teachers, while also never receiving full "insider"-status as someone speaking Limburgish. In that sense, our data underscores that participating as a linguistic ethnographer is fundamentally a situational phenomenon. Researchers continuously navigate the insider-outsider continuum, and their multilingual repertoires serve as both bridges and barriers in this navigation (Costley & Reilly, 2021).

The moments when researchers choose not to engage with participants' multilingual practices may be equally telling about local language dynamics as moments when they do engage. While Marie, for example, aligned with the teachers' language practices by foregrounding a focus on the institutionally relevant language, Pomme borrowed resources from the pupils' linguistic repertoires. Despite involving almost opposite practices, the two situations contributed to rapport-building in their own way, which highlights the context-sensitivity of the construction of researcher positionality. Importantly, the researchers' engagement with local multilingual practices might also change over time: Leonie's presence, for example, was the very reason for the cow to utter the mm-sound, and the researcher could make sense of it thanks to her accumulated ethnographic knowledge from ethnographic research with cows. Also, her long-term engagement shows how meaning is co-constructed, because her own adaptive responses become part of the interactional sequences over time. Therefore, both the research relationship and what Leonie considers as data have changed together with empirical insights.

Our empirical examples underscore that multilingualism adds layers of complexity to the construction of positionality, as researchers' language practices acquire meaning through their interplay with local dynamics. Critically reflecting on multilingual research practices in the field can therefore yield insights into local language dynamics (e.g., language policies and ideologies) as well as into the research process itself. In that function, such reflection can enhance transparency about the researchers' role in generating data—an aspect of particular relevance in linguistic ethnography.

Attuning to, engaging in, translating, and recognizing participants' language practices may all be part of ethnographic research in multilingual contexts across time and space. By embracing this complexity and making it visible in our research representations, we can develop more nuanced, reflexive, and methodologically sophisticated approaches to multilingual ethnography. Ultimately, this approach serves as a tool for unraveling the multilingual complexity of "what is going on here?"

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

To protect the participants, the research data is not publicly available.

LLMs Disclosure

We declare that some of the authors used LLM tools (GPT 5, claude.ai & DeepL) in a limited capacity for minor editing tasks like translation and grammar checks.

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Of Stumbling Blocks and Stepping Stones: Navigating Multilingual Challenges in Reconstructive Forced Migration Research

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Abstract

Reflexive migration research emphasizes the critical examination of knowledge production—particularly concerning researchers’ positionalities, the categories they employ, and the institutional contexts in which they operate. We aim to extend this research stream by systematically engaging with linguistic positioning, which remains an underexplored feature in migration studies. Hence, our article critically engages with the multilingual challenges encountered in a sub-study of our project, *The Art of Arriving*, which reconstructively examined the experiences of individuals who fled Ukraine to Austria during the early months of Russia’s war of aggression. Our contribution pursues two main objectives. First, we highlight the linguistic challenges that arose at various stages of the research process—including material collection, field access, data collection, translation, and reconstructive data analysis—and critically reflect on the strategies we adopted to address them. The active involvement of researchers with both cultural and linguistic expertise, combined with a reflexive and continuous dialogue within the entire research team, was crucial for navigating the multilingual research landscape. Second, we argue that translation processes in such projects should not merely be viewed as obstacles to overcome. Instead, these processes should be recognized as integral to the research itself. When critically reflected upon and facilitated through dialogue with culturally and linguistically familiar researchers, multilingualism can even enable deeper and more nuanced reconstructive analyses.

Keywords

forced migration; multilingualism; reflexivity; reconstructive research; translation

1. Introduction

When the news of the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine reached us on February 24, 2022, which was followed by the movement of people seeking refuge in Europe and Austria in the subsequent weeks, we—authors 1 and 4—were in the midst of a research project focused on the “arrival” of displaced people in Austria. The first phase of this transdisciplinary project had just concluded: Artists, both with and without refugee experience, had been invited to translate their experiences of arrival into works of art. At that point, the second phase was about to begin, with plans to initiate group discussions on the topic of arrival after forced migration that used these artworks as prompts.

The group discussions were initially designed to include people with diverse refugee experiences, giving special attention to those who had been living in Vienna for at least five years (primarily individuals who arrived from the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, as well as those who fled from Syria around 2015). The onset of forced migration from Ukraine made it imperative to also incorporate the perspectives and experiences of this most recently displaced group. At this point, however, we encountered fundamental challenges related to the language of our fieldwork. Some of these challenges were similar to those we faced with other groups; for instance, the risk that discussions conducted in German or English privileged better-educated participants with prior exposure to foreign languages. Regarding the displaced Ukrainians, this became even more pressing since, unlike groups whose forced migration had occurred over five years ago, these Ukrainian individuals were still processing the very recent experience of displacement and loss. This made the language issue all the more pressing: How could they truly be given a voice if their research participation required them to speak in a foreign language about their very recent and potentially traumatic experiences? This stood out as being ethically problematic. Furthermore, this material for our project would have had limited analytical value, especially since our reconstructive approach aims to explore latent levels of meaning by reconstructing *how* people talk about specific issues rather than merely gathering *what* they are talking about. The project’s original budget did not cover interpreters or personnel expansion because we could not anticipate the specific circumstances created by the war in Ukraine. However, a timely call from our funding agency made additional resources available to projects that included Ukrainian researchers. Our successful application allowed us to hire two researchers with Ukrainian backgrounds, i.e., authors 2 and 3. Their linguistic competencies and familiarity with the cultural backgrounds and experiences of recently arrived Ukrainians in Austria were instrumental in making it possible to include these individuals in the research process in an ethically appropriate and methodologically sound way.

In this article, we critically examine how we, as a cross-cultural and cross-linguistic team of four researchers, navigated the multilingual challenges encountered in this sub-study on displacement from Ukraine against the backdrop of reflexive migration studies. The focus will be on exploring the interrelation between multilingualism, researcher positionality, and the reflexive production of knowledge—based on the understanding that the multilingualism inherent to our research and the different positionalities within our research team had an impact on its findings (Havlin, 2022, para. 17). Reflecting calls for a more sociologically informed reflexivity grounded in empirical studies and concrete research practices (Krause, 2021), our contribution advances reflexive migration studies by critically reflecting on the challenges and strategies of a multilingual research project. We understand reflexivity as a critical and ongoing process of self-reflection that recognizes how researchers’ positionalities, assumptions, and social locations shape knowledge production. It constitutes a methodological stance that treats knowledge as situated and contingent, aiming

to make research practices transparent, accountable, and attentive to power relations (Dahinden et al., 2021; Hadj Abdou, 2024).

In recent years, the academic literature has shown increasing engagement with the complexities of multilingual research. Scholars from various disciplines have explored the methodological, ethical, and practical challenges associated with translation and linguistic diversity (Caretta, 2015; Goitom, 2020; Havlin, 2022; Holmes et al., 2013, 2016, 2022; Inhetveen, 2012; Resch & Enzenhofer, 2018; Schembri & Jahić Jašić, 2022; Schittenhelm, 2017; Uçan, 2019; Zhao et al., 2024). Additionally, textbooks and handbooks have begun to sporadically address this topic (Bading et al., 2025; Berger, 2023; El-Menouar, 2022; Roslon & Bettmann, 2019). Havlin points out that unreflexive language use in the study of social processes risks reproducing the very systems of domination that are embedded within language itself. This becomes evident, for example, in the privileging of standard language over dialects, language “mixing,” and written over spoken language (Havlin, 2022, p. 22). A reflexive sociology of migration must recognize and critically engage with these implicit hierarchies to *de-naturalize* language, challenging the assumption that language is neutral or given. Havlin further emphasizes that critical awareness of language hierarchies in knowledge production and mitigating language dominance by embracing multilingualism in its varied forms are key strategies in this process (Havlin, 2022, p. 28). This highlights that language use and reflecting on language practices are not peripheral concerns, but rather fundamental aspects of a critical, power-sensitive sociology of migration. Other scholars (Goitom, 2020; Inhetveen, 2012; Svensson, 2024; Uçan, 2019) have similarly argued that language itself constitutes a social field in which inequalities are inscribed and reproduced—making its critical examination essential to any reflexive engagement with migration and knowledge production.

Our reflections are grounded in this body of literature, which provides the conceptual and methodological framework for a transparent examination of the multilingual challenges encountered during our project. Studies on translanguaging are particularly insightful for our research. These address the fluid and dynamic use of language by multilingual speakers that transcends the basic separation of distinct linguistic codes. Thus, besides referring to linguistic differences between (some of) the researchers and participants, multilingualism also refers to the bilingualism in our project, including cases of translanguaging practices of our participants, who speak both Russian and Ukrainian. Crucially, this bilingualism carries a deeply political dimension, especially in light of the war. A key insight from this literature is that it is vital to continuously and reflexively engage with language use throughout all stages of the research process in order to ensure the rigor and depth of qualitative inquiry; equally essential are reflections on the researchers’ language-specific positionalities. We contribute to this body of literature by critically reflecting upon our research practices across different project phases, situating these reflections in relation to existing literature, and showing how multilingualism in a highly sensitive and politically charged context requires an especially nuanced and reflexive methodological approach. Furthermore, we engage with scholarship that goes beyond identifying the challenges of multilingual research alone. These perspectives do not solely frame multilingualism as a potential *stumbling block*, but rather also as a resource—as *stepping stones*—that can enhance the validity of findings in reconstructive research settings. Nemouchi and Holmes (2022), for example, demonstrate how translanguaging as a method can foster reflexivity and thus strengthen the credibility of qualitative research. Zhao et al. (2024) also address validity in multilingual research projects by challenging the traditional notion of “equivalence” in translation. They argue that the uncertainties and discrepancies that emerge during translation processes should not be seen as threats to validity, but rather as opportunities for deeper reflection.

To sum up, the key insight from the above literature is that, within the framework of reflexive migration research, multilingualism must be thoroughly considered as a central phenomenon. It is crucial to reflect on the multilingual nature of societies and specific research contexts, take the associated challenges seriously, and develop effective mitigation strategies. Moreover, multilingualism and related processes of translation should be understood as processes that can enhance reflexivity. Embracing these linguistic dynamics thoughtfully allows researchers to deepen their critical awareness and improve the rigor and sensitivity of their work. Consequently, our article makes two key contributions to these discussions: First, we highlight the challenges that emerged at different stages of our research and reflect on the strategies we developed as a multilingual team in light of the existing literature to address these *stumbling blocks*. In doing so, we also draw attention to the roles and positionalities of individual team members. The reflexivity of our knowledge production is especially evident in the negotiation processes between languages (particularly in the translanguaging between Russian and Ukrainian) and in our sensitivity to the political meanings embedded in these practices. Second, we outline why translation processes in such projects should not merely be viewed as obstacles to overcome. Instead, these processes must be recognized as integral to the research itself. When critically reflected upon and facilitated through dialogue with culturally and linguistically familiar researchers, multilingualism can even enable deeper and more nuanced analyses, thus serving as *stepping stones*.

Before we proceed with our reflections on the challenges encountered and the strategies developed during our research, we first address two key aspects: the transparency of our positionalities and our understanding of “cultural familiarity.” These provide essential context for the discussion that follows.

In light of ongoing debates around insider–outsider positions in qualitative research, it is important to make our positionalities within the project transparent before delving into our reflections. While we recognize that positionalities are inherently fluid and shaped by context (Carling, 2014; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), it remains analytically useful to reflect on how our differing backgrounds have influenced the research process. The team consists of two senior researchers who, while being insiders in the field of migration studies and reconstructive methodology, are linguistic and experiential outsiders with regard to the specific context of forced migration from Ukraine. By contrast, two junior researchers—Ukrainian nationals who share aspects of the interlocutors’ lived experience—are newcomers to the project and its specific methodological approach. To illustrate these distinctions, we differentiate between the specific positionalities where necessary, using the third person to either specifically refer to the linguistically and culturally unfamiliar senior researchers or the culturally and linguistically familiar junior researchers, while speaking in the first-person plural (“we”) in sections written from the collective perspective of all four authors. In terms of disciplinary background, author 2 was trained as a translator and international relations specialist, while author 3 is a gender researcher with an extensive background in journalism.

Building on Reckwitz’s (2004) notion of culture as meaning- and knowledge-oriented, we do not conceptualize “cultural expertise” or “cultural familiarity” as static sets of traditions or practices, but as the capacity to recognize and engage with meaning-making processes that are locally and socially situated. Such processes often rely on implicit, taken-for-granted knowledge that is not readily accessible to individuals less familiar with the context. In our project, the two junior researchers exemplified precisely this kind of cultural expertise: By having grown up in Ukraine and having personal experiences of displacement, they were able to access and resonate with the participants’ shared experiential horizons. This proximity was crucial during

data collection, because participants themselves experienced it as a form of “cultural closeness,” while during data analysis, it also helped to make participants’ meaning-making processes visible through reconstructive analysis.

The structure of the article is as follows: The next section introduces our research project and outlines the methodology. Section three is divided into four subsections, focusing on the respective preparation for and actual access to the field (3.1), data collection (3.2), data preparation and processing (3.3), as well as data analysis and interpretation (3.4). The insights gained will be discussed in the concluding fourth section.

2. Research Context and Methodology

2.1. *The Potential of Art for the Sociology of Migration*

Our research on the experiences of displaced persons from Ukraine forms part of the larger project, *The Art of Arriving*, which explored the transformative potential of arts within the sociology of migration and integration. Our project did not focus on how the “established” respond to displaced people or how displaced people adapt to existing structures, but on the experiences of “arriving” in the context of displacement. Building on Ludger Pries’ conceptualization, “arrival” is understood as extending beyond mere physical relocation—it is deeply embedded in a migrant’s inner world; shaped by perceptions, emotions, and lived experiences, as well as external social contexts and the negotiations they entail:

[It is] as much a migrant’s mental concept, experience and feeling as it is an outcome of [their] social environment and corresponding negotiations. Arrival refers to the individual’s ability to navigate their way to socio-cultural and physical resources. Arrival also deals with cognitive frames and negotiated belongings as group constructions of “us” and “them.” (Masadeh & Pries, 2022, p. 3891)

To deepen our understanding of how displaced individuals navigate the multifaceted processes of arrival and to strengthen the reflexivity of our research, we drew on insights from reflexive migration research (Dahinden, 2016; Dahinden et al., 2021; Dieterich & Nieswand, 2020) as well as postmigrant approaches (Foroutan, 2019; Foroutan et al., 2018; Hill & Yildiz, 2018; Yildiz, 2018). These perspectives call for a critical examination of how knowledge about migration is produced, emphasizing the positionality of researchers, the categories they deploy, and the institutional settings in which research is embedded. Adopting this lens enabled us to engage with the research process with heightened sensitivity to the underlying power dynamics and the co-construction of meaning between researchers and participants. In this context, we integrated artistic practices as a complementary lens to our genuinely reconstructive methodology. Drawing on insights from arts-based methods in qualitative research (Leavy, 2020), we explored the potential of integrating art as a “decentring” strategy (Dahinden et al., 2021), that is, distancing one’s research from well-established ideas while developing alternative perspectives. Decentering through art can be best achieved through the multiple meanings that artworks may hold, as well as their potential to evoke emotional responses. In the first phase of the project, we invited artists with and without experiences of forced migration to express their experiences and knowledge of arrival through aesthetic forms. This collaboration resulted in a series of artworks (<https://artofarriving.univie.ac.at/en/artworks>), which later became central to group discussions involving participants both with and without displacement backgrounds. In these discussions, the artworks were not only interpreted, but also served as catalysts,

encouraging and enabling participants to express their often difficult and hard-to-articulate personal experiences of arriving after displacement.

We conducted 23 group discussions with a total of 58 participants from diverse backgrounds, including Afghanistan, Iran, Cameroon, Nigeria, Pakistan, Syria, the former Yugoslavia, and Ukraine. These group discussions all took place in 2022—the year that began with Russia’s war of aggression, which displaced many Ukrainians from their homeland. While the forced migrants from other countries had already spent between five and 30 years in Austria and generally possessed good to very good German language skills, we initially questioned whether it would be pragmatically and ethically feasible to include the newly arrived Ukrainian individuals in our study. At the same time, their perspectives struck us as particularly compelling—both in their own right and as a contrasting case to other refugee experiences. Additional financial support from the funding agency allowed us to expand our project team and hire two new members, both originally from Ukraine and bilingual in Ukrainian and Russian. In line with the principles of the documentary method, the group discussions with displaced Ukrainians were then conducted separately in order to ensure homogeneous group compositions. These discussions also took place later in the research process, which led to the emergence of a distinct sub-project that we refer to in this article. In total, 19 Ukrainian participants took part in eight group discussions. Most of these participants were women (15) with academic backgrounds, which reflects the broader sociodemographic composition of displaced Ukrainians currently living in Austria and across Europe. Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 59. Our reconstructive analysis of these group discussions revealed the challenges associated with arrival, which encompassed issues of self-identity, navigating between past experiences and uncertain futures, and adapting to an unfamiliar environment. While the broader findings have been reported elsewhere (Mijić et al., 2024; Mijić & Parzer, 2023; Parzer et al., 2024), this article focuses on multilingualism-specific challenges (in our reflexive framework). Before delving into these themes in detail, including the role of our multilingual research team, it is important to first outline the central methodological framework that underpins our analysis, as some of the multilingual challenges can be attributed to the specific methodology employed.

2.2. Reconstructive Social Research Methods

Our analysis draws on the documentary method, which has been established as a key approach within the broader framework of reconstructive methods in qualitative social research. Reconstructive methods aim to uncover implicit and often tacit forms of knowledge and meaning that underlie social practices. Rather than focusing solely on what people say or do, these methods seek to understand how social reality is produced and interpreted through shared orientations shaped by experience and social positioning.

The documentary method, developed by Ralf Bohnsack (Bohnsack, 2010; Bohnsack et al., 2010), builds on this epistemological foundation by distinguishing between communicative (explicit) and conjunctive (implicit) knowledge. It assumes that individuals’ shared experiences, often based on similar social positions, give rise to “collective orientations” that structure how they interpret the world. These orientations are rarely articulated directly; however, they can be reconstructed by analyzing how people talk and act in specific contexts (Bohnsack, 2010; Bohnsack et al., 2010). The method is particularly well-suited to group discussions, where it differentiates between two levels of analysis: formulating interpretation, which summarizes explicit content, and reflecting interpretation, which reveals underlying conjunctive knowledge by reconstructing the “documentary meaning” of participants’ actions and expressions. This second level

emphasizes the *modus operandi*—how something is done—rather than simply its objective or subjective meaning (Bohnsack, 2010, p. 103). As Reischl and Plotz (2020, p. 49) note, the focus is less on “what is happening” and more on how practices are socially generated and structured. In other words, such reconstructive analyses do not merely aim to capture the spoken content but rather seek to uncover the meaning embedded within it. Researchers employing this approach must therefore engage both with the literal definitions of terms and with their nuanced meanings and context-specific implications (Mijić, 2025). This becomes particularly complex in intercultural or multilingual research settings, where interpreting beyond the lexical level poses significant challenges—an issue that will be explored in more detail in the following chapter, which addresses the multilingual dimensions of our project.

3. Challenges in the Research Process

Our research faced challenges associated with multilingualism on various levels: During the fieldwork preparation, we had to develop a context-sensitive approach to recruit participants and engage with them in a setting that was ethically and methodologically sound. The main data collection challenge involved creating a safe, inclusive, and culturally sensitive space as well as anticipating the role of different languages and their sociopolitical implications for the participants. Further challenges arose during the transcription process and the subsequent transcript translations, as well as during the reconstructive analysis of the data. Addressing these challenges—covering ethical, methodological, and substantive dimensions—required tailoring a set of carefully considered strategies to the multilingual nature of our research. First, we brought in additional team members with linguistic and cultural expertise to ensure a nuanced understanding of the research context. We introduced the junior researchers to the project’s methodological and theoretical foundations. This emphasized the fieldwork approach and the group discussion procedure developed by Ralf Bohnsack, since they were expected to carry out a substantial part of the data collection independently, although with guidance from the senior researchers. They were also trained in the documentary method of data analysis, which enabled them to participate as co-interpreters in the analysis of the collected data. In line with Temple and Edwards (2002) and Temple and Young (2004), we are convinced that this approach of involving linguistically and culturally familiar team members throughout the research process provides greater methodological rigor and enhances the analytical depth of the study compared to relying on interpreters for short-term data collection or working with translations unreflexively.

Furthermore, we emphasized reflexivity and open dialogue as core methodological principles, fostering a continuous critical examination of our research process. Given the assumption that researchers’ positionalities should be viewed as relative and shift between insider and outsider perspectives (Carling, 2014; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), reflecting on one’s positionality and its impact on knowledge production in this context also involves considering how the researcher’s own linguistic background shapes their “language strategies” within the entire course of their inquiries (Havlin, 2022, para. 38). Finally, we critically engaged with translation processes to manage the challenges of working across languages and cultural contexts. In the following sections, we will explore the challenges and strategies in greater detail, drawing on insights from our concrete project work, while building on and referencing the existing literature.

3.1. Preparation of Data Collection and Access to the Field

The linguo-cultural expertise was particularly significant at key stages of gaining access to the field, specifically in adapting the written materials (e.g., informed consent, info sheets), establishing contact, and creating comfortable conditions that enabled trust (Edwards et al., 2006), while reducing hierarchical barriers between researchers and participants. These considerations are especially compelling in the context of working with a uniquely vulnerable group of people who experienced very recent, violence-induced displacement. Importantly, the Ukrainian researchers were not “integrated” into the Austrian and German-language context and had only arrived in Austria shortly before the research started, which placed them in a position similar to that of the participants.

In the following, we address the multilingual challenges of preparing materials for field access and data collection. We reflect upon the process of initiating contact, the importance of a context-sensitive approach to engaging with (potential) participants, and the role of culturally familiar researchers in this process.

3.1.1. Preparing the Materials with Linguistic and Cultural Sensitivity

After introducing the new members to the theoretical and methodological foundations of the project, the first task was to prepare the written materials. These included an information sheet with an invitation to participate in a group discussion, an informed consent form, a short questionnaire for socio-demographic data collection, and a guide for the group discussions that outlined its main questions. Although Ukrainian and Russian were later both used during the group discussions, the written materials were only provided in Ukrainian. This decision aligned with the administrative norms in Ukraine, where Ukrainian is the official language for formal documents. While Russian has been, and continues to be, widely used in oral and informal written communication among Ukrainian nationals, the exclusive use of Ukrainian in official contexts is the norm (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2024).

We paid particular attention to translating and formulating the information sheet and informed consent form, which are crucial for ensuring that participants fully understand the study’s nature, purpose, and their rights. The German- and English-language documents from the larger project served as templates, which were then adapted to fit the specific context of the sub-study. From an ethical perspective, it was essential that all participants clearly grasped how their data would be used, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw from the discussion at any time without any negative consequences. Furthermore, the documents explicitly communicated that the group discussions would be anonymized in the analysis and that participants were expected to respect the confidentiality of their fellow participants, thereby contributing to a safe and trustworthy discussion environment. The information sheet’s language was carefully tailored to be clear, culturally sensitive, and inviting, so as not to discourage potential participants from taking part. Likewise, the short questionnaire was adapted to fit the specific socio-political and linguistic context, ensuring relevance and appropriateness. Additionally, we placed a significant focus on adjusting the discussion guide, which was used by the Ukrainian researchers to facilitate the group discussions and to ensure coherence across sessions. Although this guide was only translated into Ukrainian, we made preparations to adapt the project’s special terminology into Russian to reflect how the group discussions would take place in Ukrainian, Russian, or both languages. Despite a generally high level of coordinated bilingualism among Ukrainians, this may be more difficult when dealing with unfamiliar terms and concepts.

This approach to creating Russian-language adaptations is visible in the following example: The concept of “arrival,” central to the project, was intended to play a key role in the group discussions. The participants were asked to share their experiences of arriving in Austria and reflect on what “arrival” means to them personally. Originally coined in German by Ludger Pries to critically engage with contemporary discussions on migration and asylum (Pries, 2018), adapting “arrival” into Ukrainian and Russian was a challenge, since the researchers without German language competency had no access to all the connotations of the original term. To achieve equivalence in Ukrainian and Russian, the Ukrainian researchers created a linguistic commentary, exploring the term’s different meanings and possible adaptations into both languages. The main challenge was that the original German-language term *Ankommen*, as noted above, does not only mean reaching a place, but also resonating with it or being well received; to affect someone (in a certain way), to touch someone, or to be important or meaningful to someone (Pries, 2016). By contrast, the term lacks such social implications in Ukrainian. The researchers used the equivalent of *прибуття* (*prybuttia*), which means the actual process or action of arriving. In Russian, the term was translated as *прибывание* (*pribyvanie*), which also means the process of arriving, and consonant with this word *пребывание* (*prebyvanie*), which means to stay or be in a certain place. However, the Ukrainian and Russian terms hardly correspond to either the original German version or its English adaptation. The team ultimately settled with words *прибуття* (*prybuttia*) and *прибывание* (*pribyvanie*) in Ukrainian and Russian, respectively. The English version was also provided to the participants who were fluent in English during the discussion. However, while conducting group discussions, it became apparent that a lack of semantic overlaps meant that employing these terms offered no analytical value to the research subject. Using these terms as a frame in the discussions proved fruitless—shifting the focus to speaking through experiences instead of terms—which exemplified the challenges of multilingualism.

3.1.2. Tailored and Considerate Participant Recruitment

Group discussion participants were recruited through social media as well as in-person contacts in public places. The initial strategy advertised the call for participation on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram. Additionally, printed advertisements were placed at universities, in refugee centers, and at several public events organized by Ukrainians in Vienna. In-person contacts were most effective for attracting participants with specific shared traits, for instance, men who were significantly less likely to leave Ukraine due to martial law or people with an artistic background. This recruitment was done through personal connections, mostly through the university network, through artists’ Instagram pages, or by striking up a conversation with musicians after a performance. Inviting participants to the discussion in their native language offered a key advantage: It enabled the clear communication of the project’s research objectives and participation conditions, while also signaling that participants could expect a deep understanding of their contributions, both linguistically and in terms of lived experiences of war, displacement, and arrival.

3.2. Data Collection: The Group Discussions

In addition to methodological considerations, there were ethical and emotional dimensions to the data collection process, especially the need to create a safe, inclusive, and culturally sensitive space. The researchers’ own backgrounds, the shared languages, and the sociopolitical implications of language choice played a central role in shaping the discussions. These reflections underlie the following two sections, which first address our efforts to create a welcoming atmosphere and then examine the participants’ complex linguistic realities.

3.2.1. Before the Discussion: Fostering a Safe Space through Cultural Sensitivity

Conversations on sensitive topics such as armed conflict and forced displacement required a comfortable and safe environment, especially given the recent shock caused by the war. Schembri and Jahić Jašić (2022) discuss how language choice in interviews can shape both data quality and the power dynamics between researchers and participants. For our project, language was highly illustrative of how researchers and potential participants with common backgrounds are likely to understand the challenging context of arrival after forced migration. During the discussions, several participants emphasized the value of these shared backgrounds and contrasted them to interactions with individuals who had no experience of forced displacement, noting that the Ukrainian researchers' own backgrounds greatly facilitated the exchange. The researchers made strong efforts to establish a safe environment for the participants: by creating a welcoming atmosphere in the university rooms where the discussions took place, organizing small tea breaks, and reminding participants that their involvement was voluntary and that they could stop the interview at any time. The informal conversations that preceded the interview were vital in this regard. Here, the researchers briefly introduced themselves, reiterated the purpose of the project, and outlined the plan for the next few hours. While participants received project details and were encouraged to ask questions beforehand, the brief oral presentation addressed outstanding questions and set the structure of the discussion group. Additionally, the participants introduced themselves to the group before the formal discussion, which was intended to foster familiarity and create a trustful environment among the participants. During the introductions, participants typically shared their names, occupations, Ukrainian hometown, and their date of arrival in Austria.

The researchers also used the informal sessions to determine which language—Ukrainian or Russian—the participants preferred to use for the discussion. Because of how the war politicized language use, this decision required a sensitive approach that would not have been necessary for English- or German-language discussions. In practice, the participant characteristics like region of origin, social class, and age helped support selecting the language of discussion, which is further reflected upon in the following section.

3.2.2. The Question of (First) Language

As described in the introduction, reconstructive research requires creating an environment where individuals can express themselves freely and without language barriers, which allows them to share their experiences as fully and in as much detail as possible. When participants are asked to speak about difficult topics—such as, in our case, war and displacement—language choice is not only a practical concern, but an ethical one. Thus, it was essential that discussion participants could share their experiences in their first language. However, in the case of the forced migrants from Ukraine, the notion of “first language” is marked by certain complexities. Thinking of this group solely in terms of the Ukrainian language overlooks the multilingual realities they often embody (Havlin, 2022, para. 13). Ukraine's linguistic landscape is largely characterized by diverse forms of bilingualism, where Ukrainian and Russian are used interchangeably, including via code-switching, language interference, and code-mixing (Surzhyk; Havlin, 2022; Masenko, 2019, pp. 63, 74). Code-switching occurs in coordinated bilingualism, where the speaker consciously switches between two languages. By contrast, interference is characterized by the partial overlap of codes and sometimes less intentionality, but still obeys the respective grammatical, phonetic, and syntactic norms of both languages in single speech acts. Code-mixing, in turn, describes non-standard language varieties that dissolve the

language boundary (Masenko, 2019; Vogel & García, 2017). The cultural and ideological perception of each of these language modes is highly contextual (Bernsand, 2001; Bilaniuk, 2003, 2004; Masenko, 2019). However, the war caused the Ukrainian language to become increasingly prevalent within the country, especially in the public sphere (Homon & Biletska, 2024; Renchka, 2023). According to the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (2023), by 2022, about half of Ukrainians spoke Ukrainian at home, a quarter Russian, and a quarter both. After Russia's invasion, the number of people who spoke only Ukrainian at home increased by ten percent. The most significant changes occurred in the public sphere. Before 2022, 43 percent of people used Ukrainian at work or school; after the war began, this number rose to 68 percent. Similarly, only 22 percent used Ukrainian on the internet before the war, but this increased to 52 percent afterwards (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2023). These changes formed the cultural context that Ukrainian researchers were not only aware of but also equipped to navigate effectively.

Our project allowed participants to choose the discussion language in which they currently felt most comfortable, and the researchers emphasized that their language choice would be completely respected. Most participants chose to use their first language. However, some, for whom Russian was their family's language of communication before the war, switched to Ukrainian (as a matter of principle) after the war started, and consequently, they also participated in the Ukrainian-language group discussions. There were also instances where participants spoke the Surzhyk dialect and alternated between languages, or where one spoke Russian and the other Ukrainian. This alternation mirrors the typical bilingual reality in Ukraine. However, in times of war, it also carries the potential for conflict. Speaking Ukrainian can instantly signal political loyalty to Ukraine, while using Russian may prompt suspicion, requiring speakers to assert their stance through other means, such as speech content, clothing, or accessories. Still, even when such implicit labeling exists, tensions around language choice can be mitigated. In some cases, participants adjusted their language to that of the other participants: For example, during a discussion between two artists—a young woman who had switched to Ukrainian after the war began, and a middle-aged Russian-speaking man from a city that had been completely destroyed by the Russian army—the woman decided to speak Russian to him. Given that she made a conscious decision, from a political standpoint, not to use Russian in her daily life after the outbreak of the war, her co-participant's continued use of Russian could have led to a conflict. While gender and age imbalances may have also influenced these group dynamics here, it is highly plausible that the woman wanted to offer this man, who shared his experience of being in a besieged city and the horrors of war, the opportunity to express himself in the language he felt most comfortable with, regardless of it being Russian. This example clearly demonstrates that, just as the researchers were “scanning” for appropriate linguistic behavior in each group, the participants were doing the same and frequently adjusted their communication in response to the circumstances.

The concept of translanguage clarifies this flexible and seemingly contradictory use of several languages. Although originally coined in the sphere of bilingual education during the 1980s (Baker, 2011; Vogel & García, 2017), this perspective on language and cross-cultural interaction has started to enter discussions on research in social sciences, especially migration studies (Darvin, 2019; Havlin, 2022). Translanguage views all people as having a singular linguistic repertoire, regardless of the number of externally categorized languages they possess. Emphasizing pragmatics (Masaeed, 2023) over form, the translanguage approach suggests that people deploy the multimodal features of this (multi-)linguistic singularity under different circumstances, depending on the communicative and expressive ends. It highlights how people “‘go beyond’ use of state-endorsed named language systems” (Vogel & García, 2017, p. 4) and

simultaneously highlights the complexity of multilingual environments and language use in post-colonial and globalized contexts. As Havlin points out (2022), translanguaging is a by-product of immigration and transnationalism, which was also evident in the discussions. Although most of the participants had only recently arrived in Austria, some had already started using German-language terms such as *Termin* (appointment), *Ausweis* (ID), or *Asyl*. Notably, these words were relevant to the specific situation of being displaced (Havlin, 2022, para. 35) and reflect the participants' key concerns: looking for international protection, ensuring a legal stay in the country, and following the rules of the local bureaucratic structures.

Given the (multilingual) complexities outlined in this section, researchers who possessed linguistic competence but lacked familiarity with the cultural context would have had more trouble communicating appropriately in that research setting. Navigating the complexities of translanguaging, code-switching, and code-mixing not only requires a technical understanding of these linguistic phenomena but also a deep sensitivity to the social, cultural, and political dynamics that shape language use in such contexts. As Havlin (2022, para. 17) stipulates, translanguaging, as a fundamental characteristic of multilingual practices, "creates [a] specific semantic field involving those who are able to decode the meaning constructed and generated in the moment." This implies that the researchers required both a knowledge of Ukrainian contexts as well as an understanding of Austrian realities in order to genuinely understand the participants during the group discussions and react appropriately, especially regarding the lived experiences of displaced individuals within that context. And of course, the participants' awareness of the researchers' multilingualism also played a role (Havlin, 2022, para. 35). For example, participants would have been unlikely to use any of the described German terms if they had perceived the researchers as being unfamiliar with the Austrian context.

At this stage, the non-Ukrainian researchers had a limited role and primarily focused on preparing the culturally and linguistically familiar team members for the group discussions and guiding them through the process. This involved regular joint reflections on how the conversations unfolded, the dynamics within the different groups, and the emotional experiences of the researchers themselves. All of these reflections became an integral part of the research.

3.3. Data Preparation and Processing: Transcribing and Translating

In this phase of data preparation and processing, the primary focus was on transcribing the discussions in the original language and translating the material. The transcription process adhered to the rules of the documentary method (Bohnsack, 2021, pp. 255–256), capturing nuances such as pauses, emphasis, and overlaps. Then, the transcripts were translated into English, the research lingua franca, with careful attention paid to preserving the markings made in the original transcript. While a direct translation of the group discussions would have been possible in principle, it was important to retain the original transcripts for analytical purposes.

The chosen translation approach balanced literal translation with cultural adaptation, while also aligning with English conventions to ensure comprehensibility for the researchers who lacked knowledge of the original discussion language. Inevitably, phrasing, word order, or expressions were occasionally adjusted. The overarching goal, however, was to achieve dynamic equivalence (sense-for-sense translation), while also applying the principle of formal equivalence (word-for-word translation; Nida, 2021) where necessary to reflect the cultural realities conveyed in the source language. This approach was intended to ensure that the

concepts in the target language carried the same emotive meaning as in the source language community, while also maintaining fidelity to lexical details and, when appropriate, grammatical structures. Where necessary, translations were supplemented with annotations and explanations. Building on the work of Zhao et al. (2024), we chose to move beyond a purely equivalence-based understanding of translation and instead adopted a reflexive approach—one that embraces uncertainty and difference as valuable resources in the context of qualitative research. We will return to this perspective in more detail later, when we discuss our analytical process. When inconsistencies emerged during the data analysis, the translations were reviewed and revised or supplemented with alternative versions as needed. Additionally, translanguaging instances were also annotated in the translations so that they could be incorporated into the interpretation process (Schittenhelm, 2017, p. 109). Havlin (2022, para. 50) similarly emphasizes this point, noting:

Therefore, it is relevant to ask: Why it appears, under which conditions, and which meaning it communicates. It highlights the researcher-researched relations; it illustrates the communication in action in the multilingual and multicultural contexts; it reveals those elements resistant or difficult for an immediate translation. For this reason, it is paramount to preserve the incidences of translanguaging in original interview transcripts, as well as including them in further interpretation.

The translations provided the non-Ukrainian researchers with their first opportunity to engage with the material and determine how to proceed with the analysis.

3.4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis is at the heart of any research because it gives meaning to the data. This is literally true for interpretive research, which is fundamentally concerned with reconstructing meaning. This raises the question of how feasible it is to even work with translated material in such research. Existing studies suggest that it is indeed possible (Dersch & Oevermann, 1994; Mijić, 2019, 2025; Oevermann, 2001; Schröer, 2007), but requires involving culturally familiar interpreters who can, through a dialogical process, bridge the gap between “worlds” and facilitate the understanding of one within the context of the other (Mijić, 2025; Schröer, 2007).

From the project’s outset, it was crucial to familiarize the culturally and linguistically familiar team members with the reconstructive approach. They were introduced to the key steps of the documentary method, which assumes that shared experiences grounded in similar social positions give rise to “collective orientations” or “conjunctive knowledge,” which in turn form the basis of individual knowledge (Bohnsack, 2010, p. 105). Rather than primarily focusing on what participants say, the sequence analysis looks at how they speak about a particular topic. Accordingly, a literal translation is not sufficient; rather, the translation must grasp the broader semantic field and underlying orientations. While the core analysis was carried out by the senior researchers who have expertise in reconstructive methodology, the culturally close researchers played a crucial supporting role: They served as aides in decoding and interpreting the data relayed from another linguistic and cultural system; they assisted in moments of uncertainty and acted as a continuous point of reference by critically observing the analytical process to ensure that the interpretations remained grounded in the original material and valid. During this phase, the researchers relied heavily on each other, since they were carriers of two different types of knowledge: While the senior researchers had reconstructive analysis expertise and extensive experience, which ensured that everyone stayed within the methodological and theoretical structure of the study, the analysis would not have been possible without the junior researchers, who functioned as culturally

familiar co-interpreters. The ongoing dialogue between the junior and senior researchers was absolutely vital for developing a truly reconstructive understanding of the material.

In general, the analysis of the translated material held up well against the original. Rare cases where inconsistencies emerged were explicitly and extensively addressed through a reflexive dialogue. It was precisely at these points that it became clear that such challenges should not be seen as mere problems, but as valuable opportunities for deeper analytical insight. Juxtaposing the original material and translation made a wider range of interpretations accessible, which were then refined through a constructive process of the translation of meaning: Senior researchers, lacking direct access to the original material, guided the junior researchers in interpreting it, while continuously probing their culturally grounded knowledge with precise questions to understand why a statement seemed meaningful in one context, but not another. This process generated an exceptionally thorough and reflexive engagement with the material, pushing the analysis into depths that are rarely reached in processes without such a mutual dependence of interpretation partners in collaborative reconstructions.

4. Conclusion: (Multi)Lingual Reflexivity—Stumbling Blocks and Stepping Stones

This article reflects on the linguistic challenges we encountered in our reconstructive research about the experiences of forced migration from Ukraine to Austria in 2022. We examine the various phases of the research process—from preparing data collection, through translation, to the analysis of material—which we, as a multilingual team of two non-Russian/Ukrainian speakers and two native speakers of Russian and Ukrainian, navigated through the lens of existing literature on multilingualism. In doing so, we contribute to the growing body of reflexive migration research by systematically addressing the previously underexplored role of multilingualism in knowledge production. While reflexive migration studies have long emphasized the importance of critically examining researchers' positionalities, the categories they employ, and the institutional contexts in which they operate (Dahinden, 2016; Dieterich & Nieswand, 2020; Havlin, 2022), multilingualism has rarely been integrated into this reflection. When it is considered, the focus often remains on the language of origin and the language of arrival, while the potential multilingualism of the research participants—shaped by their often-transnational trajectories and biographies—is frequently overlooked. Our findings extend this discourse by foregrounding linguistic positionings as a central dimension of reflexivity.

In this regard, literature on *translanguaging* was especially important (Darvin, 2019; Havlin, 2022; Holmes et al., 2016; Masaeed, 2023; Vogel & García, 2017): Translanguaging describes the flexible and dynamic use of language by multilingual speakers and dissolves the strict separation between linguistic codes. In our project, multilingualism not only referred to the linguistic differences between researchers and participants, but also to their bilingualism since they spoke both Russian and Ukrainian. This bilingualism carries a deeply political dimension, especially in the context of the current war. Our work demonstrates that—particularly, though not exclusively, in politically charged contexts—a continuous and reflexive engagement with both language use and the language-specific positionalities of all project participants throughout every stage of the research process is essential. It further illustrates how such engagement can be put into practice.

Moreover, in line with literature emphasizing that linguistic diversity can enhance the validity of findings (Nemouchi & Holmes, 2022; Zhao et al., 2024), we argue that multilingualism should not only be seen as a

stumbling block but also as a stepping stone in reconstructive research. In practical terms, we observed that linguistic barriers often slowed down the interpretive process, but that this deceleration created valuable opportunities for deeper reflection. The slower engagement sharpened our focus on aspects that we might otherwise have overlooked in a faster, more everyday “routine” understanding. At the same time, the distance created by linguistic differences enabled a more deliberate and profound engagement with the material. This resonates with Ulrich Oevermann’s argument that the unfamiliar can often be examined more clearly than the familiar, as it is not obscured by the “opaque layer of everyday understanding” (Oevermann, 2008, p. 147). Thus, the intuitive expertise of linguistically and culturally familiar team members was challenged by the precise and often critical questions of the “linguistic outsiders.” At the same time, the outsiders depended on the insiders, guiding them methodologically to ensure that interpretations were clearly and transparently justified. The success of this multiperspective approach rested on two key conditions: First, fostering open and continuous dialogue to actively engage with and balance team dynamics; second, preventing power imbalances between junior researchers with linguistic and cultural familiarity and senior researchers with a more profound methodological expertise. Both perspectives were treated as equally indispensable and mutually enriching for the analytical process.

To summarize, this article provides two key takeaways. First, it is essential to reflexively engage with the challenges of multilingualism in order to do justice to the phenomena studied in qualitative and reconstructive migration research. Recognizing multilingualism as an integral part of the research process can foster a more reflexive and inclusive approach that captures the social and cultural dynamics of migration in a fuller sense. This insight has also fundamentally shaped our own research practice more broadly, prompting continuous reflection on language use and linguistic positionalities beyond the confines of this specific sub-project on displacement from Ukraine. Second, we argue that when such reflection is carried out consistently, researchers need not fear the challenges of multilingualism. On the contrary, systematic engagement with linguistic dynamics provides a valuable opportunity to enhance both the quality and depth of reconstructive research.

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Conflict of Interests

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

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

2. Theoretical Background

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

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

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

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

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

3. Methods

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

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

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

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

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

3.2. Working With AI tools for Translation and Transcription

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

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

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

4.1. Negotiating Common Linguistic Ground

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

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

Figure 1. Excerpt 1—“Or Italian or German or English.”

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

4.2. Reflecting on Linguistic Repertoires

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

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

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

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

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

4.3. Translation as a Collaborative Practice in Multilingual Knowledge Construction

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

- 01 KS: and and and we see above the title (.) okay we didn't read it yet, it was
- 02 written **ethnographische protokolle november zwe twotausend**
ethnographic protocol november two two thousand
- 03 twentyfour **kita**:: so:: even if its not the title we read... so **kita** it could be
daycare daycare
- 04 a first (.) ehm
- 05 **hinweis**
- 06 NT: hint
- 07 KS: hint. thank you, for the setting

Figure 3. Excerpt 3—"Ehm Hinweis."

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

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

- 01 KS: but [...] why call it then **FIGLIO** if it's from the perspective of the
child / son
- 02 ethnographer? maybe first child first first child would it be **PRIMO**
first
- 03 **BAMBINO**? because **FIGLIO** is my child i think, no? **FIGLIO** my child so **mein**
(male) child child / son child / son my
- 04 **sohn** in german. so [...] **erster sohn wörtlich übersetzt**. so for me it's like
son first son literally translated
- 05 [...] yeah Nadja?
- 06 NT: it could be, **erster sohn** in german or **erstes kind**. so in in italian it's both uh
first son first child
- 07 male and uh general. i'm not sure if i explained it well [...] yeah. so if it's um
- 08 a child uh without it it's relation to parents then it would be a **BAMBINO** or
(male) child
- 09 **BAMBINA** yeah but uh **FIGLIO E FIGLIA** is really a child of parents.
female child son and daughter

Figure 4. Excerpt 4—“FIGLIO.”

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

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

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

- 01 RW: now it takes place in a school or it's at least an educational context. so i
- 02 was just translating enrollment for me and it sounds like um like a like a real
- 03 **bürokratisch** part of going to school it's not like an or for me it sounds not
bureaucratic
- 04 like a party or um and um and context with where the family is attends to it's
- 05 more like the **verwaltungsbereich** i don't know administration
- 06 administration and part of the part of going to school.
- 07 um so we know that **FIGLIO PRIMO FIGLIO** means the eldest uh of a person's
(male) child / son first (male) child / son
- 08 GA: uh um children. we still don't know how many but uh in the timeline is quite
- 09 some time ago so this child is now uh 20 20 ish uh no yes i think and there's
- 10 also what Rebecca said earlier it's **ISCRIZIONI** sounded a bit **bürokratisch**
enrollment bureaucratic
- 11 that was said uh so now we have um **LETTERA DEL COMUNE**.
letter from the municipality

Figure 5. Excerpt 5—“Bürokratisch.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Figure 6. Excerpt 6—“ASILO NIDO.”

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

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

- 01 NT: and i see that it's a - direct translation i would assume from italian to
- 02 german (.) the- i'm just thinking but um - maybe if it was not a translation
- 03 it could also start or it could also be something like **bitte füllen sie "das**
please fill in "the
- 04 **gesuch" "sorgfältig und in allen seinen teilen" aus** - i would find that more
application" "carefully and in all of its parts"
- 05 logical for my language feeling but i'm not sure how you what what you
- 06 would say **"das gesuch ist sorgfältig und in allen seinen teilen auszufüllen"**
"the application is to be filled in carefully and in all of its parts"
- 07 KS: what what for me actually sound strange is this part **"in allen seinen teilen"**
"in all of its parts"
- 08 this part in it it sounds for me strange actually it's nothing as you said also
- 09 now it's nothing that you normally would write in that like that i think (.)
- 10 **"in allen seinen teilen"** it sounds strange
"in all of its parts"
- 11 RW: yeah i would say it sounds like a very or like a um administrative way of talking
- 12 NT: ah okay
- 13 KS: i thought maybe it could be like somebody had could be uh had - had to
- 14 **schreiben können so so uh alle felder oder und alle felder ausfüllen oder**
write can so so uh all fields or and fill in all fields or
- 15 **in die richtung** - like **seinen teilen** it's it's it's not it's not it's nothing like **seine**
in this direction its
- 16 **teile** it's nothing uh not connected to administration stuff i think **seine teile**
parts its parts
- 17 it's not **seine felder** like because it's a **feld** - so yeah for me it would be more
its parts field
- 18 logically logically if they um if if they would write um **"das gesuch ist**
"the application is
- 19 **sorgfältig" und "das gesuch ist sorgfältig und" eigentlich alle felder**
carefully" and "the application is carefully and" actually all fields
- 20 **"auszufüllen" oder so also** something with **felder** kind or or i don't know
"to fill in" or something like that fields
- 21 but **seine teile** it's it's not like i think uh it's maybe from the uh from the uh
its parts
- 22 **TRADUZIONE?**
translation

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

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

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

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

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

- 01 NT: i find the translation interesting (laughs), eeh, because, eeh, **bint** is eeh
girl / daughter
- 02 SEK: **RAGAZZA** maybe?
- 03 yes **RAGAZZA** or eeh even ehm, daughter.
girl
- 04 NT: yeah girl
- 05 SEK: both.
- 06 NT: yeah, so daughter? **ja...**
yes
- 07 SEK: yeah because the literal translation as you are pointing out, so when we say
- 08 **bnt bladi**, especially in morocco, we mean someone from your same country,
girl / daughter of my country
- 09 but it is like, “daughter of my same country” or “son of my same country”. so it
- 10 seems like we have the same mother country.
- 11 NT: yeah. and for me it’s stronger than **COMPAESANA** in some way because it’s,
female person from the same village / country
- 12 or, not stronger but it’s something else because **COMPAESANA** refers to the
female person from the same village / country
- 13 nation or to the mmm yeah, [incomprehensible word] and **bint** refers to to a
girl / daughter
- 14 family. eeehm
- 15 GA: it’s like the **DEL MIO STESSO S_**, i don’t know if **DEL MIO STESSO** is like
of my same b_ of my same
- 16 my same blood or something like that. like, like I’m thinking about aaa about
- 17 an equivalent, maybe not a translation, something similar in italian. it’s like
- 18 **DEL MIO STESSO**, or mmm like these metaphors with blood things.
of my same
- 19 NT: but it’s not about blood. it’s about...
- 20 SEK: yeah it’s more aaa like imagine the country as parents.
- 21 NT: yeah [nods], as a family!
- 22 SEK: ok, yeah exactly! and then you say to people you are son of my country and
- 23 NT: mmm [nods]
- 24 SEK: so there is like this shared land, land is shared which is not land it’s most like
- 25 family like Nadja was pointing out.
- 26 NT: mmm [nods]

Figure 8. Excerpt 8—“bnt bladi.”

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

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

5. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

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

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Methodological Insights From a Qualitative Case Study in a Migration Context: Translingual Writing Practices Among Emergent Multilingual Children

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Abstract

This article examines the methodological challenges and opportunities of researching translingual writing practices among emergent multilingual children in South Korea. Drawing on a four-month qualitative case study involving three focal participants, the study explores their translingual writing across school, home, community, and a specially designed after-school writing program. A multi-sited, multilingual research design combined classroom observations, interviews, writing artifacts, and digital traces produced in English, Korean, and/or Russian. The multilingual nature of the dataset required sustained attention to translation, interpretation, and shifting ideological meanings across research contexts. Ethical tensions and power asymmetries emerged in decisions surrounding transcription, translation, and voice representation. While participants actively mobilized diverse linguistic resources during composing, this diversity was only partially visible in the final products due to institutional language norms. The findings underscore the need for flexible, reflexive, and context-sensitive methodologies for multilingual research in migration societies.

Keywords

Koryoin students; multilingual education; multilingual learners; multilingual qualitative research; translingualism

1. Introduction

Schools often operate under a tacit monolingual logic, even as they accommodate students with complex transnational and linguistic biographies. For researchers seeking to understand how emergent multilingual students navigate such environments through translingual practices, the methodological endeavor is equally

complex. Although translingual practices are integral to students' everyday meaning-making, they are often excluded from formal assessments or final products due to institutional language norms (Choi, 2022). Capturing translingual processes, therefore, requires more than traditional observation or translation; it demands methodological approaches that recognize language as dynamic, relational, and politically charged.

Against this backdrop, researching translingual writing among emergent multilingual children in a nominally monolingual system presents both empirical opportunities and methodological challenges. Prior work on classroom translingual practices (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; García & Kleyn, 2016; García et al., 2017; Li, 2018) has shown that young learners fluidly mobilize their full linguistic repertoires during meaning-making, even when final products must conform to dominant language standards. Yet, documenting these practices often remains limited to surface-level translation of final products rather than the dynamic processes through which multilingual meaning emerges. As a result, scholarship has tended to privilege multilingual outcomes over the situated, multimodal processes that sustain them.

Matsuda (2014) cautions that without critically engaging with language and translingual issues, research risks merely presenting "examples of visible differences" (p. 483) and obscuring the processes of multilingual meaning-making without substantive argument (Gevers, 2018; Gilyard, 2016; Kubota, 2016). By contrast, Lu and Horner (2013) and Jordan (2015) argue that the expressions and negotiations of emerging multilingual learners themselves constitute the content of multilingual research, providing an essential starting point for translingual inquiry. This perspective suggests that, through the critical exploration of language differences and situated resources, researchers can illuminate learners' language and literacy processes as achievements in their own right. Such practices represent legitimate and creative forms of knowledge-making that depart from standardized norms (Cushman, 2016).

Recent methodological scholarship further underscores that cross-language qualitative research is never a neutral technical practice. Decisions regarding who translates, when translation occurs, and how meaning is rendered actively shape what counts as knowledge (Temple & Young, 2004). Extending this concern, Zhao and Carey (2023) propose bilingual analysis as a decolonial practice that resists the premature Anglicization of meaning, while Schumann et al. (2023) describe cross-language data work as containing epistemological icebergs—often-unseen challenges related to translation timing, fidelity, and voice. Together, these studies call for sustained researcher reflexivity and transparent analytic procedures that keep participants' linguistic repertoires visible throughout the research process.

This orientation aligns with broader debates on multilingual research ethics and practice, including translation timing (Santos et al., 2015), ethical transparency in multilingual interviews (Schembri & Jahić Jašić, 2022), and bilingual analysis strategies (Zhao & Carey, 2023). While this study draws on a larger translingual research project (2018–2024), it focuses specifically on the project's methodological dimensions. Accordingly, this article addresses the following research questions:

1. What methodological challenges arise in a multilingual qualitative research project that investigates the translingual writing practices of emergent multilingual children, particularly during data collection, translation, and analysis?
2. How do power relations and institutional language hierarchies shape the research process and influence the representation of participants' multilingual knowledge and agency?

By addressing these questions, this article aims to extend street-level and school-based scholarship on linguistic diversity (Holzinger, 2020; Scheibelhofer et al., 2021; Thoma & Draxl, 2023) into the realm of multilingual qualitative research. Drawing on a four-month translingual study, it offers concrete strategies—such as shared authority in data interpretation—for producing ethically sound and analytically rich accounts of translingual writing practices in migration societies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Epistemological, Ethical, and Methodological Challenges in Multilingual Qualitative Research

Multilingual qualitative research confronts a range of epistemological, ethical, and methodological challenges, particularly in contexts shaped by institutional monolingualism, such as in South Korea. Specifically, in Yoon's (2023) ethnography of a Russian-speaking preschool community in Korea, multilingual children are often evaluated against dominant Korean language norms, and non-Korean repertoires are positioned as deficits rather than resources. The structural biases are not only reproduced in classrooms but also affect how researchers design studies, engage with participants, and interpret data. To ethically engage with the participants' multilingual realities in monolingually structured environments, Yoon triangulates video recordings, field notes, and participant observation while continuously reflecting on her positionality as a monolingual Korean researcher.

Similarly, Choi's (2022) case study of her own multilingual child extends methodological discussions by foregrounding the complexities of conducting insider research in a multilingual household. As a mother scholar, Choi employed longitudinal ethnographic methods to trace her child's literacy development across Korean, Farsi, and English. Her detailed data collection—balancing observation notes, multimodal compositions, and informal interviews—demonstrates the depth of insight that can emerge from sustained, intimate engagement. At the same time, Choi candidly reflects on the ethical tensions in her dual roles, as her desire to document sometimes disrupted daily life and her assumptions as a parent-researcher required ongoing reflexivity. These methodological dilemmas—of access, representation, and researcher influence—resonate beyond her context, raising critical questions about how positionality affects what can be known, shown, and shared in multilingual qualitative research.

Additional challenges emerge in cross-language translation practices. For example, Santos et al. (2015) caution that the timing of translation in cross-language research—whether during transcription, coding, or analysis—can significantly shape data interpretation. Extending this argument, Schumann et al. (2025) warn that unexamined translation practices often conceal deeper epistemological tensions around authorship, fidelity, and voice. Ethical concerns are further amplified by power asymmetries in multilingual fieldwork as translation must be treated as an ethical and positional practice rather than a neutral technical procedure (Flores, 2024; Schembri & Jahić Jašić, 2022).

Together, the body of work calls for flexible, reflexive, and ethically grounded methodological approaches in multilingual qualitative research. Rather than treating language as a barrier, these approaches view multilingualism as a generative site of knowledge production—albeit one that demands critical attention to how voices, meanings, and identities are mediated through data collection, translation, and analysis.

2.2. Challenges in Researching Translingual Writing Practices

Translingual writing emphasizes the fluid negotiation of meaning across languages, resisting monolingual norms and often occurring in informal, multimodal, and socially situated contexts (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Li, 2018). However, the complexity of participants' linguistic repertoires and the non-linear, multimodal nature of translingual composing make such practices difficult to capture through conventional qualitative approaches (Crane et al., 2009; Sun & Lan, 2021a).

One core challenge is the tension lies between the situated, process-oriented nature of translingual writing and the epistemological assumptions of dominant academic traditions, which often privilege stable products over emergent meaning-making processes. As Sun and Lan (2021b) argue, studies on translingual writing tend to focus on writing products rather than the creative, semiotic, and embodied processes that shape them. It risks reducing complex translingual practices to observable artifacts rather than attending to their emergence through affective, material, and discursive entanglements. Additionally, institutional language ideologies often compel researchers to translate or clean multilingual texts into dominant languages for peer review, limiting the visibility of translingual practices and reproducing linguistic hierarchies in the very act of research dissemination (Crane et al., 2009; Ticheloven et al., 2021).

As illustrated by Choi (2022) and Yoon (2023), researchers' positionalities profoundly shape access, interpretation, and ethical decision-making in studies of young multilinguals. In her mother scholar case study, Choi (2022) wrestled with how to ethically represent her child's translingual compositions while maintaining critical distance and minimizing disruption to family life. Yoon (2023), working in a Korean preschool classroom, recognized how her identity as a native Korean-speaking adult might influence children's language use and her interpretation of their interactions, especially when she lacked proficiency in the children's home language, Russian. Both studies call for reflexive, situated methodologies that account for the embodied, affective, and relational dimensions of working with young multilinguals.

Finally, epistemological assumptions about what constitutes legitimate data—such as fixed linguistic forms, coherent narratives, or articulated intent—often stand at odds with the emergent, affective, and multimodal nature of translingual writing. Building on this perspective, MacLure (2013) urges researchers to reconsider the status of data, not as static representations awaiting interpretation, but as incitements—events that invite affective and intellectual engagement. Data, she argues, hold the capacity to provoke wonder not merely because of what they contain, but because of how they resonate materially and virtually—through bodies, objects, moments, and potentialities. For researchers working with young multilinguals, this means resisting premature closure and instead experimenting with ways of seeing, sensing, and representing that allow the complexity of translingual practices to emerge—often unexpectedly—as knowledge-in-the-making.

3. Methodology

3.1. The Study: Translingual Writing Practices Among Emergent Multilingual Children in South Korea

This article is part of a larger research project conducted between 2018 and 2024. For the purposes of this article, the data specifically draws on materials collected between May and August 2020, which overlaps with the data collection phase of my doctoral research (Jang, 2021). During this period, a specially designed

after-school translingual writing program (TWP) was implemented at a Korean middle school that had experienced a growing enrollment of Russian-speaking ethnic Korean migrant students since 2018.

The program was proposed in response to the students' restricted use of their first language (Russian) in school, despite their need to learn both Korean as a second language and English as a foreign language. The TWP was designed as a pedagogical space where students could draw on their full linguistic repertoires and reconceptualize their L1 not as a deficit but as a resource for multilingual learning. Participation in the program was voluntary.

The program was designed as a seven-week blended course, offered in both online and offline formats. I conducted the program three to four times per week, with each session lasting between one and three hours. During each session, students engaged with assigned readings while simultaneously working on three main writing projects (see Table 1). During the first two weeks, students introduced themselves, shared their language learning experiences, and read *Amy Tan in the Classroom: The Art of Invisible Strength* (Shea & Wilchek, 2005) and *Mother Tongue* (Tan, 1990) as anchor texts for developing autobiographical narratives.

In week 3, students engaged in a translation activity and read Lin's (2010) *English and Me: My Language Learning Journey*, while preparing interview questions for parents, teachers, and peers to explore their language learning processes. These interviews allowed students to use multiple languages and reflect on their own learning strategies through others' experiences.

Table 1. Overall TWP plan & student participants' writing products.

	Lesson	Readings	Students' writing products
Week 1	Let Me Introduce Myself	Shea and Wilchek (2005)	<i>My Life Map/Story</i>
Week 2	The Trials and Triumphs of My Language Learning (1)	Tan (1990) Visson (2013)	Brainstorming Memoirs/turning points Written comments on the stories shared by peers
Week 3	The Trials and Triumphs of My Language Learning (2)	Lin (2010, chapter 16)	Individual students' interview questions for their interviewees (e.g., parents, teachers, peers)
Week 4	The Trials and Triumphs of My Language Learning (3)	Gladkova (2007, chapter 11)	Written reports on their interviews Rough draft of my success story of language learning Peer feedback on a rough draft Written response to peer feedback
Week 5	The Trials and Triumphs of My Language Learning (4)	Gladkova (2007, chapter 11) Ulman (2007, chapter 4)	First revision of my success story of language learning Peer feedback on the first revision Written response to peer feedback
Week 6	The Trials and Triumphs of My Language Learning (5)	Ulman (2007, chapter 4)	Second revision of my success story of language learning
Week 7	Future Me		Final draft of <i>My Success Story of Language Learning</i> <i>A Letter To My Future Self</i>

Weeks 4–6 focused on translation activities based on Visson’s (2013) *What Mean? Where Russians Go Wrong in English* and selected chapters from *Translating Lives: Living With Two Languages and Cultures* (e.g., Gladkova, 2007; Ulman, 2007). These texts guided students in identifying how multilingual writers construct meaning across contexts and informed their own essays, titled *My Success Story of Language Learning*. Following peer review, students revised and presented their narratives in class.

In the final week, students reflected on their learning trajectories and outlined their last project, Future Me, by envisioning themselves five years ahead. Using this outline, they composed letters to their future selves as a culminating reflection on their multilingual learning journeys.

Following Yin’s (2018) principles of multiple sources of evidence and chain of evidence, data were collected through (a) classroom, home, and community observations; (b) semi-structured interviews with students, parents, and teachers; (c) pre- and post-program surveys; and (d) the collection of educational artifacts and student writing (see Table 2). These multiple sources produced a rich, triangulated dataset enabling an in-depth examination of students’ translingual writing across contexts (Durdella, 2019).

Table 2. Data sources and collection methods.

Method	Data source	Frequency
Observation	Video and audio recordings in classrooms	3–4 times a week
	Field notes in classrooms	3–4 times a week
	Video and audio recordings in home and community contexts	1–2 times a week
	Field notes in home and community contexts	1–2 times a week
Collection of Students’ written responses and educational artifacts	Writing artifacts/documents	3–4 times a week
	Screen capture/recordings	3–4 times a week
	Literacy logs	5 times a week
Surveys	Pre- and post-student survey	At the beginning and the end of the program
Interviews	In-process composition interviews	Once a week
	Interviews at home	Once a week
	Final interviews in school	End of the program
	Interviews with parents and teachers	3 times during the data collection period

The study was conducted as a four-month multiple case study with three focal participants—Leo, Sandra, and Alex (pseudonyms)—all Koryoin middle school students. Participants were selected based on sustained engagement in the program and willingness to participate in interviews. Prior to the study, detailed study information was shared with the students and their parents. Both parental and child consent forms were distributed, and families were asked to return the signed forms if they agreed to participate in the study.

At the time of data collection, Leo was an eighth-grade student who was fourteen years old. Ambitious and academically driven, he aspired to work at Google in his twenties and devoted considerable effort to achieving

strong grades in his Korean school. Leo spoke Russian as his primary language but also had some knowledge of Uzbek and Koryomal. Koryomal, a Korean variety widely spoken by Koryoin communities in Russia and Central Asia, differs from standard South Korean language in that it exhibits North Korean intonation and incorporates early twentieth-century Korean and Russian vocabulary. Leo's multilingual background stemmed from his family: His mother is Uzbek, and his father is Koryoin. However, Leo reported that his proficiency in both Uzbek and Koryomal was limited to basic comprehension and conversational ability. His English learning began during his fifth year at an elementary school in Uzbekistan, where he also received three years of private tutoring. Additionally, he acquired basic Korean expressions while staying temporarily in Russia before migrating to South Korea.

Sandra was a fifteen-year-old ninth-grade student who had migrated to South Korea earlier than Leo. I first met her in late 2018, when she was a seventh grader at a regional middle school I visited for the initial phase of the study. At that time, she appeared quite confident in speaking Korean and frequently assisted both Korean teachers and her Russian-speaking peers with communication. Like Leo, she possessed some knowledge of Uzbek, as she attended an Uzbek school where Uzbek was the medium of instruction, although Russian was predominantly spoken at home and in her community in Uzbekistan. Sandra had learned English as a foreign language in Uzbekistan, but had little or no exposure to the Korean language before her migration.

At the time of data collection, Alex was a fourteen-year-old eighth-grade student who had migrated to South Korea at the age of nine. Energetic and expressive, he often shared his thoughts actively—both through speech and written messages—throughout the program. Having spent more years in South Korea than the other participants, Alex demonstrated greater confidence in Korean while showing comparatively limited proficiency in Russian and English. Interestingly, although his Russian ability appeared to be at an elementary level, he enthusiastically used and displayed his Russian knowledge during the program, seemingly taking pride in Russian as his first and mother language.

Using video-stimulated recall, interviews, field notes, and trilingual data analysis (Korean, Russian, English), the study examined how translingual spaces afforded agentive language use. While students' multilingual practices were robust during the composing process, their full linguistic repertoires were rarely visible in final products due to dominant school language expectations. Accordingly, rather than centering analysis on final written outputs, this study foregrounds the writing process itself to capture students' translingual meaning-making in greater depth—an aspect explored in detail in Section 4.

3.2. Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality in the Study of Translingual Writing

Qualitative inquiry, especially in multilingual contexts, requires the researcher to continuously interrogate their own role in shaping the research process and the knowledge it produces. In this study, my positionality as a Korean-English bilingual researcher who previously tutored one of the focal participants and later designed and implemented the after-school TWP generated both relational affordances and ethical tensions. My embeddedness in the field fostered trust and enabled sustained engagement, allowing me to observe students' evolving multilingual literacy practices across home, school, and community contexts. At the same time, as a teacher-researcher with limited proficiency in Russian, I remained vigilant about how my linguistic repertoire, institutional affiliations, and pedagogical authority could influence participants' responses, the framing of interview questions, and my interpretation of multilingual artifacts. This dynamic reflects broader

concerns in multilingual qualitative research regarding the researcher's shifting role from facilitator of learning to interpreter of meaning.

To address these concerns, I employed multiple reflexive strategies throughout the research process. They included maintaining detailed field notes with regular memos documenting moments of interpretive uncertainty; inviting participants to review and comment on translated excerpts and preliminary analyses; and explicitly surfacing moments when my own language ideologies or pedagogical intentions may have shaped the data generation process. Additionally, with the support of Olga (pseudonym), a professionally trained trilingual translator (Russian–Korean–English) who was hired for the research project and had assisted from its earliest stages in 2018, I approached my role not as a neutral observer but as a co-participant of meaning-making practices within a shared linguistic and cultural space. Reflexivity thus functioned not as a discrete phase of the research but as a sustained methodological stance embedded in every layer of design, analysis, and representation.

3.3. Navigating Insider/Outsider Dynamics Through Trilingual Collaboration

As a Korean researcher working with Russian-speaking ethnic Korean children in South Korea, I occupied a complex position of being both an insider and an outsider. While I shared ethnic and cultural affiliations with the participants, I remained an outsider to their Russian linguistic repertoire, migration trajectories, and lived experiences. This dual positionality shaped my epistemological stance and methodological decisions throughout the research process.

To bridge the linguistic and experiential gaps and co-construct meaning more equitably, I worked closely with Olga. Rather than treating translation as a neutral conduit of meaning, we approached it as an interpretive and relational act (Temple & Young, 2004; Zhao & Carey, 2023). During data analysis, we engaged in repeated cycles of translation and discussion: Olga first produced a literal translation of a student's Russian utterance in both Korean and English, after which we collaboratively examined cultural connotations, affective tone, and pragmatic nuance before finalizing the English version for analysis. In one case, a seemingly simple Russian phrase used by a student carried a strong idiomatic sense of sincerity, which required several rounds of negotiation to render accurately in Korean and English. As a Koryoin who was born and raised in Russia and had lived in South Korea for nearly 15 years, Olga was uniquely positioned to interpret students' intended meanings with cultural and linguistic sensitivity. Her mediation extended beyond technical translation, functioning as a cultural interpretation that ensured participants' nuanced voices were faithfully represented in the findings. In this sense, collaborative translation operated as both an analytic and ethical practice (see also Section 4.2). Olga's role extended beyond technical translation; she functioned as a cultural mediator and interpretive co-participant. Our collaboration allowed for more nuanced and contextually grounded interpretations during interviews, member-checking, and data analysis, aligning with Flores's (2024) call for translator transparency and co-reflexivity in cross-cultural research.

Additionally, to ensure accuracy and deepen interpretation, I conducted member checks, soliciting participants' feedback on emerging findings to identify potential misinterpretations and better represent their perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As Maxwell (2013) emphasizes, member checks can minimize "the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do," allow researchers to revisit "the perspective they have on what is going on," and help identify "one's own biases and misunderstandings of what was observed"

(p. 161). Throughout data collection and analysis, I used member checks in weekly interviews and in follow-up discussions at the end of the research project. Participants' comments were treated as valuable contributions and were incorporated into the findings to strengthen the credibility and interpretive depth of the study.

This sustained partnership enabled a research design that resisted premature Anglicization and maintained the visibility of participants' linguistic repertoires throughout the study (van Nes et al., 2010; Zhao & Carey, 2023). In line with Schumann et al. (2025), this study adopted staggered and iterative translation strategies to avoid submerging participants' voices beneath researcher assumptions. Working reflexively with Olga revealed the ethical and analytical tensions inherent in multilingual research (Schembri & Jahić Jašić, 2022) and enabled me to approach data representation as a shared responsibility. Ultimately, my position as an insider-outsider—mediated through a trilingual translator—became not a limitation, but a methodological asset that enabled richer and more ethically grounded understandings of translanguaging writing practices among multilingual youth.

3.4. Collecting, Transcribing, and Reporting Data in Russian, Korean, and English

Working with Russian-speaking ethnic Korean children in South Korea required a multilingual research design that could accommodate the fluid and hybrid nature of participants' linguistic repertoires. Data were collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews, video-stimulated recall sessions, classroom observations, and written artifacts across school, home, and community contexts. Interactions were conducted primarily in Korean and Russian, with occasional use of English depending on participants' communicative purposes and comfort levels.

Given the trilingual nature of the data, transcription and translation were recursive, interpretive processes rather than linear steps. As emphasized by Temple and Young (2004) and Santos et al. (2015), translation in cross-language qualitative research is never neutral—it shapes whose voices are heard, whose meanings are preserved, and whose identities are foregrounded. In collaboration with Olga, I adopted a layered approach to transcription and translation. Initial transcriptions were done in the source language, followed by collaborative translation sessions where we engaged in iterative discussions to ensure semantic, affective, and contextual accuracy.

In reporting the data, I prioritized maintaining the visibility of participants' multilingual repertoires rather than collapsing them into a single dominant language. Following Zhao and Carey (2023) and Schumann et al. (2025), excerpts were presented in the original language alongside English translations, enabling readers to engage with the linguistic texture of the data and interpretive decisions made during data collection and analysis. This multilingual reporting functions not only as a methodological strategy but also as a decolonial gesture that resists premature Anglicization and preserves the sociocultural conditions under which meaning was produced. Across all stages of data collection, transcription, and reporting, sustained attention to ethical transparency, reflexivity, and the politics of language remained central to the research process.

3.5. Data Analysis

To investigate the methodological challenges and power dynamics embedded in multilingual qualitative research—particularly those arising in data collection, translation, and analysis—I employed an inductive and comparative analytic approach (Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data analysis began

concurrently with data collection and continued throughout the research process, allowing iterative cycles of reflection, coding, and interpretation across Korean, Russian, and English. Following the constant comparative method, incoming data from interviews, observations, field notes, and students' writing artifacts were systematically compared with earlier data to identify emerging themes and patterns.

Transcriptions were first produced in the original languages, after which I, together with the trilingual translator Olga, engaged in recursive translation and collaborative coding to ensure semantic and cultural accuracy. Coding proceeded inductively at three levels: (a) descriptive coding to document actions and events across school, home, and community contexts; (b) interpretive coding to generate conceptual categories related to translingual writing practices, agency, and positioning; and (c) analytic memoing to trace reflexive responses, interpretive shifts, and theoretical insights over time. Together, these layers of analysis produced a nuanced account of how participants navigated multiple linguistic, relational, and institutional spaces in their meaning-making.

In addressing the first research question (RQ1) regarding methodological challenges in researching translingual writing, I constructed an individual-level logic model (Yin, 2018) to map the conditions, processes, and outcomes shaping students' engagement in translingual writing across contexts. This model illuminated how institutional language norms, school expectations, and participants' linguistic repertoires shaped their writing practices.

For the second research question (RQ2) concerning power relations and institutional language hierarchies, I conducted a cross-case analysis (Miles et al., 2020) across the three focal participants (Leo, Sandra, and Alex). This analysis enabled the identification of both shared and divergent trajectories of translingual engagement and traced how researcher-participant-translator interactions shaped the construction and representation of multilingual knowledge. Cross-case synthesis enhanced the interpretive depth and analytical transferability of the findings by contextualizing individual experiences within broader institutional and sociolinguistic conditions.

Throughout the analysis, reflexive memos and member checks functioned as key strategies for analytic rigor and credibility. Transcripts and coded excerpts were regularly revisited with participants and the translator to verify interpretations, surface alternative readings, and minimize researcher bias (Maxwell, 2013). In addition, multilingual analytic memos—written alternately in Korean, English, and occasionally Russian—supported the preservation of linguistic nuance while deepening theoretical interpretation.

Through this iterative analytic process—integrating constant comparison, logic modeling, and cross-case synthesis—the study captures both the methodological and ethical complexities of researching translingual writing among emergent multilingual children. It also foregrounds the interpretive negotiations through which multilingual voices are translated, represented, and become legitimate within qualitative inquiry.

4. Findings

The findings are organized into three themes. First, capturing students' translingual practices requires methods that go beyond gathering final products to trace multilingual meaning-making across contexts. Second, ethical and epistemological challenges in translation and analysis—particularly in cross-language

research—necessitate transparent, collaborative approaches that resist researcher dominance and honor participants' voices. Third, this study argues for an expanded notion of translingual writing as a multimodal activity shaped by affect, situated resources, and spatial practices, calling for research methods that attend to these dimensions rather than focusing solely on linguistic output. Taken together, the findings contribute a set of practical guidelines for researchers exploring emerging multilingual students' translingual writing practices by: (a) prioritizing data collection methods that capture drafting processes across multiple languages, (b) incorporating collaborative translation with transparent researcher and translator roles, and (c) adopting analytic frameworks that accommodate the full multimodal and socio-emotional scope of translingual writing.

4.1. Documenting the Translingual Writing Processes of Multilingual Children Within Institutional Language Norms

The findings address how the process–product gap complicates the documentation of emergent multilingual children's translingual writing practices. While students engaged in translingual practices fluidly in informal settings—using Russian, English, Korean, and/or semiotic resources to brainstorm, scaffold, or express meaning—their school-based written outputs largely reflected rigid monolingual norms. Although their final assignments rarely displayed multiple languages, their composing processes revealed frequent and strategic use of diverse linguistic and semiotic resources, including their heritage languages. Nevertheless, much existing translingual and multilingual research has focused primarily on multilingual traces in final products, often overlooking the dynamic, situated processes through which multilingual meaning-making unfolds. This limitation also reflects conventional data collection practices, as artifact-based analyses and one-directional classroom video recordings often fail to capture these invisible dimensions of practice. Responding to RQ1, this section demonstrates how process-oriented, multimodal methods are essential for documenting translingual writing as it unfolds across contexts.

Even when students were explicitly encouraged to compose in their preferred language(s), they consistently completed their final work in Korean and/or English, with little to no use of Russian. Even during the program, students remained reluctant to include Russian in their final drafts. Some Korean-proficient participants explicitly stated that using Russian might interfere with their Korean language development, which they perceived as critical to their academic success. This pattern aligns with prior findings showing that students are unlikely to take up one-time opportunities to use their full linguistic repertoires unless such practices are regularly integrated into the curriculum. Their resistance appears to stem, in part, from their swift socialization into monolingual norms within school environments (Choi, 2022; Edelsky, 1982).

In such contexts, students' full linguistic engagement cannot be adequately captured through writing products alone. To address this, multiple data collection methods were employed, including screen recording on laptops and mobile phones, and video recording of students as they worked on their writing. Following the observations, students participated in video-stimulated recall interviews using a set of guiding questions provided 1–2 days in advance. This multimodal design enabled closer examination of their real-time translingual writing processes.

Leo's case illustrates this dynamic clearly. Despite his proficiency in Russian, Korean, and English, Leo consistently completed academic tasks in Korean and/or English during the program. For instance, when

completing a graphic organizer after reading, his final product contained English, Korean, and other semiotic resources, but no Russian. During the composing process, however, Leo drew extensively on his full linguistic repertoire, particularly Russian. Although he was provided with English, Korean, and Russian versions of the same reading text, he selectively read the Russian version (Figure 1) and used his mobile phone to look up corresponding Korean or English expressions through dictionary and translation applications (Figure 2). This strategic but invisible multilingualism became evident only through real-time observations of his writing sessions and screen-recordings of his mobile-phone use; the final written product alone concealed it.

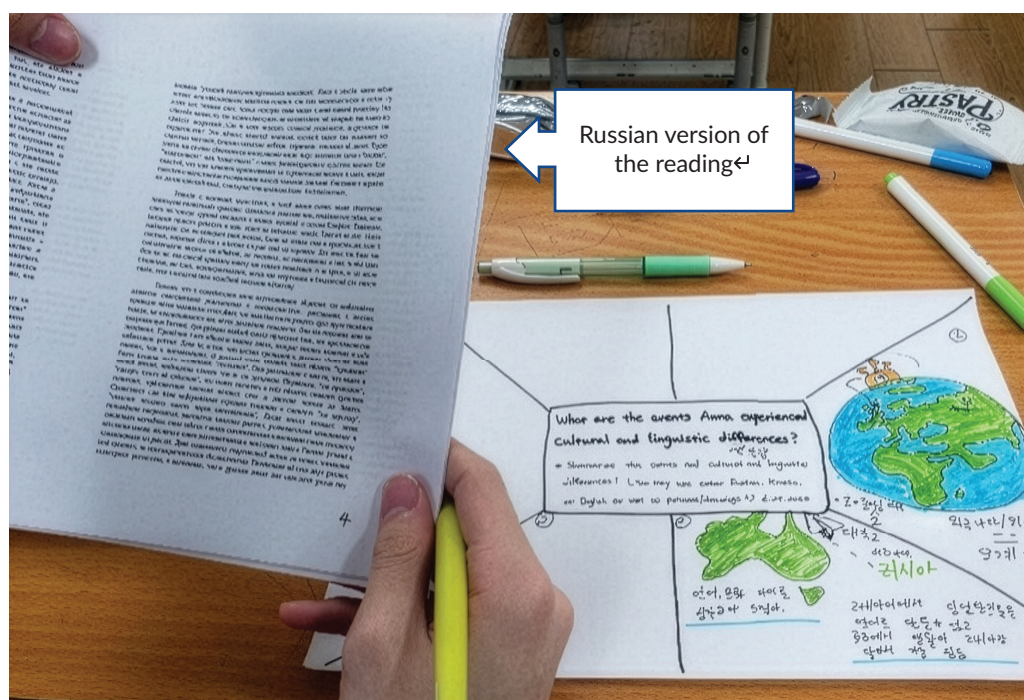


Figure 1. Leo's academic task in English, Korean, and other semiotic resources.



Figure 2. Sandra's and Leo's use of their cell phones while working on the writing task.

Similar to Leo's writing practices, Sandra also used her cell phone while working on her writing tasks after reading (see Figure 2). As she was fluent in Korean, she tended to complete her tasks in Korean until Week 5. However, in Week 6, for the first time during the program, she asked if it would be acceptable to complete her writing in Russian (see Figure 3). When submitting her work, she commented: "It has been a while since I used Russian in school" (originally in Korean).

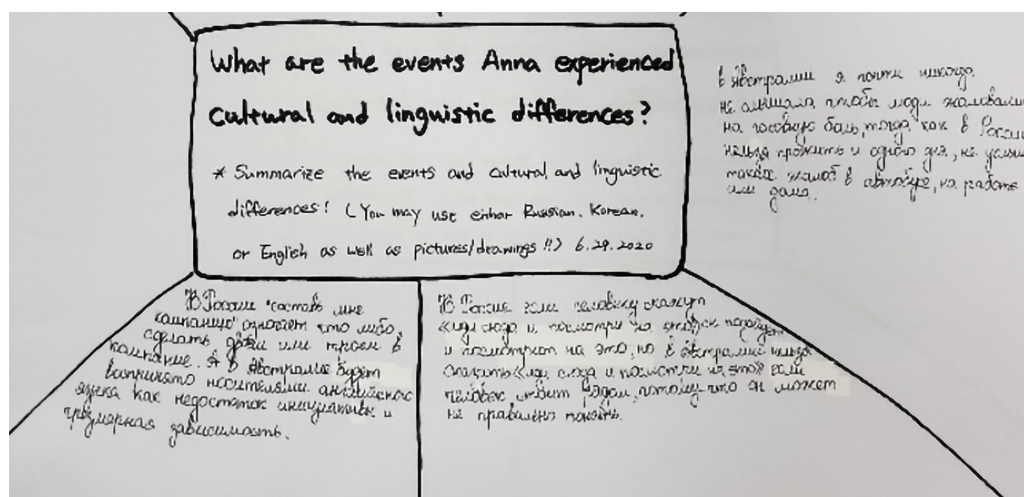


Figure 3. Sandra's writing task, written in Russian for the first time in school.

Notably, although students were repeatedly informed that they could use any languages or visual resources while developing and completing their writing tasks, they generally chose not to use—or even ask permission to use—their first, mother, or heritage languages, particularly in their written products when physically situated at school. Nevertheless, throughout the writing process, they drew on multiple, dynamic linguistic and semiotic resources.

Leo's and Sandra's cases exemplify how emergent multilingual writers "consciously tune themselves toward language dynamism" to articulate meaning (Lorimer Leonard, 2014, p. 243), when such practices remain invisible in submitted texts. Consequently, rigorous investigation of translanguaging engagement requires methods that capture the composing process itself, enabling researchers to trace students' fluid and flexible deployment of multiple semiotic resources rather than relying solely on final written artifacts.

4.2. Trilingual Collaboration: Embracing Translator Transparency and Co-Reflexivity

This section foregrounds the ethical and epistemological challenges that arise in cross-language research, particularly when translation is treated not as a neutral act but as a socially embedded and interpretive process (Temple & Young, 2004; Zhao & Carey, 2023). As the research unfolded across Korean, Russian, and English, such challenges emerged not only in the translation of participants' utterances but also in the broader politics of representation—whose meanings were preserved, whose voices were made audible, and how interpretive authority was distributed among the researcher, translator, and participants. Addressing RQ2, the finding illustrates how researcher-translator collaboration and member-checking practices mediated ethical and epistemological tensions in multilingual qualitative research.

Collaborative translation functioned as a central methodological strategy. Working closely with Olga, the study departed from a researcher-dominant model of translation and instead positioned her as a cultural and linguistic co-participant throughout data collection, transcription, and analysis. As a third-generation ethnic Korean who had migrated from Russia to South Korea, Olga brought not only linguistic fluency but also a deep understanding of the cultural and affective nuances embedded in participants' communicative practices. Through iterative translation discussions, we jointly negotiated semantic meaning, affective tone, and cultural reference, while identifying instances in which Korean or English translations risked misrepresenting participants' intentions.

The analytic value of co-reflexive translation became especially visible in one illustrative episode. During an online TWP session, I asked students to reflect on the concept of *promise* and to discuss linguistic and/or cultural differences between Korean and Russian understandings of the term. Alex responded in the Zoom chat in Russian: *обещание это когда ты даешь слово человеку. как это на русском "даю зуб"* (see Figure 4). A literal translation ("A promise is when you give your word to someone; in Russian, it is like saying 'I give you my tooth'") initially puzzled me, as I could not grasp the pragmatic force of the final expression. Through collective meaning negotiation with the students, it became clear that *даю зуб* functions as a strong idiom of assurance in Russian, comparable to an emphatic "I swear" in English. I later revisited this exchange with Olga, who further enriched the analysis by offering the culturally resonant Korean equivalent: *거짓말이면 손에 장을 지진다* ("If I am lying, I will burn the palm of my hand"). This layered interpretive process—first with student participants and then with the trilingual translator—revealed the affective and cultural density embedded in Alex's seemingly simple utterance. Without such collaborative translation, the idiom's rhetorical force and its significance for understanding students' translingual meaning-making would have remained invisible.

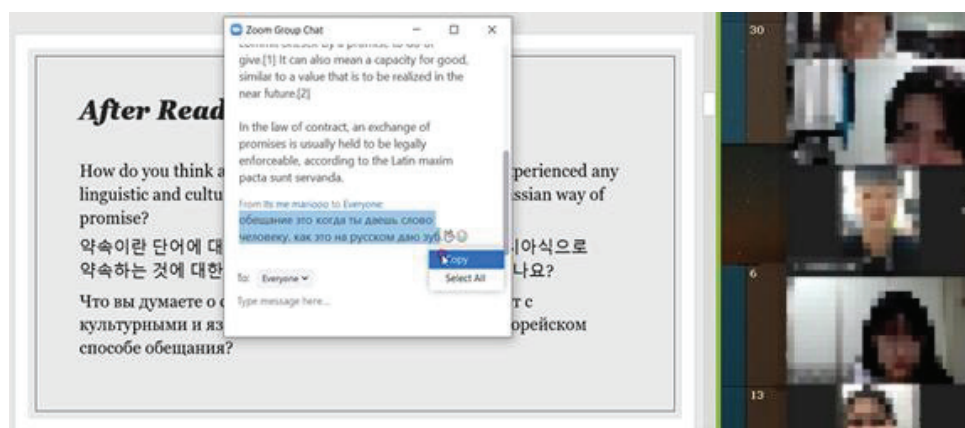


Figure 4. Alex's written response in Russian and its embedded cultural meaning.

In a follow-up interview, Alex explained that he chose to respond in Russian because all program participants understood Russian, while knowing that I, as the instructor, did not. He anticipated that I would use Google Translate and, therefore, felt comfortable expressing himself more precisely in Russian. When asked whether he would have done the same in his regular Korean classroom, he responded unequivocally that he would not, given that most classmates had no knowledge of Russian. He was initially surprised that his response could be translated literally, but agreed that a freer translation was necessary for Korean speakers to grasp the idiomatic meaning of *даю зуб* ("I give you my tooth" in English). These exchanges illustrate how institutional language hierarchies condition students' linguistic choices and shape the interpretability of their voices.

Member-checking further extended the collaborative ethos. Participants were invited to review selected excerpts from interviews and written reflections, not only to verify factual accuracy but also to express discomfort, offer reinterpretations, and propose alternate translations. This recursive process enabled students to reclaim interpretive authority and disrupt the hierarchical norms embedded in academic knowledge production. In this way, the study responded to Flores's (2024) call for translator transparency and to Zhao and Carey's (2023) critique of epistemic extraction in multilingual research.

This co-reflexive approach also functioned as a methodological response to my insider-outsider positionality. As a Korean-English bilingual with limited Russian proficiency, my reliance on Olga was not treated as a limitation to be concealed but as a site of reflexive methodological engagement. Our collaboration underscored how shared authority could enhance—not dilute—the trustworthiness and depth of qualitative interpretation. Following Schumann et al. (2025), staggered and layered translation strategies were used to maintain the visibility of participants' original language practices in both analysis and reporting, resisting the flattening effect of premature Anglicization. In presenting excerpts in their original languages alongside English translations, the study made transparent the interpretive decisions that shaped the final narratives.

Ultimately, this trilingual collaboration illustrates that ethical multilingual research requires sustained commitment to relational accountability, translator visibility, and iterative reflexivity. The findings demonstrate that embracing translator transparency is not merely a procedural concern but an epistemological stance—one that challenges the extractive tendencies of cross-language research and honors participants as co-constructors of knowledge. In so doing, the study contributes to a growing body of work advocating for decolonial and ethically responsive methodologies in research with emergent multilingual populations.

4.3. Capturing the Multimodal and Affective Dimensions of Translingual Writing

The findings demonstrate that capturing translingual writing processes requires attention not only to the strategic use of multiple named languages but also to the multimodal, embodied, and affectively charged dimensions of meaning-making. While the participants mobilized Korean, Russian, and English during writing, their meaning-making extended well beyond linguistic choices alone. Students frequently drew on gesture, bodily movement, spatial positioning, and material artifacts—such as personal notebooks, translation applications, and even family photographs—as integral components of their writing practices. These semiotic resources enabled them to access personal memories, scaffold comprehension, and express ideas that might not have surfaced through verbal language alone. Such observations underscore the importance of process-oriented, multimodal documentation for capturing students' translingual writing practices. Accordingly, this section primarily addresses RQ1 by extending the methodological discussion to the multimodal and affective dimensions of translingual writing and demonstrating how process-oriented, multimodal data collection enables a more holistic understanding of students' writing practices.

The multimodal nature of meaning-making was particularly evident when students composed texts closely tied to their lived experiences. For instance, when Sandra drafted a life narrative tracing her experiences from birth onward, she repeatedly drew on images embedded with affective memories as anchors for her written reflection (Figure 5). She used both Korean and English to describe her entrance into Korean elementary school and her graduation, incorporating a photograph of her school and her classmates' rolling paper filled with

farewell messages. This illustrates how emotional resonance, along with spatial and material contexts, shaped the flow of her composition. Her engagement exemplifies what MacLure (2013) refers to as the emergent, affect-laden quality of qualitative data—one that resists neat categorization yet reveals the relational and embodied nature of learning and expression.

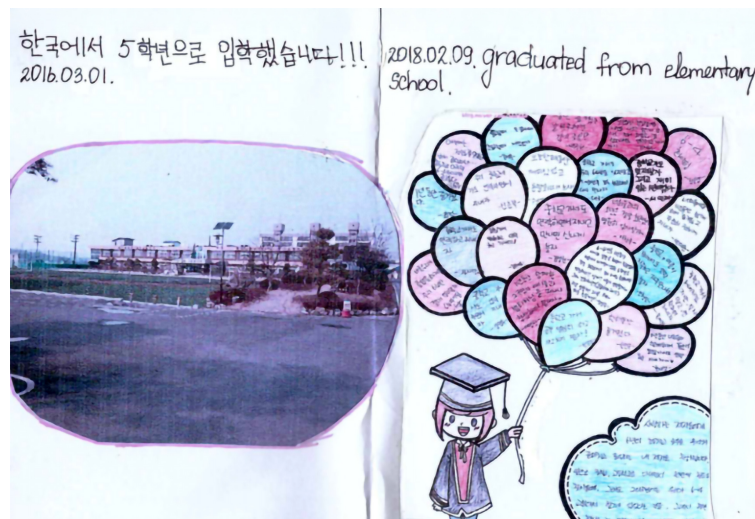


Figure 5. Sandra's integration of a school photograph and her classmates' rolling paper into her written task.

Another example underscores the importance of documenting emergent multilingual children's writing processes through multiple sources of data. As illustrated in Figure 6, Sandra used her cell phone to document and share her ongoing work during the program through an online Reel. The reel captures a pre-meeting held before the official start of the program, which she titled the meeting *Мини-конференция* ("mini conference" in English) and accompanied it with a photo and two emojis expressing her affective stance toward the meeting.



Figure 6. Sandra's use of Russian and visual symbols in an online reel during the pre-program meeting. Text in the image reads, in English: Mini conference 🤪🙋

Notably, Sandra did not use Russian, images, or emojis in her onsite activities, as far as my observations indicate, whereas her online writing practices displayed the opposite pattern. She thus operated simultaneously across two communicative channels—one onsite and the other online—demonstrating how her writing practices shifted across spaces. Without the real-time capture of the Reel, I would not have recognized that she was participating in the meeting exclusively in Korean onsite while concurrently posting in Russian online. This instance underscores the methodological value of collecting multimodal digital traces, as such real-time recordings reveal parallel dimensions of participation that conventional classroom observations alone cannot capture.

From a methodological standpoint, this example highlights the necessity of multimodal and process-based data collection strategies in multilingual qualitative research. Capturing participants' linguistic and semiotic practices across different communicative spaces enables the identification of dimensions of translingual engagement that would otherwise remain invisible in conventional classroom observations or textual analyses. Importantly, these multimodal practices were not peripheral but central to how students negotiated meaning across languages, modes, and contexts.

More broadly, recognizing and documenting these multimodal enactments expands what counts as data in multilingual qualitative inquiry. Translingual writing cannot be fully understood through text-based or language-focused analysis alone. Instead, it must be situated within the broader ecology of semiotic practices, affective orientations, and spatial arrangements that constitute students' literate lives. Accordingly, these findings call for research frameworks that move beyond linguistic code-switching to include the full spectrum of children's communicative repertoires. Such an approach affirms that multilingual children are not only language users but multimodal meaning-makers whose writing practices are deeply entangled with emotion, identity, and place. Multimodal documentation, in turn, enables researchers to access affective and spatial dimensions of literacy that are often overlooked in traditional text-based analyses.

5. Conclusions

This study contributes to ongoing methodological debates in multilingual research by demonstrating the value of process-oriented, ethically responsive, and multimodally attuned approaches to investigating translingual writing among emergent multilingual children. Drawing on an extensive, multi-source dataset—including classroom observations, screen and video recordings, writing artifacts, and participant reflections—the study foregrounds the complexity and richness of children's translingual practices as they navigate Korean-dominant school contexts while maintaining multilingual repertoires shaped by migration and community life.

Addressing RQ1, the findings show that emergent multilingual children's writing processes are deeply embodied, affective, and spatial, often extending beyond what is visible in final written products. Across online and offline contexts, Russian, Korean, and English were mobilized in context-sensitive and purpose-driven ways for comprehension, expression, and affective connection. These findings demonstrate that understanding translingual writing requires multimodal documentation that traces not only *which* languages are used, but *how* and *why* they are mobilized across contexts. The study thus proposes methodological tools—such as screen-recording, video-stimulated recall, and cross-context observation—to capture multilingual writing as a dynamic, relational process rather than a static product.

In response to RQ2, the study also reveals how power relations and institutional language hierarchies shape both participants' language use and the researcher's interpretive stance. Despite engaging fluidly with multiple languages during the writing process, the students' final texts often conformed to Korean-only norms—a reflection of institutional monolingualism and internalized linguistic hierarchies. Through sustained trilingual collaboration and member-checking, the research process itself became a site of negotiation, where meanings were co-constructed, translated, and ethically validated. This methodological stance—rooted in translator transparency and shared interpretive authority—demonstrates how multilingual qualitative inquiry can resist extractive tendencies and more equitably represent participants' voices.

The study's key contribution lies in its methodological synthesis: It shows that capturing translingual engagement demands multimodal, multilingual, and reflexive approaches that foreground process over product, collaboration over control, and representation over reduction. By attending to the interplay of language, affect, materiality, and institutional power, this research advances methodological frameworks for multilingual qualitative studies that aspire to both analytic rigor and ethical integrity.

However, this study is not without limitations. First, it focused on a small group of participants in a specific institutional and cultural context—a Korean middle school and its surrounding community—during a fixed time period, which limits broader generalizability. Second, while the collaboration with a trilingual translator substantially strengthened the analysis, the researcher's limited proficiency in Russian may still have constrained certain layers of cultural interpretation. Third, although writing was the primary analytic focus, other forms of meaning-making (e.g., oral storytelling, artistic expression) emerged but were not examined in depth.

These limitations open up valuable directions for future research. Longitudinal studies could trace how students' translingual practices evolve across grade levels, institutions, and national contexts. Comparative studies across schools with differing language ideologies could further illuminate how institutional support or constraint shapes multilingual meaning-making. Future research might also move beyond writing to explore translingual practices in multimodal domains such as art, digital media, and performance. In addition, involving youth as co-researchers in the design and interpretation of studies may further democratize knowledge production and challenge hierarchies of voice and authority in research with multilingual populations.

Ultimately, this study affirms that translingual writing among emergent multilingual children is not merely linguistic but relational, spatial, and political in nature. To fully recognize and support such practices, researchers and educators must adopt methods that are not only inclusive in scope but ethically and reflexively attuned to the complexities of students' lived experiences.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article; further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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Translanguaging Towards Equitable Participation: Doing Research Multilingually With People With a Migration Background

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Abstract

Doing research with multilingual people belonging to marginalized groups involves reconsidering our methods of inquiry. Language differences between researchers and participants can render the lived experiences, multilingual subjectivities, and knowledge of the participants unrecognized and undervalued. This is amplified in educational settings, where a monolingual norm can be pervasive, delegitimizing other languages that are important for sharing values and knowledge. Based on a codesign study with multilingual caregivers with a migration background, the present article aims to reflect on how translanguaging can be employed as a methodological approach in research processes. Translanguaging is defined here as promoting the use of a person’s entire linguistic repertoire to make meaning and (more equitably) participate in research. We draw on three codesign rounds conducted in the Netherlands involving ten multilingual caregivers. In a reflection based on fieldnotes, artefacts, and pictures collected during participant observation in 22 codesign meetings, we formulate seven heuristics that could be helpful to other researchers or practitioners employing translanguaging in research processes. These are: (a) encouraging and modeling the use of multiple languages; (b) using multilingual resources; (c) using translation apps; (d) using an interpreter; (e) encouraging brokering; (f) encouraging same-language group pairings; and (g) building in the time necessary to legitimize translanguaging strategies. By sharing our reflections and heuristics, we hope to foster equitable participation of marginalized groups in research, with a specific reference to participants with a migration background.

Keywords

multilingual caregivers; participatory research; researching multilingually; translanguaging

1. Introduction

Doing research with multilingual people belonging to marginalized groups can be challenging, particularly when there is a language difference between researchers and participants (Warriner & Bigelow, 2019b). Because linguistic asymmetries between researchers and participants can leave the voices, experiences, and knowledge of marginalized groups underrepresented, we need to rethink our methods of inquiry and the role of language therein (Warriner & Bigelow, 2019b). Some solutions point towards participatory methods (Ross, 2017) and doing research multilingually (Costley & Reilly, 2021; Holmes et al., 2013) by adopting translanguaging as a methodological approach (e.g., Goodman & Seilstad, 2025; Seilstad, 2025). Translanguaging refers here to both researchers and participants drawing on their entire linguistic repertoire to make meaning and (more equitably) participate in research.

The aim of this article is to reflect on the implementation of translanguaging as a methodological approach to allow for meaningful participation of multilingual participants in research. Based on this reflection, we formulate seven heuristics, pieces of advice grounded in practice, that can be useful for researchers engaging with similar groups. Relevant observations come from a larger research project in which the first author codesigned mathematics activities with multilingual caregivers, to be done with their children in whichever language they were comfortable in. The rationale behind the project was that these caregivers bring with them valuable funds of knowledge that can help support their children's mathematical learning (Moll et al., 1992). Over the course of three codesign rounds, the first author and three groups of caregivers developed, tested, adjusted, and re-tested these activities in an iterative codesign process. We realized quickly that many of the caregivers were not comfortable sharing in Dutch or English, the languages spoken by the first author. Thus, we implemented various translanguaging strategies to enrich the research process by broadening the scope of participants engaged in our research: being able to represent more voices and, therefore, more experiences. The enactment of translanguaging strategies ensured that caregivers and the researcher could share and participate from more equitable positions. The larger study provided us with an opportunity to learn and reflect on the translanguaging approach adopted in this codesign study.

1.1. Linguistic Asymmetries and More Equitable Approaches in Research

Linguistic differences between researchers and (potential) research participants belonging to marginalized groups do not represent mere logistical challenges to be overcome by researchers (Gordon, 2022). Rather, language choices “may shape, challenge, disrupt, subvert or reinforce power structures and social inequalities in interpersonal relations between researchers and researched” (Meyer Pitton & Semiramis Schedel, 2022, p. 310). Language choices in research are thus linked to *who* gets to participate in research processes and to the (a)symmetric distribution of power among the different agents, which, in turn, determines *how* they participate in such processes (Havlin, 2022; Meyer Pitton & Semiramis Schedel, 2022). These aspects are influenced by prevalent language hierarchies, such as the asymmetry between the highly valued official societal language and regional or migrant languages, which are less valued, or between a standard language (highly valued) and non-standard varieties (less valued; see Havlin, 2022). Therefore, lack of careful reflection on language choices when doing research with multilingual minoritized groups “runs the danger of reproducing the systems of domination which languages carry with them” (Havlin, 2022). Thus, it is becoming increasingly important to reconsider our methods of inquiry and find alternative approaches that foster more equitable participation in research (Phipps, 2022; Warriner & Bigelow, 2019b). We understand equitable participation as encompassing

people having “opportunities for self-expression and for flexibility in constructing their responses” while being shown “respect for their identities [and being positioned] in ways that can help to offset the power imbalance that exists between the researcher and the researched” (Liddicoat & Derivry-Plard, 2025, p. 17).

An alternative approach towards shifting traditional researcher-participant power hierarchies has been implementing specific methodological choices with the potential to empower research participants (Ross, 2017), such as participatory action research (Cornish et al., 2023) or design based (implementation) research (Bakker, 2018) carried out through research-practice partnerships or joint inquiry (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Manz et al., 2022). Such approaches move away from a positioning of the researcher as the expert who produces knowledge about the participants; instead, they provide opportunities for participants to engage in both knowledge production and value creation processes that enable dialogues around the things people care about to make a difference (Ross, 2017; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020). This also entails questioning traditional hierarchies regarding who is seen as an expert and whose experiences, values, goals, contributions, and knowledge are considered valuable.

Other alternatives for reconsidering methods of inquiry are directly linked to language and have been explored in the field of “researching multilingually” (Costley & Reilly, 2021; e.g., Goodman & Seilstad, 2025; Holmes et al., 2022; Warriner & Bigelow, 2019a). Such alternatives encompass reflecting on the positionality of the researcher in relation to the participants (Havlin, 2022; Warriner & Bigelow, 2019b) and the language choices that are needed to dismantle prevalent language hierarchies.

Research shows that such dismantlement can be achieved in different ways. Some options are researchers either working with professional interpreters or learning the language(s) used by certain communities, rather than expecting participants to communicate in the dominant language of the researcher (Egilsson et al., 2022; Gibb et al., 2019). This has been shown to produce shifts in the power dynamics between researchers and the participants, empowering marginalized participants by positioning them as experts while researchers reveal their linguistic vulnerability (Muller & Gubrium, 2016; Young Knowles, 2019). Another way of dismantling prevalent language hierarchies in research can refer to attempts to mitigate the value of the dominant forms of expression in society, while making room for other linguistic practices, commonly seen as less valuable. This can be done by actively adopting a translanguaging approach, where both researchers and participants draw on their entire linguistic repertoire to make meaning and more equitably participate in research. While adopting a translanguaging approach in research represents a recent direction, there are indications of its promising nature (Gordon, 2022; Havlin, 2022; Lee, 2022; Li, 2022; Polo-Pérez & Holmes, 2023; Seilstad, 2025). In this article, we focus on translanguaging as an approach to foster equitable participation in research.

1.2. Translanguaging and Its Potential to Foster More Equitable Participation in Research

Translanguaging emerged as a pedagogical strategy in the context of 1980s Welsh bilingual education, where it referred to the use of two languages for input and output (Baker, 2011; Lewis et al., 2012a, 2012b; Williams, 1994). The notion of translanguaging was further expanded starting from the 2010s, leading to its understanding as a linguistic practice, a pedagogical approach, and a theoretical construct (e.g., Creese & Blackledge, 2015; García, 2009). As a linguistic practice, we understand translanguaging as involving speakers employing their full linguistic repertoire in diverse ways that may diverge from linguistic expression attributed solely to named languages. As a pedagogical approach, translanguaging highlights the idea that all

students' language competences should be valorized as resources for learning. Such linguistic and pedagogical practices involve combining linguistic features attributed to different named languages, which could be done by employing semiotic features multimodally, translating, comparing, collaborating, brokering, and/or designing a multilingual landscape (Moraru et al., 2025). In education, translanguaging often entails a critical perspective, questioning and attempting to transform the educational inequity experienced by linguistically minoritized students (e.g., García, 2009).

While the notion of translanguaging has developed mostly in formal education, there is an increasing attention to its potential in other contexts, including out-of-school learning settings, such as museums, homes, or libraries (e.g., Kwon, 2022; Ryu, 2019). Other studies left the education arena and focused instead on translanguaging practices in the workplace, at the market, or in healthcare (e.g., Blackledge & Creese, 2017; Du & Zhou, 2022; Prada & Woodward-Kron, 2024). Some scholars have also recently started considering the potential of translanguaging for methodological decisions and processes. The present study aims to contribute to the expansion of this new direction, which we discuss in more detail below.

Lee (2022) and Li (2022) call for research on the phenomenon of translanguaging to be carried out by “translanguaging research methodologies.” Such a perspective could influence the formulation of research questions, the type of evidence that is needed, the data collection methods, and the analysis process. Translanguaging research methodologies may open up the space to think about how research (in applied linguistics) is carried out, reject abyssal thinking, and decolonize methodology. Currently, there is a very limited number of empirical studies and reflexive accounts that delve into the adoption of translanguaging as an approach in research methodologies. The reviewed research highlights that why and how translanguaging is employed varies according to the degree to which the researcher and participants share their linguistic repertoires, ranging from very limited overlap to almost full overlap. Reflecting on ethnographic work with adolescent newcomers in Ohio, Seilstad (2025) highlights how the researcher and one focal participant engage in translanguaging when they do not share their linguistic repertoire; the author highlights the critical relevance of multimodal tools (e.g., Google Translate, Facebook, Wattpad) in enabling and enriching the interactions. Conducting research with transnational Chinese teachers with whom she partially shares the linguistic repertoire, Gordon (2022) highlights the importance of planning ways to create opportunities for translanguaging, such as showing the interview guide to the participants in advance. Additionally, the author shows how engaging in translanguaging practices may not lead to participants feeling comfortable as soon as that becomes an option—rather, this may entail a process that requires time. In contrast, Havlin (2022) focuses on conducting research with participants with whom she shares her linguistic repertoire. The author underscores the limitations of labelling participants with a Russian migration background in Germany as (only) Russian speakers and the prompt need to engage in translanguaging practices with Russian, German, Ukrainian, and/or English in interviews that were initially planned to take place only in Russian. In a similar vein, discussing the use of translanguaging as a methodology to study language cafes, Polo-Pérez and Holmes (2023) showcase that researchers need to be aware of the translanguaging dynamics already occurring in the field and to intentionally draw on similar linguistic practices to co-construct meaning about content together with the participants.

These studies show that translanguaging holds ample potential when employed as an approach in research. Polo-Pérez and Holmes (2023) contend that adopting translanguaging as a methodology challenges the monolingual ideologies prevalent in research. It does so mainly by providing opportunities for researchers

and participants to engage in the research process through the multiplicity of their linguistic repertoires and experiences (Gordon, 2022; Havlin, 2022). This may allow positioning shifts that lead to changing the power asymmetries between the researcher and participants and a positioning of the participants as collaborators whose knowledge, lived experiences, and multilingual subjectivities are recognized as valuable (Gordon, 2022; Polo-Pérez & Holmes, 2023; Seilstad, 2025). In sum, by intentionally drawing on translanguaging, researchers have both the opportunity and responsibility of creating more equitable conditions for the participation of all people in research (Seilstad, 2025).

1.3. Research Needs and the Present Study

Methodological reflections on the equitable participation of marginalized groups in research are not new. There is a significant body of literature that highlights the need for researchers to adopt a reflexive stance on their positionality, the emerging power relations in the field, and the influence of these aspects on research processes (Meyer Pitton & Semiramis Schedel, 2022). However, the issue of how language choice influences research, and participatory research in particular, has been much less frequently addressed (Gibb et al., 2019; Meyer Pitton & Semiramis Schedel, 2022), and there is still a paucity of methodological guidance for researchers attempting to engage linguistically diverse communities that have been historically underrepresented in research (Gordon, 2022; Holmes et al., 2013; Warriner & Bigelow, 2019b). Additionally, despite calls for and advances towards the implementation of translanguaging as a methodology (Lee, 2022; Li, 2022), this field remains underdeveloped (for exceptions see Gordon, 2022; Havlin, 2022; Polo-Pérez & Holmes, 2023; Seilstad, 2025). This means that the research methods, i.e., the actual strategies, tools, and techniques involved in data collection and processing (Li, 2022, p. 1), as well as the implications and limitations of employing translanguaging as a methodological approach, still need to be better mapped out. This is particularly the case for research processes involving little overlap between the linguistic repertoires of the researcher and the participants, as well as work with linguistically heterogeneous groups, where there is little overlap between the linguistic repertoires of the participants.

The present study contributes to the emergent literature on using translanguaging when doing research multilingually, by explaining the specific strategies that were proposed in each codesign round as well as reflecting on potential and challenges. An important contribution represents the seven heuristics drawn from across three rounds characterized by highly different linguistic dynamics both among the researchers and the participants, as well as among the participants themselves. By sharing these heuristics, which can be adjusted and implemented in other settings, we seek to encourage other researchers to work towards an increasingly equitable participation of linguistically marginalized groups in research.

In the following sections, we introduce the research context (Section 2), reflect on translanguaging as a methodological approach in each codesign round (Section 3), present heuristics (Section 4), and discuss potential and challenges of implementing translanguaging within participatory research as well as limitations and future directions (Section 5).

2. Research Context

2.1. National Context, Language Policy in Dutch Schools, and Study Participants

The Netherlands can be characterized as having a strong monolingual norm in education (Kuiken & van der Linden, 2013), in which the Dutch language is used for learning in primary schools (excluding the province of Friesland, where Frisian and Dutch are used for schooling). Currently, 28% of people in the Netherlands have a migration background, speaking sometimes or always a language other than Dutch at home (CBS, 2024). However, the learning or use of home languages is typically not supported in Dutch primary schools.

Caregiver participation in children's education can look different depending on the school and caregivers. Caregivers are expected to attend a start-of-year conversation and an end-of-year conversation with their child's teacher. Caregivers are often given participation tasks, such as preparing food for school celebrations, checking for lice, and decorating the school hallways for holidays. However, engagement in more academic-related tasks may differ for caregivers who speak a language other than Dutch.

Ten caregivers participated in this study (see Table 1), which took place between September 2022 and December 2023. It is a part of a larger project (www.multistem.net) funded by the Dutch Research Council. The participants were recruited from three urban primary schools. The director of each of the three schools reported between 90–100% of students being multilingual. Each of the three schools reported having an active caregiver participation program. The programs were social in nature, encouraging caregivers to

Table 1. Overview of participating caregivers.

No.	Pseudonym	Country (original)	Language(s) spoken	Length of time in NL (years)	Completed education	Design round
1	Alma	Sweden	Swedish, English, Spanish, little Dutch	3	High school	1
2	Kiana	Dominican Republic	Spanish	Unknown	Unknown	2
3	Maria	Ecuador	Spanish, Italian, little Dutch	5	University	2
4	Zaid	Yemen	Arabic	>2	Unknown	3
5	Fatima	Yemen	Arabic	Unknown	Unknown	3
6	Layla	Syria	Arabic, English, little Dutch	>2	University	3
7	Amina	Syria	Kurdish, Arabic, some Dutch	Unknown	Unknown	3
8	Zeynap	Turkey	Dutch, Turkish	<30	Training after HS	3
9	Elif	Turkey	Turkish, little Dutch	>1	University	3
10	Mehmet	Turkey	Turkish, some Dutch	Unknown	University	3

socialize. However, the schools also organized more specific workshops based on caregiver interest. While participants were recruited via caregiver participation programs and codesign sessions occurred at school, codesign was otherwise independent from school. All multilingual caregivers with at least one child in primary school were eligible to participate.

2.2. Codesign Rounds

This study follows three codesign rounds with multilingual caregivers with a migration background. During each codesign round, caregivers and the researcher engaged in joint inquiry. While there are various forms of participatory research, joint inquiry emphasizes the participant as an “inquirer and knower” and the importance of altering roles within research practice (Manz et al., 2022, p. 455). In the first round, more emphasis was placed on developing activities with the caregiver, who tested various ideas with her child. The two subsequent rounds focused on testing, adjusting, and re-adjusting the mathematics activities with caregivers, who also tested activities at home with their children. We considered that translanguaging strategies may enable more equitable participation of the caregivers in the process of codesign. Over the course of three rounds, we enacted the strategies with caregivers, sometimes re-adjusting and re-enacting the strategies depending on the specific round. For example, we presented caregivers with a PowerPoint in multiple languages, observed how they interacted during the meeting using the PowerPoint, and adjusted it accordingly. Our cyclic approach allowed us to gain insight into how caregivers interacted with certain translanguaging strategies in a participatory research round.

2.3. Critical Moments and Reflection

Kali (2016) highlights that while design research often focuses on outcomes, less attention is given to the critical moments that define the learning process of the researcher. Critical moments are defined here as observed instances in which a participant’s action or insight catalyzed transformative learning for the researcher. Drawing on field notes, artefacts, and pictures, we identified critical moments in which the researcher gained insight into how translanguaging could enable and enrich the process of codesign across the three rounds of codesign. In this article, we bring forth relevant examples of such critical moments from fieldwork, focusing on the potential of translanguaging to promote meaningful participation for multilingual caregivers with a migration background and the challenges encountered when adopting this approach. The heuristics we formulate are based on the critical moments that characterize the learning process of the first author (Kali, 2016).

This reflection draws on 22 meetings over the course of three design rounds. The first author made field notes during each meeting and reflected after each meeting. Seventeen meetings were recorded. Five meetings were not recorded as one or more caregivers did not give consent. Each meeting took place at a school for the convenience of the participants involved. Each codesign round began with the first author giving a short presentation for interested caregivers to introduce the research and to shed light on common assumptions surrounding multilingualism. The researcher presented multilingualism with an asset-based lens. The presentation was given orally in Dutch, and written information about the project was provided in Arabic, English, Spanish, and Turkish. At the end of the presentation, caregivers were invited to participate in the codesign of multilingual mathematics activities, which would begin in the week following the initial presentation.

The first author used a semi-structured conversation guide to promote discussion. However, as meetings progressed, participants often came with input or questions that directed the meetings. Some participants were eager to tell about interactions with their child(ren) and how they had approached the activity. During the meetings, they did mathematics activities, evaluated and discussed activities, and brainstormed new ideas for activities with the first author. In many cases, participants tried out activities at home with their child(ren) and reported on their experiences during the meetings. They often discussed dilemmas or questions related to the activities during the meetings. In addition, participants often spoke more broadly about their experiences, thoughts, questions, and challenges related to child-rearing.

2.4. Positionality Statement

The first author is a white young woman who moved from the USA to the Netherlands seven years before the study took place. Her background is in Sociology and teaching primary school Mathematics. Her position as a PhD candidate, ethnicity, and bilingualism in English and Dutch may have played a role in the creation of a certain asymmetry between her and the participants. However, her migration background and position as an (albeit advanced) learner of Dutch may have offset to a certain degree that asymmetry. The second author is a multilingual sociolinguist with an Eastern European migration background. All four authors are scholars whose work focuses on linguistic diversity and inclusion in education. Our vision of social and linguistic justice in education has influenced the way we carry out and report research. In this case, it meant considering the representation of multilingual people's voices in research, starting from exploring and designing more inclusive data collection methods to reflecting on the challenges and opportunities they led to.

3. Reflections

This reflection, organized by codesign round, outlines examples of how translanguaging strategies were employed during codesign with caregivers of multilingual children. Each section provides a different view of the implementation of translanguaging strategies, as the composition of languages and caregivers in the three codesign rounds varied. In each of the three sections, a description of the round is given, including the number of caregivers, which languages were used, and which translanguaging strategies were used. In each section, critical learnings of the researcher connected to the use of translanguaging are described.

The process of encouraging translanguaging strategies and re-adjusting strategies was iterative. Learnings from the first and second rounds were used to enrich translanguaging strategies within the third codesign round, likely contributing to the richness within the third round.

3.1. Translanguaging When Participant and Researcher Share a Language (Codesign Round 1)

In the first codesign round, the researcher collaborated with one caregiver (Alma) whose first language was Swedish. The primary language used was English, as both the researcher and Alma were proficient in English. The researcher encouraged the use of multiple languages, offered multilingual resources (in English and in Dutch), and encouraged the use of a translation app.

The researcher began each meeting by giving verbal and written affirmation in multiple languages that all languages were both welcome and valuable. While Alma did not seem to object that Swedish and English were

valuable, there was a tension with Dutch. Despite the high status of English as a lingua franca and the relatively high status of Swedish in Europe, the competing status of Dutch as the dominant language and legitimate language for learning in Dutch educational settings represented a challenge in implementing translanguaging in codesign. Alma tried to use Dutch in initial meetings, despite stating that she could articulate her thoughts and ideas much more clearly in Swedish or English. It was not until the researcher repeatedly asked during codesign meetings “how would you say that in Swedish?” that Alma started to use Swedish. The researcher also tried to learn certain Swedish words, often asking the participant to repeat certain words and attempting to reproduce them. This is a form of linguistic vulnerability in which the researcher attempted to shift the position of “knower” to the participant. Later, Alma mentioned how comforting it was to be able to use Swedish and English during the meetings. She noted this in contrast with the pressure she felt from school employees to speak Dutch, and also the pressure she put on herself to speak better Dutch.

As the first author and Alma were proficient in English, ideas and experiences were shared with relative ease. However, at times, neither Alma nor the researcher were able to produce subject-specific words in English. In other moments, Alma wanted to know a word in Dutch. In these instances, the researcher suggested a translation app. Initially, Alma hardly used the translation app and tried to use other words in English. The researcher chose to make a conscious shift, using the translation app herself at times, either to translate a word or to look up a Swedish translation. Initially, it was a way of showing interest in the participant’s language. In later meetings, the researcher noticed Alma using the translation apps more frequently without prompting.

The researcher ensured that all activity instructions for caregiver-child activities were provided in both English and Dutch. Alma found it important to try to understand the Dutch version, like she did when trying to help her children with homework. However, Alma also noted times when understanding the goal of the homework was challenging, as it was in Dutch. In contrast, she noted how accessible the material during codesign was to her, as instructions were in multiple languages. Alma remarked that this could also be very helpful for other caregivers. She noted:

I think a lot of people that I’m with the Dutch lesson, not everyone would understand everything in Dutch. They would have to have it in Arabic or their own language as well...it would be good for them to have it in both languages...then it’s easy for them.

In these moments, Alma was positioned as the knower regarding what would help her and other multilingual caregivers.

3.2. Translanguaging When Two Caregivers Share a Language With Each Other (Codesign Round 2)

In the second codesign round, the researcher collaborated with two caregivers (Kiana and Maria). The primary language used by the two participants was Spanish. They shared a language with one another, but not with the researcher. Kiana and Maria indicated that they wanted to learn Dutch and could understand some things, but that they were not able to have a conversation in Dutch. Consequently, much of the codesign work included a non-professional interpreter. Using an interpreter was a recommendation of the teacher at the school, who noted that Spanish-speaking caregivers seemed to feel much more comfortable using Spanish. Interpreting was done by the second author or by a Spanish-speaking teacher at the school. They were chosen due to

their advanced skills in Spanish and English, background in translation studies (author 2), familiarity with the project (author 2), and the participants (teacher). The team aimed for an informal consecutive interpreting mode. Similar to language and cultural brokering, this mode allowed a focus on the interpreter building rapport with the participants, making them feel comfortable, and explaining the instructions in detail. This also meant that the interpreter shared at times the role of a meeting facilitator with the researcher.

The researcher encouraged the use of multiple languages in written form and through the interpreter, and offered multilingual resources in Spanish and Dutch. While Kiana and Maria indicated that they wanted to learn Dutch, they chose to speak Spanish during codesign. When the researcher expressed value for all languages in codesign, Kiana and Maria reacted in a (seemingly) relieved way and indicated that they appreciated the chance to participate in Spanish. While the Spanish language does not traditionally hold equal status to Dutch in educational settings, it became the main legitimate language in the codesign meetings, being temporarily shifted in the position often occupied by the dominant language in society.

All activities during codesign meetings and for caregivers and children included multilingual instructions, which were translated by a colleague or using an online translation service. In addition, the researcher provided Spanish-Dutch vocabulary worksheets for caregivers during codesign, as caregivers indicated that they wanted to support their children by learning more “school-related” Dutch terms. Maria reflected on doing the math activities with multilingual instructions (see Figure 1) with her children. Assignments from school were at times frustrating for both her and her children, as she wanted to help them but felt unable to do so because of her level of Dutch. In contrast, she reported the freedom that she felt to mix languages during codesign, often using Dutch names for shapes but speaking in Spanish. Multilingual instructions and vocabulary worksheets seemed to shift linguistic hierarchies, modifying the linguistic policy to include Spanish as a valued language for communication and learning in codesign.

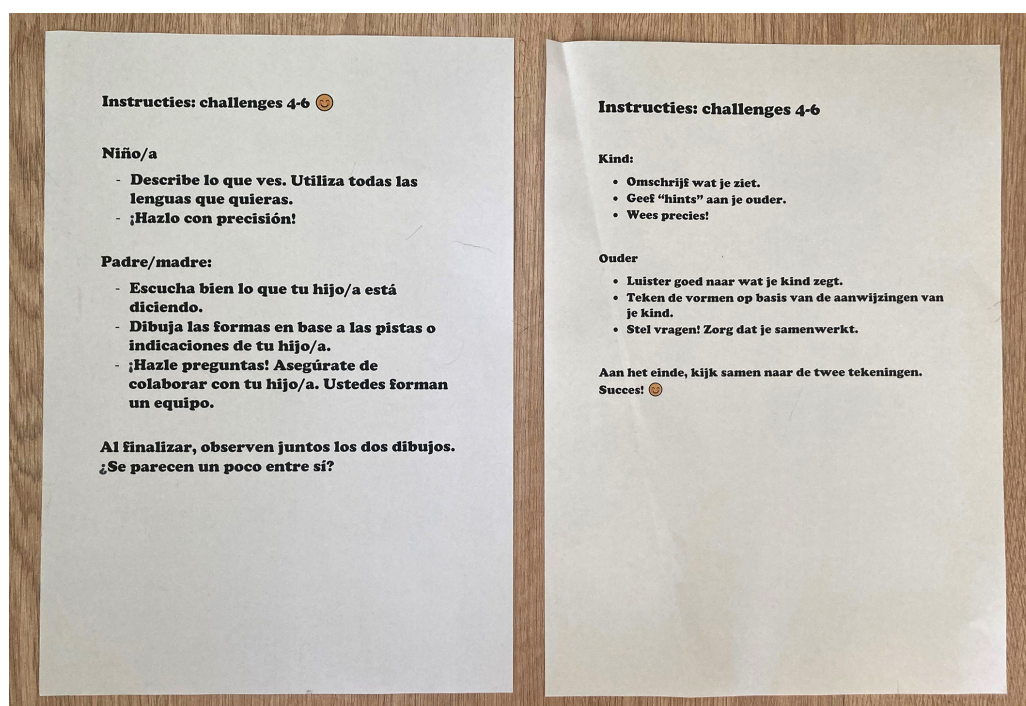


Figure 1. Multilingual activity instructions.

While Kiana and Maria occasionally used some Dutch words, communication with the interpreter was in Spanish. This allowed the participants to share ideas, speaking quickly and enthusiastically. They seemed to be engaged and interested in contributing during codesign. The first author reflected in fieldnotes:

I notice [that when I communicate with the mothers with the help of the interpreter], they are able to say a lot, they are very expressive. When we try to speak in Dutch together, they seem timid and insecure, it doesn't go smoothly. Both parties try (I try to use relatively simple language and go slow, remembering how it was for me when learning Dutch—I also try to enunciate, using my mouth to really make the words) but it is challenging. With [the interpreter], they are expressive, especially Maria seems confident.

The first author later also reflected:

When debriefing at the end, Kiana seemed very engaged, had a lot to say. Speaks assertively in Spanish, which is interesting. When I was introduced to her in the beginning she seemed so timid. [The] interpreter seems to give them more of an ability to communicate strongly, as if they are participating from strength or in the best way they can.

The first author continued the reflection, writing: “The caregivers say a lot with [the interpreter]. With me, few words [are directly] exchanged [in Dutch].” The first author noted many times in her notes how the interpreter enabled participants to participate extensively and fluidly. It was clear that the participants were able to share ideas, knowledge, and experiences relevant to the design of the activity. The interpreter helped to shift the position of the participants to the position of the “knower.” In addition, Spanish gained status as the language for sharing knowledge in codesign, a position traditionally occupied by Dutch.

Using an interpreter presented some challenges as well. Facilitating the discussion became more difficult, as the first author could not react immediately to participant remarks and ideas. She reflected:

The feedback I give in these moments is minimal. Normally, I want to be able to compliment a participant immediately for their ideas, here that is more challenging because I am getting the information with a delay.

The first author also noticed distance when using the interpreter—both with participants and with the information. To allow more time for the interpreter, the process took considerably longer. The first author also felt at times that she was missing the richness of the information being shared. She reflected:

I definitely miss a lot of the details in the translation, seems like I am getting the larger picture but miss smaller details. This happens because the participant has a lot to say, and I don't want the interpreter to have to go line by line, but it means the interpreter can't translate everything back to me.

These two challenges can be linked, at least to some extent, to the non-professional status of the interpreters and to the chosen interpreting mode, which was more similar to language and cultural brokering than to professional interpreting. At the same time, we note that the enrichment that drawing on interpreting in this manner brought to the research process surpassed by far the challenges that emerged. Interpreting during

codesign went beyond translation and communication: It enabled the caregivers to participate from a position of strength as knowledge holders.

3.3. Translanguaging With Caregivers in Arabic, Turkish, Dutch, and English (Codesign Round 3)

In the third round, the researcher collaborated with seven caregivers (Zaid, Fatima, Layla, Amina, Zeynap, Elif, and Mehmet). Six of the seven participants in this codesign round were newcomers, understood here as caregivers who had resided in the Netherlands for two years or less, regardless of their legal migration status. Arabic, Turkish, English, and Dutch were used during meetings. Some participants shared a language amongst each other, and some participants shared a language with the researcher. Of the caregivers who signed up to participate, three were proficient and comfortable in Turkish, and four participants were proficient and comfortable in Arabic. In most Dutch mainstream educational settings, Arabic and Turkish do not hold status as legitimate languages for learning. The researcher encouraged the use of all languages, multilingual resources, a translation app, brokering, and language-specific pairings for brainstorming. All activity materials and instructions were prepared in Arabic, Turkish, and Dutch. In addition, the researcher provided the following: an NL-EN-home language organizer (see Figure 2) where participants could fill in corresponding terms in their home language; NL-AR and NL-TUR mathematical reference sheets; multilingual PowerPoints containing discussion questions in Arabic, Turkish, and Dutch; and brainstorm worksheets in Arabic, Turkish, and Dutch.

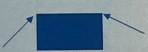
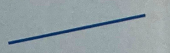
Nederlands	Engels	Eigen taal
Cirkel	Circle	
Driehoek	Triangle	
Hoek	Corner	
Kant/zijde	Side	
Lijn	Line	
Ovaal	Oval	
Pijl	Arrow	

Figure 2. Dutch-English-home language organizer.

Initially, we were interested in how same-language pairings or groups could support participants to translanguage. However, in the first meeting, Dutch was used almost exclusively, acknowledging the participants' preference that using Dutch could help their Dutch, and would also allow everyone to participate in discussions. The first author reflected:

We were able to do an activity together, but it was tiresome. The group seemed to find it a bit boring. The discussion didn't really take off—not because there wasn't interest, but because it was not possible to say much.

Similar to codesign round one, initially, Dutch held a high status in codesign as the language for learning. Zeynap entered the second part of the meeting with the idea to first meet in smaller same-language groups. Fatima joked that she was much smarter in Arabic. Layla said that she knew many more words in Arabic, especially more formal, mathematical words. Mehmet mentioned that he could participate much better in activities using Turkish—that it would be easier for him to express his ideas. After splitting into two groups, one group used mostly Turkish and some Dutch, the other group used mostly Arabic and some English. There seemed to be an immediate difference in the room. Caregivers were sitting up straight and seemed to be more involved. The first author reflected: “It seemed to go smoothly, they were talking a lot. It also took much less time.” Amina later stated that she knew what she wanted to say immediately. Layla reflected that she could understand others much better in Arabic. The first author noted that Elif was initially timid and silent, but seemed to be smiling more during the second half of the meeting. When reflecting on the use of multiple languages during codesign and how this was encouraged, Zeynap commented that she noticed that when people can use their home language, they say more. She mentioned feeling frustrated seeing so many caregivers sit silently during meetings at school because they could not speak enough Dutch to participate. However, she noticed a stark difference in codesign, where others could participate using their home languages. “That should be the point,” she claimed. She noted that this was not only better for them, but also for her, because she learned from their ideas when multiple languages were encouraged.

Initially, participants were hesitant to use multilingual resources in the codesign meetings. However, this subsided over time. As participants tried using different resources, they became more enthusiastic. The first author noted their enthusiasm, especially when given the NL-EN-home language fill-in worksheet, where they could fill in their home language corresponding to the Dutch mathematical terms. Participants also reacted positively to the mathematical dictionaries, which enabled them to learn new Dutch words. They indicated that more materials, such as the dictionary and fill-in worksheet, would be helpful for them.

The heterogeneity of languages brought about challenges with whole-group discussion. After noticing the different languages and language levels, the first author chose to create multilingual PowerPoints with discussion prompts. The first author noted that participants were very focused in the first meeting, in which a multilingual PowerPoint was used, starting to brainstorm and write their thoughts immediately upon seeing the discussion questions. The first author reflected on this, writing:

Because the PowerPoint was in their own language, they could begin with writing down their thoughts without help. I also think that the discussion went more easily, because they had already written down their own thoughts. They were brainstorming in their home languages, and then the discussion went from there.

Layla reflected positively on the multilingual PowerPoint (see Figure 3) and associated handouts, claiming that her experience with these resources during codesign helped her to take time to process her thoughts. She indicated that this was different than during normal meetings at school, where she is often given information but is not always able to respond or process it. In this way, the multilingual PowerPoint supported more equitable participation for Layla.



Figure 3. Slide of a multilingual PowerPoint presentation.

Translation apps were encouraged, but not immediately used, except for Amina, who seemed comfortable using the translation app from the beginning. In group discussion during the initial meeting, Amina used the app and passed it around, letting everyone read the translation. In subsequent meetings, Amina and the researcher often turned to translation apps. Elif began using an app during group discussion and proceeded to use it often. The first author reflected on this discussion, writing:

Without the translation app and Zeynap [broker], it wouldn't have been a pleasant experience for Elif. I notice that Elif has a lot to say, but doesn't have the words in Dutch yet...but it is really valuable that through using the translation app and Zeynap [broker], she is able to express what she wants to.

Elif was initially the most timid. However, as the meetings progressed, she became perhaps the most vocal participant with the help of translation apps and brokering. It was clear that she knew a lot and wanted to contribute. Especially for keywords or subject-specific terms, she used the app to understand what was being discussed. The translation app proved to be a valuable tool for her to participate and become more actively involved. However, the translation app also brought challenges. It took time for it to be “legitimized” by the researcher and other participants, who were initially hesitant. Participants seemed to feel that using a translation app was a sign that they were not competent enough in Dutch to participate in the discussion. In addition, the translation app brought about insecurity at times. Participants sometimes determined that a translation given was not fully correct. In these moments, participants withdrew from conversations, concerned that they were not fully understanding. In other moments, the depth of discussion was stifled, as there was doubt whether everyone had the (correct) information necessary to proceed.

Initially, participants seemed reluctant to engage in brokering. Brokering entails that a person who speaks two or more languages acts as a mediator between two or more other people, using one language with one group and another language with the other group, in hopes that the two will better understand each other's ideas. The first author reflected on this: “During an activity, regardless of language(s), everyone is trying to understand each other to get further in the activity. So, it's in everyone's interest that everyone can understand.” While the researcher encouraged the use of other translanguaging strategies throughout codesign, brokering (once legitimized and encouraged in the initial meeting) seemed to happen more

organically during activities. Brokering in codesign seemed to have different functions. It helped participants to learn from each other. Zeynap commented (in Dutch) that Elif had a lot of great ideas that she shared in “very beautiful, academic Turkish.” Zeynap appreciated this, as it helped her to learn new words in Turkish that she had not been exposed to. In other moments, brokering helped Elif assume the role of knowledge holder and Zeynap to better understand. In one moment, Zeynap struggled to understand a concept, while Elif had ideas to share. Through brokering, Elif was able to share her ideas in Turkish, which Zeynap shared with the researcher as a broker. After this, she indicated that the process of listening to Elif’s ideas in Turkish and sharing them with the researcher in Dutch helped her to better understand the concept herself.

In this section, we reflected on the implementation of translanguaging strategies during three codesign rounds. In the following section, we formulate seven heuristics on translanguaging within participatory research. These heuristics are connected to critical moments (Kali, 2016), which stimulated learning for the researcher during the three codesign rounds.

4. Heuristics Related to Translanguaging With Multilingual Participants in Participatory Research

In this section, we draw on our reflection, offering six broader heuristics related to specific translanguaging strategies. The seventh heuristic highlights the time necessary for legitimizing multiple languages in participatory research.

1. Researchers encouraging and modeling the use of multiple languages can help participants to feel comfortable using their linguistic repertoires: If researchers themselves use multiple languages in written and spoken form during participatory research, participants may be stimulated to use their entire linguistic repertoires. There may be varying levels of comfort with the language of instruction, and using multiple languages or mixing languages in an educational setting may not be something that participants are accustomed to. In school settings, they may be limited to the language of instruction, or using other languages can be viewed as a secondary form of participation that is only desirable when one cannot participate using the language of instruction. Multilingual participants may have past experiences in which using their entire linguistic repertoire was prohibited. However, using multiple languages can help to process and share ideas and experiences more fluidly, concretely, and deeply. Participants may look to researchers initially to establish norms. Researchers should consistently encourage the use of multiple languages and continually employ their linguistic repertoires openly, utilizing translanguaging strategies to break down preconceived barriers and hierarchies that may be present in other educational settings. It is important to note that in our work, all meetings took place at school. However, we recognize that we may have had to do extra work to model norms and strategies as a form of legitimization due to the existing monolingual norms within that educational setting.
2. Using multilingual resources can support content comprehension and processing, and ensure that participants’ (linguistic) wishes are considered: Multilingual PowerPoints, texts, and videos can stimulate caregivers’ understanding of content and stimulate participants to share their ideas and understand the ideas of others during meetings. It is important that a participant feels confident in their comprehension of a subject. If material about a subject is presented solely in the language of instruction, participants may feel less confident. Employing PowerPoints in which multiple languages

are used to explain content, catalyze reflection, or stimulate interaction between participants can ease the participatory research process, ensuring that participants can participate with ease and in a more meaningful way. Similarly, offering translated texts, videos, or materials in other languages can also ease participation. In addition, providing multilingual resources can also legitimize multiple languages for learning together in participatory settings. Languages may have different functions for participants: They may value one language for content discussions with their children and another language for relational conversation. Understanding content, articulating ideas, or building on the ideas of others may go more smoothly for participants in their home language. However, participants may also participate in research to gain exposure to the language of instruction. Using multilingual resources in which home languages and the language of instruction are included can help to accommodate participants and support their linguistic goals.

3. Using translation apps can ease processing and stimulate interaction when participants and/or researchers do not share any common language: Using translation apps can stimulate participants to share their ideas and understand the ideas of others during participatory research. In some cases, a caregiver may need to translate a word to follow the conversation. In other situations, more effort and time may be required to ensure that everyone can follow the conversation, process materials, and/or participate. A benefit of translation apps is that the participant can use an app without relying on another person as a translator, taking their participation more into their own hands. However, relying solely on these apps may not be sufficient.
4. Brokering in heterogeneous language groups when some but not all participants share a language can ease and enrich participation: In many cases, brokering can help participants to share their ideas or participate with help from another participant who shares their linguistic repertoire. This can enrich discussion, as more perspectives are considered. In addition, brokering can ensure that the broker better understands a topic as they move between their two languages.
5. Using an interpreter during participatory research can help participants to participate more fully in the research process: Central to participatory approaches is the idea that participants can assume an active role as knowledge holder. When the researcher and participants do not share any languages, an interpreter can help participants and the researcher to participate in the research process more fully together. An interpreter can help both participants and the researcher to express ideas and interact with the ideas of others. Using an interpreter may require extra consideration. It may take more time and money, and can create distance between the researcher and participants. Researchers should anticipate this and think actively about how the interpreter can play a facilitating role.
6. Same-language group pairings can help participants to engage more completely in activities related to the research process: Participants may feel most comfortable and competent brainstorming with 1–3 other speakers who share a home language. This can enrich the process of participatory research, as participants can share and co-create knowledge together, and support each other in contributing to whole group discussions. Alternating between same-language group pairings and whole-group discussion with heterogeneous language groups can ensure that participants more often assume the position of knowledge holder.

7. Build in time to legitimize translanguaging practices: In many cases, it may take time to establish norms and legitimize home languages in a space where they were not previously valued. Researchers should take into account that translanguaging practices may be an ongoing process.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The present article expands the fields of doing research multilingually and translanguaging studies by offering detailed insights stemming from empirical work regarding the implementation of translanguaging as a methodological approach, a currently under-researched topic. We complement the work carried out previously (Gordon, 2022; Havlin, 2022; Polo-Pérez & Holmes, 2023; Seilstad, 2025) by reflecting on a variety of language constellations both between the researcher and the participants and between the participants themselves. This wider range of interactions and relationships allows us to put forward a set of seven heuristics regarding the implementation of translanguaging in participatory research. These pieces of advice, grounded in practice, can be useful for researchers looking for practical ways in which to promote a more equal participation in linguistically diverse research settings, a methodological resource that was previously underdeveloped (Gordon, 2022; Holmes et al., 2013; Warriner & Bigelow, 2019b). The reflections and heuristics developed may also have a practical relevance for professionals working together with linguistically minoritized groups in a wide variety of sectors, such as education or healthcare.

Our reflections strengthen the idea that translanguaging holds potential as a methodological approach when doing research with multilingual people belonging to marginalized groups (Gordon, 2022; Havlin, 2022; Polo-Pérez & Holmes, 2023; Seilstad, 2025). Similar to previous research on doing research multilingually, this highlights that creating the conditions for research participants to employ their entire linguistic repertoires may not only bridge language differences between the researcher and the participants in a functional way, but also question and partially dismantle prevalent language hierarchies and asymmetrical power relations among the researcher and the participants (Costley & Reilly, 2021; Goodman & Seilstad, 2025; Holmes et al., 2013, 2022; Warriner & Bigelow, 2019a). Promoting translanguaging in codesign allowed for the caregivers to be positioned as knowledge holders and experts in their home languages. As such, translanguaging can involve shifts in the participants' positionality in relation to the researcher, allowing for more space for recognizing participants as collaborators whose multilingual subjectivities, experiences, and knowledge are legitimized (Gordon, 2022; Polo-Pérez & Holmes, 2023; Seilstad, 2025). In addition, it broadens the scope of which voices can be heard in participatory research.

Furthermore, a less anticipated insight is that many participants reflected on the potential of translanguaging in this study in relation to the monolingual language policies prevalent in their children's schooling. This connection is likely due to both the physical location of our study in school settings and to the content of the codesign meetings focused on activities that caregivers could use with their children. In many instances, participants implied that the possibility of employing their entire linguistic repertoire when communicating with the school or when supporting their children with homework would also help shift power asymmetries between caregivers and educators, positioning the former in a more advantageous position from which they could better express their knowledge, values, and experiences. This highlights the need for questioning the deficit discourses around parental involvement in relation to caregivers with linguistically diverse migration backgrounds (e.g., Bromley & Yazdanpanah, 2021). Essential to redefining school and language policy is the acknowledgement that the caregivers in our study want to learn the language of instruction, and embracing

multilingual approaches such as translanguaging may both enhance this process and offer a better chance of everybody participating more equitably.

While we have shown that translanguaging involves potential for questioning and partially dismantling linguistic asymmetries between the researcher and participants, our reflection also highlighted several challenges in implementing translanguaging. First, the pressure to learn the societal language (Dutch) was pervasive (Havlin, 2022). Caregivers expressed the wish to practice Dutch and display their competence in it. They feared that the use of translanguaging strategies would lead them to be perceived as having failed to learn Dutch. While linguistic norms were renegotiated and translanguaging practices legitimized over time, caregivers requested the use of Dutch alongside the rest of their linguistic repertoire with the aim of further enhancing their own linguistic competence and their ability to support their children. A second challenge arose from using an interpreter. The interpreter helped participants to move into the position of “knowledge holders,” but the researcher did not have immediate access to the knowledge and experiences being shared. Instead, the interpreter took a facilitating role. While this is not inherently problematic, the distance between caregivers and the researcher required a renegotiation of roles within codesign. As this challenge may be linked to the non-professional status of the interpreters and the interpreting mode chosen, differences in these dimensions may have led to different dynamics. Importantly, the challenge linked to interpreting was experienced by the first author/researcher as minor in comparison to the enrichment it brought to the overall research process. A third challenge that arose when using the interpreter, brokering, and when using translation apps was insecurity on the part of participants. In some cases, a translation proved to be inaccurate or not fully correct. The insecurity that arose in these moments likely impacted the participants’ position as knowers, re-illuminating an asymmetry between those who were relying on translations and those who were not. These points highlight that implementing a translanguaging approach can sometimes be a challenging endeavor. It requires researchers to leave room for the renegotiation of linguistic norms, pay careful attention to the participants’ wishes and experiences, and reaffirm the potential awarded when all participants can (linguistically) engage in an equitable way.

A limitation of our work is that we did not employ research instruments (such as interviews), which could give more in-depth insights into the participants’ experiences and perspectives regarding the potential and challenges of translanguaging in research. This is because our reflections are based on work carried out within a larger research project where translanguaging was employed as a methodological approach for achieving certain goals, but was not the direct object of study. In addition, we acknowledge that an intersectional lens would have enriched our reflections. However, as the focus of the original study did not involve collecting information regarding aspects such as social class or religion, the adoption of such a lens was not feasible. Future studies could carry out empirical research on how translanguaging can be implemented in participatory research settings, triangulating different sources of data and directly taking into consideration participants’ voices regarding the implementation of translanguaging as a methodological approach. Further work could also consider the intersection between language and other social dimensions, such as social class, ethnicity, or religion. An additional future direction could be exploring the operationalization of the seven heuristics in contexts with varying degrees of institutional support and digital environments.

In conclusion, we emphasize the importance of paying attention to language choice in research. It is a key but often overlooked factor which influences who can participate in such processes and how. We suggest that adopting translanguaging as a methodological approach may partially mitigate certain inequalities and exclusions and lead towards more equitable participation when doing research with multilingual people.

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Data Availability

Requests for original data can be directed to the corresponding author.

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Conducting Research Across Three Languages in a Multilingual Space: Polish Immigrants in Alanya

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Abstract

In multilingual research, language choices and linguistic hierarchies play a significant role. The participants' language preferences reveal emotional connection and confidence in their self-expression. Building on Znaniecki's (1927) concept of humanistic coefficient, Bourdieu's (1991) theory of linguistic capital, and Blommaert's (2010) and Heller's (2007) understandings of multilingualism as social practice, this article examines how multilingual practices reveal underlying power dynamics and social hierarchies. From an ethical and methodological perspective, it proposes a model that prioritizes participant agency, minimizes biases, and redefines the researcher-participant dynamic by granting participants the freedom to choose their interview language. Drawing on fieldwork conducted among Polish immigrants in Alanya, Türkiye, the article shows how multilingual practices during interviews expose hierarchies. It also allows code-switching to function as a resource rather than an obstacle. The study offers a methodological framework for managing multilingual interviews, addressing the ethical and analytical challenges of linguistic hierarchies and code-switching. It contributes to a broader understanding of social inclusion in migration studies by offering practical insights into developing fair participant-researcher interactions. I argue that emphasizing participants' linguistic realities and proposing adaptable strategies for multilingual research contribute to more inclusive and equitable methodologies in migration studies.

Keywords

code-switching; interview; language hierarchies; multilingual research; social inclusion

1. Introduction

Multilingual research presents both challenges and opportunities for migration studies, particularly within transnational communities. When research involves multiple languages, participants and researchers face issues tied to identity, power dynamics, social hierarchies, and agency. Previous works have explored these themes from the perspectives of power and identity (Henry, 2003; Sherif, 2001; Thapar-Björkert & Henry, 2004) and through the lens of agency (Canagarajah, 2012; Lugones, 1987). When multiple languages are involved, new layers are added to these relationships and to the research process itself.

Alanya, a well-known tourist destination and multicultural hub in Türkiye, lends itself well to an examination of multilingualism in migration. Over 62,000 foreigners from 115 countries own property (Alanya Kent Konseyi, 2024), and the city even hosts a Foreigners' Parliament, the first of its kind in Türkiye. Its diverse population, heavily shaped by tourism, creates a living multilingual space. In this setting, language intersects with daily life, identity, and research.

Research on the new Polish migration to Türkiye is almost non-existent, but electoral data from the National Electoral Commission of Poland provides some insight. According to the National Electoral Commission (2023), in the 2023 parliamentary elections, Polish citizens in Antalya (the province where Alanya is located) cast a total of 2,526 votes. By the 2025 presidential elections, a separate polling station had opened in Alanya itself, with 673 registered voters and an 85.3% turnout (574 valid ballots; see National Electoral Commission, 2025). This indicates that the Polish community in the city has grown sufficiently to be recognized as a distinct voting population.

Alanya's growing Polish immigrant population offers a compelling example of how migration, tourism, and multilingualism interact in dynamic ways. The local linguistic landscape is shaped mainly by Turkish, Russian, German, English, and Polish. Based on my fieldwork, many immigrants speak Turkish fluently, which enables them to integrate and navigate daily life. Polish is maintained as a community language and is also used in tourism-related employment, particularly where Polish visitors are the primary clientele. English, meanwhile, functions as a lingua franca in both the tourism sector and interactions with other migrant groups. Rather than one language dominating, Polish, Turkish, and English coexist and gain prominence in different domains, shaping migrants' opportunities and their sense of belonging.

Polish immigrants play an active role in this multilingual environment. They participate in the city's social and political spheres, including forums such as the Foreigners' Parliament, and move across three languages in their everyday routines. The high number of Polish tourists also helps maintain the visibility and use of the Polish language. Many members of these Polish communities belong to bicultural families and are involved in economic migration. In daily life, Polish immigrants shift fluidly between Turkish and English, depending on context. These linguistic movements reflect how they negotiate their identities and position themselves within the local community (field observations, 2024).

In multilingual fieldwork, language choices are never neutral. They shape how researchers and participants relate to one another and how data is produced (Gallego-Balsà, 2018). Allowing interviewees to select their preferred language not only respects their comfort but also reveals the power dynamics behind those decisions. This article explores how participants use language to assert agency during multilingual research, and how these choices affect the quality and inclusivity of the data collected.

Although multilingualism in migration studies has been addressed (e.g., Extra & Yağmur, 2004; Havlin, 2022; Vertovec, 2007; Wei, 2011; Yağmur, 2017), there is still a notable gap when it comes to discussing how to actually manage fieldwork across languages. There is a lack of research on how language hierarchies and code-switching can be approached in practice. This study offers tools and strategies to help researchers navigate these challenges and build more inclusive research practices in multilingual migrant settings.

The research question in this article centers on the challenges of conducting multilingual research and how language hierarchies affect the interpretation of data:

1. What are the methodological challenges of conducting research in three languages?
2. How do language hierarchies influence the collection and interpretation of data?
3. What strategies can help researchers remain inclusive and authentic when working with multilingual participants?

These questions aim to provide a clear framework for exploring the complexities of multilingual research as something shaped by both agency and power. The article draws on three key theoretical perspectives: Znaniecki's (1927) humanistic coefficient, Bourdieu's (1991) work on language and power, and Blommaert's (2010) and Heller's (2007) views of multilingualism as social practice. Znaniecki's framework supports a focus on lived experience and participant agency. Bourdieu helps explain how linguistic capital and hierarchies manifest in fieldwork. Blommaert and Heller emphasize that language is practice tied to context, power, and identity. This study uses these ideas to reflect on what it means to conduct research in Turkish, Polish, and English, and how researchers can remain attentive to language hierarchies, shifting power, and reflexive practice throughout the process.

1.1. Multilingual Research and Migration

Multilingual research in migration studies extends beyond translating between languages. It involves engaging with ideological beliefs, cultural representation, and the production of knowledge across different language settings. Much of the existing literature focuses on translation, interpretation, epistemological challenges, and language use (Squires, 2009; Temple & Young, 2004). These studies highlight the many layers involved in cross-language research.

Translation involves more than words. Steiner (1975) saw it as a transformative and informative process. Venuti (1995) treated translation as a political act, shaped by culture. Lefevere (1992) connected translation choices to questions of power and ideology, while Tymoczko (2007) showed how those same choices can either reinforce or resist dominant structures. Temple and Young (2004) reminded researchers that translation and interpretation affect what knowledge is created and shared. Bassnett (2002) went further, suggesting that cultural fit sometimes matters more than literal accuracy.

In research, translation usually refers to written texts and focuses on semantic accuracy. While both translation and interpretation focus on meaning, interpretation is oral and context-sensitive, requiring real-time choices about meaning (Pöchhacker, 2004; Temple & Young, 2004). In multilingual interviews, researchers often interpret rather than translate. This happens because meaning must be conveyed in real-time for communication to continue. This distinction matters because interpretation highlights how much the researcher is involved in shaping meaning during the interaction.

Beyond translation, the researcher's own multilingual background shapes how fieldwork unfolds and data are interpreted. Researchers often act as both interviewer and translator, both during the interaction and later in translating transcripts or other fieldwork data, which raises ethical and political questions about how multilingual data is represented (Burkhard & Park, 2023).

Burkhard and Park (2023) discuss dilemmas and ethics involved in this dual role, including the challenge of translating participants' voices and maintaining research integrity. It also requires researchers to reflect on their positionality and the choices they make when mediating between languages. As Hawkins et al. (2024) point out, in cross-language studies, researchers must also manage layered complexities related to ethics, validity, and trust in cross-language qualitative research.

These challenges also affect how knowledge is built and shared. Doing multilingual research requires thinking carefully about every step from design and data collection to analysis and reporting (Holmes et al., 2013), since researchers interpret what is said and how it is expressed across languages and contexts. Research into small-scale multilingualism shows that languages shift and evolve depending on social and historical context (Lüpke, 2021). In migration studies, this adds complexity. Multilingual settings come with their own landscapes, risks of exclusion, and opportunities for rich, balanced insights.

Migrant communities often use multiple languages in fluid ways, which means that speakers may shift between languages depending on circumstances, topic, or relationship. For researchers, this creates challenges in deciding which language to prioritize in interviews, analysis, and writing. A single-language approach may not capture key nuances (Ganassin & Holmes, 2020; Holmes et al., 2013). Therefore, researchers face choices about which language to use during interviews, how to handle participants' translanguaging practices, and whether to translate, summarize, or preserve multilingual data in analysis.

There is also the issue of access. Migrant or multilingual scholars are often excluded from academic publishing due to language barriers. This limits their ability to contribute and be heard in global knowledge production. Liu and Zheng (2024) and Bennett (2023) argue for more substantial efforts to promote epistemic inclusion.

In this light, researching multilingually offers meaningful insights into the lived experiences of migrants. It can help uncover how cultural and linguistic identities develop in real life (Bagga-Gupta & Carneiro, 2021; Holmes et al., 2013a). Working this way supports collaborative and adaptive methods. These approaches give space for both researchers and interviewees to use their full linguistic repertoires. The result is deeper and more inclusive knowledge (R'boul et al., 2023; Reilly et al., 2023).

Language use in research also requires reflection. In migration studies, multilingualism raises questions about how knowledge travels across cultures and how to use language in a way that captures that complexity (Havlin, 2022). Choosing which languages to use in interviews and deciding what language to publish in are key issues (Baumgartner, 2012).

The languages researchers choose also reflect their own identity and biases. These choices affect both the type of data collected and how it is understood (Gallego-Balsà, 2018). Interpreting multilingual interviews requires cultural awareness. It means translating context and meaning, not just words (Colorada, 2024). Together, these studies show that multilingual research is not simply a technical task. It is also a social and political process, shaped by power relations, identity, and access to knowledge.

1.2. Multilingual Research Settings: Language, Power, and Reflexivity

Multilingual practices in research settings often reveal and reproduce power dynamics and social hierarchies. In educational settings, the concept of “legitimate language” (Bourdieu, 1991) highlights which languages are recognized as appropriate in particular situations. That legitimacy usually comes from social or institutional beliefs, but everyday practices can challenge those assumptions. For instance, classrooms show how policies may either limit or support diverse language use (Bonacina-Pugh, 2020; Kiramba, 2018).

Bourdieu’s concept of the linguistic market explains how power shapes the value of different languages. Language does not exist in isolation; it is tied to social capital, and its “worth” shifts depending on context. Recent studies show that these markets are not singular but exist as overlapping networks. In multilingual teams, for example, researchers and participants each bring different language repertoires. These shape how relationships form and how power plays out in fieldwork (Zheng & Guo, 2019).

Researchers working across languages must therefore make deliberate choices and remain attentive to how language shapes their projects. This requires practicing linguistic reflexivity: being aware of how language ideologies affect the research at every stage. Here, methodology and ethics overlap. In multilingual work, power, identity, and context influence both the content of speech and the way it is understood (Bhatt & Bolonyai, 2024; Rolland et al., 2023).

This study uses theory to unpack those dynamics. It asks: How do power relations, language hierarchies, and researcher reflexivity shape multilingual research? Linguistic practices do not just affect logistics; they shape the research itself.

Blommaert (2010) and Heller (2007) extend this discussion by shifting the focus from language seen as a bounded system to language viewed as practice. For them, multilingualism in migration is not simply about the coexistence of different languages but about the ways these languages interact within power structures and shifting social landscapes. Linguistic practice changes depending on the settings, the speaker’s goals, and the people involved. Migrants adapt strategically, drawing on their full linguistic repertoires. From this perspective, multilingualism is not about mastering multiple languages perfectly: It is about managing complex social spaces with the tools available.

For researchers, this requires flexibility and awareness of our own role in shaping language practices in the field. Their presence, linguistic choices, and institutional affiliations all influence what interviewees say and how they say it. Multilingual research demands positional reflection. It requires a deep awareness of how language, identity, and power work together in real time. Moreover, it reminds us that knowledge is always co-constructed in context, shaped by the languages we include and those we leave aside.

These broader theoretical insights provide the foundation for reflecting on my own multilingual fieldwork. In what follows, I situate these dynamics within the context of my PhD project and outline the methodological challenges and solutions that emerged.

2. Research Context

My PhD project, funded by the National Science Centre of Poland (NCN Poland) from 2022 to 2026, examined the sociolinguistic adaptation of old and new Polish diaspora communities in Türkiye. The old community in *Polonezköy* was founded in 1842 near Istanbul and has preserved Polish identity and language for nearly two centuries. In contrast, the newer diaspora, often formed through bicultural marriages, highlights how Polish and Turkish come into contact in daily life in modern urban settings, including Alanya, Antalya, Ankara, Izmir, and Istanbul. This article, however, focuses specifically on Alanya and explores experiences of conducting research across three languages (Polish, Turkish, and English). Between 2023 and 2025, the project used a mixed-methods design, combining qualitative (participant observation, semi-structured interviews, ethnographic data collection, and digital ethnography) and quantitative tools (an online multilingual survey) through an ethnographic lens.

Multilingualism formed the methodological thread of the study. It was not treated merely as a feature of the research setting but as a working principle that shaped every stage of the process: from recruiting participants and conducting interviews to interpreting and reporting findings. The multilingual character of the fieldwork determined how questions were asked, how meanings were negotiated, and how knowledge was produced.

Conducting research across three languages in migration offered valuable insight, but it also brought complex methodological, practical, and ethical challenges. These challenges first appeared in fieldwork and re-emerged during data preparation, transcription, translation, and analysis. As a Turkish researcher living in Poland, I was constantly engaging with shifting power dynamics and language hierarchies. My linguistic skills and cultural background gave me unique access to the Polish immigrant community in Alanya. They strengthened connections and allowed for deeper engagement during interviews. At the same time, my interactions with interviewees were shaped by that same linguistic and cultural background.

Reaching participants in Alanya required a combination of institutional and community-based strategies. To recruit interviewees, I leveraged networks facilitated by the Polish Embassy, diaspora associations, social media platforms, and snowball sampling. This dual approach supported meaningful engagement and ensured diverse representation. Data collection combined semi-structured interviews, digital ethnography, and bilingual online surveys, with participants encouraged to use Polish, Turkish, or English according to their preference. Interviews explored themes including migration history, language use, integration experiences, and family language practices.

I conducted 30 semi-structured interviews in total, both online and in person, lasting between 30 minutes and 1 hour and 40 minutes. Most of the interviewees were women married to Turkish partners, which strongly influenced their language practices. For this reason, each interview was prepared and conducted in Polish, Turkish, and English. This multilingual structure helped build rapport and capture how language operates in real-life migrant settings. The research was initially designed to explore communication in Polish and Turkish. However, the practical implementation of the research required communicative skills in Polish, Turkish, and English. Speaking these languages was not merely useful; it was essential for establishing trust, collecting meaningful data, and ensuring accurate interpretation. The project was built around multilingual practice from the outset.

3. Methodological Reflections and Proposed Solutions

Znaniecki's (1927) humanistic coefficient helped guide my engagement with participants' narratives by centring their lived experiences within a multilingual, ethnographic setting. In this project, that meant treating interviewees not solely as data sources, but as individuals whose language practices and identity shaped the research process. Through this framework, I was able to capture the lived experiences of multilingual migrants and honor their agency to choose the language that best reflected their reality. In migration contexts, where language is closely tied to identity, accurately representing participants was crucial.

Bourdieu's (1991) notion of linguistic capital and linguistic markets adds a complementary perspective. While Znaniecki foregrounds participants' agency, Bourdieu highlights how social hierarchies and unequal access to valued languages constrain that agency. In this project, working with three languages meant engaging with different language markers. Each carried a different symbolic weight depending on the context. Recognizing these patterns enabled me to understand both the choices interviewees made and why some choices were more likely or advantageous.

Together, Znaniecki and Bourdieu offer a framework for understanding agency within structural constraints. Interviewees actively navigated multilingual spaces, making choices shaped by the unequal distribution of linguistic capital. Drawing on both perspectives allowed me to reflect on how personal experience, communication patterns, and power relations interact in shaping the knowledge we construct.

Although the study was designed with flexibility, my own linguistic preferences and confidence in particular languages also influenced these interactions. I often defaulted to the language I spoke most fluently to foster clarity and connection. Similarly, participants tended to gravitate toward my strongest language to sustain the conversation. These shared choices revealed a blend of practical considerations and underlying power dynamics.

In Türkiye, language is closely tied to national identity, reflecting an ideology of monolingualism (Aydingün & Aydingün, 2004). Turkish is expected in public life, education, and many institutional settings, whereas other languages are often relegated to private or informal spaces (Seloni & Sarfati, 2013). This creates a distinct linguistic hierarchy that migrants must negotiate. Beyond institutional prestige, these hierarchies were also evident in interviewees' everyday lives. Many of those who chose Turkish for the interview reported that it was the dominant language in their daily routines, which illustrates how language use in research is often shaped by habitual linguistic practices as much as by formal structures. Still, these choices were not fixed.

Rather than treating language as a static variable, this study acknowledges that linguistic choices evolve in response to context, comfort, and communicative needs. By allowing participants to speak in their preferred language and embedding multilingual flexibility into the research design, the fieldwork became a space where communication patterns revealed both structural hierarchies and individual agency. These patterns support Bourdieu's perspective that linguistic interactions are shaped by both macro-level social structures and micro-level negotiation processes, underscoring the need for multilingual research to account for these layered complexities.

These experiences demonstrated that linguistic reflexivity is not optional but essential. I had to develop context-specific, adaptive strategies that grounded the research and foregrounded interviewees' voices.

What I offer here are methodological reflections and practice-based solutions that arose during the research process. These suggestions are not intended as universal prescriptions, but as situated insights that may support other researchers working multilingually in the fields of migration, identity, and social integration.

3.1. Language Hierarchies in Practices

Conducting research across three languages in Alanya quickly revealed how language choice shaped the conditions of inquiry. Given the focus on Polish immigrants and their sociolinguistic adaptation, outreach was prioritized in Polish, followed by Turkish and English. Figure 1 presents the initial message sent to Polish immigrants in Alanya, written in Polish, introducing my role, the nature of the study, the expected time commitment, and the available languages for participation. The first interactions predominantly occurred in Polish. However, some participants responded in Turkish and English to the Polish-language message (see Figure 2), signalling a preference for the language they felt more comfortable using, and perhaps one they perceived I was comfortable with as well.

obecnie prowadzę badania na temat doświadczeń Polaków mieszkających w Turcji. Od około roku obserwuję z zainteresowaniem Pani aktywność w mediach społecznościowych i uważam, że Pani perspektywa byłaby niezwykle cenna w zrozumieniu społeczności polskiej w Turcji i jej procesu adaptacji.

W ramach tego projektu będę odwiedzać różne miasta od końca października do początku grudnia i byłabym naprawdę wdzięczna, gdyby zechciał Pani podzielić się ze mną swoją historią. Wywiad będzie dotyczył codziennego życia, wyborów językowych oraz doświadczeń związanych z adaptacją do życia w Turcji. Rozmowa (w języku polskim, tureckim lub angielskim) potrwa około 30-50 minut, możemy spotkać się osobiście lub skontaktować się przez Skype lub WhatsApp — w zależności od tego, co będzie dla Państwa wygodniejsze.

Figure 1. Initial recruitment message in Polish.

dziękuję bardzo, może być online, może jutro, kiedy będziesz dostępny 😊😊

Can be tomorrow:) we can talk in English if it will be easier for you :)

What time would be good for you?

Figure 2. Response from a Polish participant in English to a scheduling message.

For example, one participant replied:

Merhaba...isterseniz Türkçe iletişim kurabiliriz 😊. Seve seve, buluşalım. Pazartesi için iş takvimine bakıp size dönüş yapacağım gün içinde. Olur mu?

Hello...if you want, we can communicate in Turkish 😊. With pleasure, let's meet. I will check my work schedule for Monday and get back to you during the day. Is that okay?

Such responses illustrate how migrants exercised agency in shaping communication patterns and positioned themselves as both accommodating and attuned to the interaction.

The English or Turkish responses often occurred automatically: Upon seeing my name on a social media message, participants sometimes replied in Turkish or English to signal compatibility or assume I would be more comfortable in that language. These exchanges showed how language hierarchies manifest in research settings. As such, the researcher's perceived identity and expectations could influence which language was ultimately used in the interaction.

To create an open and relaxed tone, I asked interviewees at the outset whether we could begin in English or Turkish. This helped assess their comfort levels and language skills, allowing me to start from a position of ease. Multilingual researchers are constantly engaged in translating not only words, but also positions, relationships, and identities (Burkhard & Park, 2023). Choosing to begin in a language in which I was confident was not merely a practical decision: it was also political, reflecting how my own linguistic identity and perceived authority could influence participants' choices and steer the direction of the conversation. From the very first moment, it influenced how interviewees engaged and how relationships were established.

After the introduction, I asked interviewees which language they preferred to continue the interview in. Most felt comfortable making this choice and opted for Polish, Turkish, or English. In three cases, I initiated the language: once due to my own discomfort with Polish, and in two instances, another family member read the interview questions. Even in those moments, I made it clear that they could respond in whichever language they preferred.

This process demonstrates that language hierarchies are deeply embedded in multilingual research, underscoring the importance of linguistic fluidity. It enabled both the researcher and participants to adapt to shifting communicative needs, highlighting real-life multilingual practices. Without this flexibility, I would have missed crucial language nuances, code-switching patterns, and contextual meanings, as elaborated in Section 3.3.

I intentionally built linguistic flexibility into the design and execution of interviews. As Ganassin and Holmes (2020) argue, embracing participants' full linguistic repertoires helps counteract the epistemic injustice of monolingual frameworks. Moreover, Liu and Zheng (2024) and Bennett (2023) stress that multilingual scholars face structural barriers in producing and publishing knowledge, making such methodological choices acts of resistance.

Importantly, choosing a single language, whether Polish, Turkish, or English, would not have reflected the multilingual reality of migrants' lives. Most could communicate fluently in all three languages. However,

linguistic practice varied: Some households were Polish-Turkish dominant, others Polish-English, and some predominantly Turkish or English, especially among those less connected to the Polish community. These findings underscore the importance of attending to language choice and power dynamics in sociolinguistic research on migration and integration.

The observations from everyday communication were reflected in the interviews, where participants navigated Polish, Turkish, and English depending on context. These patterns pointed to underlying linguistic hierarchies and social positioning, which I explore in the following section.

3.2. Language, Agency, and Power

Based on my fieldwork in Alanya, Polish is a commonly used language among Polish immigrants. The city's tourism industry attracts a steady flow of Polish tourists, and many Polish immigrants work in tourism-related jobs, which reinforces their daily use of the language. Polish is also visibly present in the cityscape: tourism agency signs, storefronts, and even flags display the language, indicating a strong community presence.

Many Polish immigrants I spoke with are in relationships or marriages with Turkish partners. This shapes their speech habits in specific domains: Polish or English at work, Turkish with in-laws or in public spaces, and English often with partners or friends. These domain-specific patterns were reflected in the interviews. One interviewee who has lived in Türkiye since 2001 describes her experience with language as follows:

Bende daha önce dediğim gibi hiç Türkçe kullanmadım, İngilizce bilenlerle hayatta Türkçe konuşmadım. İşte yavaş yavaş evlendiğim gibi kayıvalidem ile konuştum, her adımda hayatımda döneminde sözlük yelpazem genişliyordu....Bazen çat soru soruyorlar. Ben de rehber olarak her gün başka şöforle görüşüyorum, seri gibi 10 tane soru var: Eşin ne iş yapıyor, ben ne iş yapıyorum?

As I said before, I never used Turkish, and I never spoke Turkish with people who knew English. But gradually, after I got married, I started speaking with my mother-in-law, and with each stage of my life, my vocabulary expanded....Sometimes, out of the blue, people [in public or at work] would ask questions. And as a tour guide, I met a different driver every day, and there was a kind of standard series of 10 questions: What does your husband do? What do you do?

This quote underlines how everyday communication both reflects and reinforces power dynamics in language. The speaker's gradual shift from English to Turkish reveals how social roles, wife, daughter-in-law, and employee, shape language choice. English initially functioned as a language of comfort and symbolic status, distancing her from the local environment, while Turkish became associated with integration and belonging. Her learning process was not only linguistic but also social: She acquired Turkish through interactions that marked her position within family and workplace hierarchies. Her expanding vocabulary parallels her deeper participation in Turkish social life, while also exposing the gendered and hierarchical norms embedded in these exchanges. In this way, it demonstrates adaptation to different linguistic markets, shaped by the context of everyday life.

These patterns do more than reveal community behavior; they also shape how researchers must navigate speech habits and linguistic hierarchies during fieldwork. Observing which languages are used in different

settings reveals the underlying social norms and power structures that guide everyday interactions. This distribution shaped my approach to interviews, my interactions with interviewees, and my interpretation of responses, as my language choices could convey authority, familiarity, or cultural alignment. Understanding these patterns was therefore crucial for effective data collection and for managing relationships, ethical considerations, and the flow of communication in a multilingual environment.

These insights emerged directly from situational questions I asked during interviews, for example, which languages migrants used at home, with partners, with children, with animals, at the bazaar, during Turkish holidays, Polish holidays, at church, and in other daily activities. One participant explained her preference for English in certain situations as linked to her sense of comfort and professional identity, highlighting how language choice was always contextual and relational, but also shaped by assumed social expectations about when each language should be used:

Half of my apartment *yabancı* [foreigner], so they are not Turkish. Almost everywhere they speak English, not Turkish. Only in Bazaar, as much Turkish as I can.

In this interview, we can see how participants adapted to different linguistic markets, shifting between Polish, Turkish, and English depending on context. These shifts shaped the flow and direction of the conversations.

Reflecting on Lüpke's (2021) concept of small-scale multilingualism, the Polish immigrant community in Alanya engages with daily life through habitual language mixing. The language choices made by Polish immigrants in various situations, as presented in Table 1, illustrate the perceived power of each language within the linguistic marketplace. This has implications for language hierarchies and intergenerational language transmission. During interviews, I observed that younger children in Polish-Turkish families tended to speak Polish, while older children preferred Turkish, indicating how Turkish increasingly dominates in education and public life over time.

Table 1. Language choices of Polish immigrants in different contexts in Alanya, based on situational interview questions (e.g., at home, with partners, with children, at the bazaar, during holidays).

Context	Preferred Language
Home (with children)	Polish/Turkish
Public interactions	Turkish
Professional settings	English/Polish
With a partner (daily talk)	Turkish/English
Social events/friends	English/Polish/Turkish

These language preferences emerged during interviews. In Alanya, Polish immigrants switched between languages fluidly, with Polish generally dominating over English and, to a lesser extent, Turkish. Over time, however, the balance shifted. For long-term residents, Turkish gained importance in daily life through social interactions, schooling, and local institutions. This did not mean losing Polish. Instead, Polish remained central in families, social networks, the job markets, and even in intimate or unconscious practices, such as counting in their heads or talking to their pets. One participant, who had lived in Türkiye for seven years, thus described this situation:

Lehçe’de hayal kurarken....Kendi dilinde küfür etmek daha ağır geliyor.

When I daydream, it is in Polish....Swearing feels heavier in my own language.

In this context, Polish retained its emotional and identity-bearing role, while Turkish was increasingly adopted as a practical tool for managing everyday life in and outside the home.

During interviews, participants also exercised agency by choosing to answer a question in a different language when I invited them to do so in Polish or Turkish. When exploring specific language practices, such as code-switching or vocabulary use, I occasionally offered participants the opportunity to answer a single question in a different language. These invitations were never obligatory; participants could decline or continue in their preferred language. For instance, if an interviewee spoke only Turkish, I might ask one reflective or cultural question that they could answer in Polish.

This approach also allowed me to observe participants’ language proficiency, emotional comfort, and the shifts in tone or vocabulary across languages. It further revealed whether my positionality influenced their linguistic agency. Decisions to switch languages, or remain in one, became important data, making visible the patterns of comfort, identity, and social positioning. As Hawkins et al. (2024) note, dynamic equivalence is a real challenge in multilingual research, and inviting participants to respond in different languages highlighted how meanings shifted contextually, deepening the epistemic richness of the data.

Znaniecki’s (1927) humanistic coefficient guided this part of my approach. I treated participants as individuals shaping knowledge through their lived experience. The flexibility in language was not a technical choice: it was an ethical one, aligned with interviewees’ everyday practices. This was highlighted in my use of multilingual interviews, which gave participants agency to choose their preferred language and co-direct the interview flow. By shifting language roles during interviews, I responded not only to linguistic convenience but also to emotional positioning and trust-building that Znaniecki identifies as central to the human experience in research.

Blommaert (2010) and Heller (2007) describe language in terms of social practice embedded in power relations. These dynamics were visible during participant observation. One interaction took place in a three-way conversation involving Polish immigrants in Türkiye, a Polish visitor, and me, a Turkish researcher living in Poland. The exchange moved across all three languages: The immigrants used Turkish when speaking with me, Polish with the visitor, and I spoke English with the visitor. Notably, the Polish immigrants shifted between the languages fluidly. Although they knew that I understood Polish, they continued talking to me in Turkish.

This choice illustrated how language marked social positioning and belonging. By using Turkish with me, the Polish immigrants presented themselves as integrated members of the host society, demonstrating their strategic positioning and awareness of the social context. Each shift in language served as a way of negotiating visibility and legitimacy within intersecting social settings. These decisions were shaped both by participants’ agency and by the context of my presence, underscoring how researcher positionality and participant strategy interact in multilingual settings. This interaction, along with examples from Sections 3.2 and 3.3, shows participants’ ability to adapt in different linguistic “markets,” shifting between Polish, Turkish,

and English depending on context, which in turn was shaped by the flow of conversation and by how emotions and identities were expressed.

This experience underlines the importance of incorporating all three languages into the research process. Participants' language choices shaped both the content and quality of the data. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1991) notion of linguistic capital, these multilingual interactions can be understood as negotiations of status and belonging within intersecting social orders. Each shift marked subtle acts of alignment or distinction, positioning participants in relation to me and to one another. The same dynamics of status and belonging that structured participants' language choices also extended to the researcher, which is explored in the following section.

3.3. Researcher's Positionality

A researcher's positionality influences every stage of the research process. Researchers are not neutral observers; they are active participants who shape the field through their presence, choices, and interpretations. Being aware of who I am and what I bring to the research was essential. Drawing on Merton's (1972) classic distinction between insider and outsider perspectives, and Bucholtz's (2000) discussion of politics and positioning in linguistic research, I understand my role as both a linguistic insider and an institutional outsider. As a Turkish researcher living in Poland, when interviewing Polish immigrants in Türkiye, I appeared as a linguistic insider, someone who shared linguistic resources with interviewees. At the same time, I remained an institutional and cultural outsider, not fully participating in their community networks or migration trajectories. This dual positioning shaped both my access to participants and my interpretation of the data (Bourdieu, 1991).

Academic and institutional affiliations often carry implicit authority. They influence who feels safe to speak, how much is shared, and whether participants feel judged, heard, or supported. I was affiliated with a Polish university and supported by the NCN Poland, which lent me credibility. However, after encountering trust issues during early outreach, I contacted the Polish embassy in Türkiye. The embassy sent emails to local associations confirming their awareness of and confidence in my research. This institutional validation, combined with my multilingual background, strengthened my position in the field by increasing participants' trust and deepening interviewees' willingness to engage.

My understanding of Polish, Turkish, and English gave me access to data that might otherwise have been overlooked. This included recognizing code-switching patterns, uncovering the reasons behind newly invented words by children, and understanding shared wordplay among immigrants, both during interviews and through observations. This linguistic awareness also shaped my positionality in the field. Because I shared the participants' multilingual environment, I was not only an observer but also part of the linguistic exchange. My ability to move between languages influenced how participants perceived me: at times as an insider who understood their daily speech practices, and at other times as an outsider, marked by my accent or cultural background. These dynamics directly affected what was shared and how meanings were constructed in interviews. This is illustrated in the account of a mother describing her children's bilingual experience and language logs in Turkish and Polish.

In the following excerpt, underlined words mark points where the speaker switched languages from Turkish to Polish within the same sentences. The bracketed notes (i.e., [switching to Turkish] and [switching to Polish]) in the translation indicate when the speaker changed languages during the interview, showing code-switching patterns in the conversation:

Evet, zaten böyle bir klasör var, teksty dzieci. I beğde...şeyde anlatıyor [oğlum] okulda, Waldorf okullarına gidiyor ve işte orada el işleri çok yapıyorlar ve işte orada anlatıyor ki: „i będziemy robić gemi i dlatego takie ipki.” Czy możesz mi to asić? [yani] bana asar mısın?...Co jeszcze, „gram na üflecie”. Üflecie, po polsku flet yani, üflemek demek.

[Spoken in Turkish:] Yes, there is already such a folder, children's texts [switching to Polish]. And [he] tells me at school, [my son] goes to Waldorf schools and there they do a lot of handicrafts, [he] says: “we will make a boat with some threads, threads” [Switching to Polish]. Can you sew it for me? [switching to Turkish]....What else, “I play the üflecie” [invented word from Turkish *üflemek*, to blow]. Üflecie, in Polish it is flet [flute, from *üflemek*] [switching to Polish].

In her speech, she describes how her children invent Polish-Turkish hybrid words such as *ipki*, *asić*, and *üflecie*. She begins in Turkish, inserts Polish phrases like *co jeszcze* (what else), and clarifies terms bilingually, saying “*üflecie, po polsku flet yani, üflemek*.” This moment underscores the role of positionality in research, showing how my background, affiliation, linguistic abilities, and cultural understanding of Poland and Türkiye shaped both the interaction and the construction of meaning.

Hawkins et al. (2024) conceptualize the “trilingual researcher” as someone who takes on the roles of facilitator, interpreter, and interlocutor in multilingual fieldwork. In this study, I embedded these roles at different stages of the research process. As a facilitator, I guided multilingual interactions and maintained openness throughout the fieldwork. As an interpreter, I engaged critically with meaning during analysis and the presentation of data. As an interlocutor, I adapted continuously within conversations and responded in ways that sustained dialogue. My ability to work across three languages positioned me as both connected to and distant from the Polish community. This partial belonging helped interviewees to relax, but it also required ongoing reflection on how my presence shaped the conversations.

Throughout the research, insider-outsider dynamics proved valuable. I was an insider through shared linguistic, cultural, or migratory experiences and an outsider in other ways. For instance, I was not part of the Polish community's social or religious networks, which sometimes limited access to informal gatherings or private discussions. These shifting interactions influenced interviewees' willingness to share their stories. For an outsider, establishing trust and building meaningful connections with the community were essential, which included sharing aspects of everyday life and speaking a common language.

Overlapping layers of connection are depicted in Figure 3, which illustrates the relationship between the researcher, participants, and institutions within a multilingual research setting. Ethical responsibility, institutional credibility, and trust were closely intertwined. My affiliation with a Polish university gave the research formal legitimacy. At the same time, shared language practices and informal conversations helped strengthen connections with participants. The space between the researcher, participant, and institution was not fixed: It shifted depending on the topic, the language used, and the degree of personal sharing.

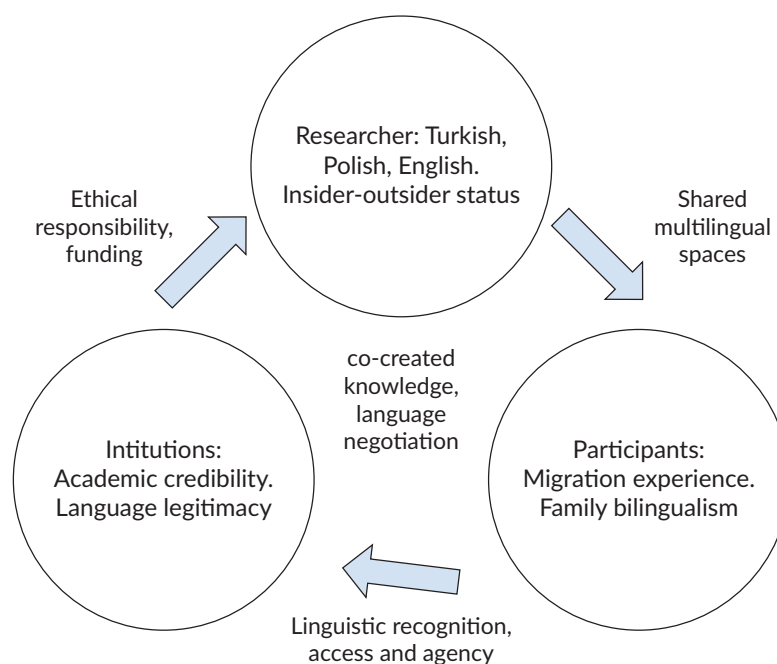


Figure 3. Relational model of researcher, participant, and institutional dynamics.

These patterns shaped how knowledge was co-constructed and how multilingual experiences were lived and represented in the field. Positionality, in turn, requires ongoing self-awareness. Researchers must continuously reflect on how their identities, assumptions, or potential biases shape interpretation.

3.4. Reflexivity and Fluidity

Reflexivity involves sustained critical examination of one's role in research. In multilingual work, especially when language itself is a central object of study, self-awareness is vital. As discussed above in relation to positionality, reflexivity enables researchers to navigate assumptions, power dynamics, and communication patterns that shape each phase of the research process.

In line with Blommaert's (2010) and Heller's (2007) views of language as social practice, this study does not treat Polish, Turkish, and English as discrete tools. Instead, these languages are enacted through lived interactions shaped by context, emotion, and institutional setting. For example, interviewees shifted between Polish and Turkish depending on the interlocuter, emotional tone, or topic. Rather than simply filling lexical gaps, these shifts functioned as acts of self-positioning, enabling speakers to negotiate identity, belonging, and power in relation to others.

To address effectively the complexities of multilingual data collection and interpretation, I employed reflexive tools such as a multilingual field diary, post-interview memos, and a code-switching log. These instruments enabled me to trace how interviewees moved between languages, what prompted these shifts, and how tone or emotional expression varied across linguistic choices. As Holmes et al. (2013) argue, multilingual research requires self-awareness not only during interviews but also in interpreting and representing data. My use of a multilingual field diary and post-interview notes allowed me to document language shifts and emotional responses, providing a layered account of meaning beyond linguistic content.

Reflexivity is a sustained dialogue with the self throughout fieldwork, analysis, and writing. Following Holmes et al. (2013), multilingualism in this study was not confined to fieldwork but integrated across the research process: from recruitment and consent to data analysis and representation. Self-awareness informed each phase to ensure linguistic inclusivity. In this way, the researcher's positional reflection underpins the fluidity of the research.

Fluidity in this context refers to the flexible nature of linguistic practices, roles, identities, and power, as explored through research. Participants' spontaneous shifts from Turkish to Polish, Polish to English, or all three within a single exchange highlighted their dynamic use of language. In one conversation, for example, a participant code-switched between English and Turkish while discussing holidays and traditions:

We spend time together....Because of Christmas, it is important, Paskalya [Easter], we paint eggs in Poland.

Here, the switches do more than convey information: English situates the narrative in a shared global or intercultural setting, while Turkish signals relational intimacy with me as the researcher. This moment exemplifies fluidity, as the participant actively shapes the interaction, shifting between cultural frames and linguistic resources, with me, as a researcher, adjusting my position in turn. Non-linear power relations, shaped continuously by both participants and researchers, emerge as participants assert control of the conversation through language, resist fixed roles, and negotiate meaning and authority.

For multilingual researchers, language should be understood as a lived, situational practice that is responsive to mood, trust, memory, and a sense of belonging, as well as the needs of the participants. My positional reflection allowed me to observe and appreciate linguistic fluidity, rather than attempting to control it. This approach created a collaborative space where meaning was co-constructed, as opposed to being extracted. It also foregrounded ethical awareness, recognizing that participants' agency is as vital as the study's goals.

Multilingual research offers profound insight into identity construction and discursive negotiation, but it also presents practical challenges. For example, interviewees and I had uneven linguistic competencies: Some were highly fluent in one language but less confident in others, which occasionally constrained the depth of expression or required repeated clarification. Translation fidelity posed another difficulty, particularly when preparing mixed-language examples for publication. Subtle cultural meanings, humor, or invented hybrid words were often hard to render accurately in English, and I risked losing nuance during transcription or analysis. Moreover, there was always a potential for misinterpretation, as shifts in tone, register, or emphasis in one language could be perceived differently when translated into another.

To address these challenges, I employed participant-led language choice, allowing interviewees to speak in the language that they felt most comfortable with. This minimized miscommunication and empowered them to shape the conversation. Careful field notes and reflexive memos helped me track linguistic shifts and contextualize meaning. When translating, particularly for publication or including illustrative examples, I maintained annotated transcripts, marking code-switching, invented words, and cultural references, and added explanatory notes. I also translated data across languages, checking translations against original utterances, and, when necessary, consulted bilingual colleagues or participants to ensure interpretive accuracy. These strategies, combined with my positional reflection and language use, helped me navigate

the complexities of multilingual research while preserving both analytical rigor and the integrity of participants' voices.

4. Methodological Learnings From the Field: Looking Ahead—Rethinking Multilingual Research

This study was guided by three key questions: What are the methodological challenges of conducting research in three languages? (RQ1) How do language hierarchies influence the collection and interpretation of data? (RQ2) What strategies can help researchers remain inclusive and authentic when working with multilingual participants? (RQ3)

Conducting research across Polish, Turkish, and English revealed that language is more than a tool for data collection; it is a lived, situated practice shaped by emotion, ideology, and social context. The study offers three key methodological insights aligned with the research questions.

RQ1 posed: What are the methodological challenges of conducting research in three languages? Multilingual research introduces both practical and conceptual challenges, including uneven linguistic competences, difficulties in translation fidelity, and the potential for misinterpretation. Field observations and interviews showed that code-switching and language mixing were not random but strategic acts of identity negotiation, which required careful attention during transcription and analysis. Reflexive practices, including field notes, reflective journals, multilingual transcripts, and code-switching logs, were essential for capturing these patterns and interrogating the researcher's own assumptions. These tools helped make the research ethically consistent and allowed the participants' perspectives to be accurately represented.

RQ2 posed: How do language hierarchies influence the collection and interpretation of data? Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital illuminated the subtle hierarchies embedded in everyday language choices. Participants adapted to different linguistic "markets" depending on context, and their shifts between Polish, Turkish, and English shaped the flow of conversation, the kind of knowledge that could be shared, and the ways in which emotions and identities were expressed. Blommaert's (2010) and Heller's (2007) views of language as social practice showed that code-switching is an enactment of social positioning, agency, and power negotiation. Recognizing these hierarchies allowed the research process to account for both participants' strategies and the researcher's positional influence.

RQ3 asked: What strategies can help researchers remain inclusive and authentic when working with multilingual participants? Ethical multilingual research requires more than accurate translation; it demands reflexivity, co-construction, and responsiveness to participants' linguistic and cultural realities (Burkhard & Park, 2023; Temple & Young, 2004). Drawing on Znaniecki's humanistic coefficient, the study prioritized participants' agency in language choice, creating space for open and authentic expression. Flexible interviews conducted in participants' preferred languages, systematic multilingual transcription and annotation, code-switching logs, and reflective field diaries were employed to capture the richness of everyday multilingual practices. By treating translation and code-switching as ethically and politically significant, rather than purely technical tasks, the research foregrounded participant voices, promoted inclusivity, and allowed the study to respond dynamically to the fluid multilingual realities of the field.

Overall, this study demonstrates that multilingualism is not a barrier but a resource that, when approached with reflection and care, can deepen understanding. Methodological frameworks should not merely accommodate linguistic diversity; they should be actively shaped by it. Practical strategies include: (a) prioritizing participant agency in language choice; (b) maintaining reflexive journals and field notes; (c) embracing co-construction and flexible, emergent approaches; (d) recognizing the ethical and political significance of translation and code-switching.

Ultimately, these insights contribute to more inclusive, reflexive, and socially aware research practices in migration studies, thus challenging monolingual academic norms and supporting ethically grounded, multilingual scholarship (Bennett, 2023; Liu & Zheng, 2024).

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

Due to the sensitive and personal nature of the qualitative data (interviews and fieldnotes) used in this study, the data are not publicly available. Anonymized excerpts may be shared upon reasonable request to the author, in line with ethical research guidelines.

LLMs Disclosure

The author used generative AI tools for language correction, grammar refinement, and improving clarity of expression.

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Language, Power, and Multilingualism in Migration Research: Reflections From the Documentary Method

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Abstract

In two research projects conducted in Austria and Germany in the field of forced migration, we found similar challenges and potentials, namely, the methodological challenges of addressing multilingualism in a methodically controlled way and the potential of systematically analysing power dynamics within multilingual interviews using the documentary method. In this article, we illustrate the intertwining of language and power in multilingual qualitative research. Discussing two empirical examples in depth, we show that different data (with and without interpreters) are embedded in different power hierarchies, which need to be recognized. We also discuss the lessons we learned, as well as the limitations that we encountered, and conclude with a call to navigate through the ambiguities of migration societies that are reflected in multilingual research realities.

Keywords

documentary method; forced migration; interviews; migration societies; multilingualism; power dynamics; qualitative research; second language interview research; social inequalities; translation

1. Introduction

In the exchange about two dissertation projects examining forced migration, linking multilingualism and the documentary method, exploratory endeavours, uncertainties, and questions arose that are addressed in this article. The main focus lies on two questions and their relation to each other. On the one hand, we dealt with the topic of power relations and language hierarchies in multilingual research settings. The complexities

of this issue have not been sufficiently discussed, according to Holmes et al. (2022), but have been fostered especially through forced migration research in recent years (Treiber & Kazzazi, 2024). On the other hand, we addressed the question of how to apply the documentary method to multilingual interview data. While the documentary method is widely used for the analysis of different data, such as group discussions, interviews, images, or movies (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014), only a few researchers have applied the method to multilingual data (e.g., Masek & Mattig, 2024; Schittenhelm, 2017; Weller, 2010). It soon became apparent to us that these two questions guiding our research cannot be thought through separately, as they are entangled in a multidimensional way. Thus, in this article, we systematically combine both issues by addressing the following question: To what extent can power dynamics be appropriately uncovered in multilingual interview material using the documentary method?

If language is understood as an instrument of power, as we elaborate in Section 2, we cannot deal with multilingualism (e.g., translation techniques) solely on a technical linguistic level. Rather, in the context of power dynamics in the academic field (and we both position ourselves as white individuals without lived experiences of forced migration beyond our research and service provision), it is essential to reflect on how powerfully language influences the entire migration research process. In this article, we focus on the process of analysis and reflect on the handling of multilingualism for the documentary method, which is especially explored in Section 3. As such, we assert that precisely because the documentary method reconstructs the speakers' practical actions, which in interviews are conveyed exclusively through verbal statements and do not merely reflect the content of what is said (and is, therefore, suitable for the migration context), we believe that a reflective approach to multilingualism is necessary.

After having debated the entanglements of language, (postcolonial) power structures, and methodological issues in the context of the documentary method, we illustrate these reflections by presenting empirical examples of different interviews that were conducted in Austria and in Germany in Section 4, which we then discuss in Section 5. Finally, we conclude that the imperfection of translating processes mirrors the hybridity of migration societies. Paying attention to ambiguities and systematically incorporating them into the research process offers insights into the realities of migration societies. Consequently, researchers are challenged to navigate through those imperfections and ambiguities.

2. Interrogating Power Dynamics Within Multilingual Research Contexts

According to Schittenhelm (2017), research processes can be defined as multilingual if data collection, interpretation, and presentation are conducted in more than one language. Further, “constellations in which researchers and participants do not share the same first language(s)” can be defined as multilingual (Berg et al., 2025). Researching in migration societies, we propose that a multilingual research context is the norm rather than the exception. As many nation-states still insist on being monolingual states, other languages may seem unusual, even though multiple languages are spoken in migration societies. Mecheril (2010, p. 17) coined the term “migration others,” referring to a perspective that focuses on the production of “others” in migration societies. Not paying attention to the interrelations of migration, language, and institutions entails the risk of reproducing exclusionary classification systems. However, the role of language has received relatively little attention (Canagarajah, 2017). For example, Scheibelhofer et al. (2021) examined how the Austrian Public Employment Service addresses linguistic diversity. They found a lack of institutional strategies as well as a “shift of language management-related responsibilities onto individuals”

(Scheibelhofer et al., 2021, p. 24). This illustrates the entanglement of political, economic, and social processes leading to inequalities through linguistic differences (Brubaker, 2014).

The reasons for focusing on multilingualism vary. Multilingualism results from political reasons (e.g., colonization, globalization), socioeconomic reasons (e.g., migration), or personal reasons (e.g., multilingual family constellations; Malechová, 2018). It can be seen as a resource (e.g., in global working environments), but has also been problematized, for example, during the recruitment of migrant workers in the 20th century in various European countries (Malechová, 2018). Duchêne (2020) emphasizes that sociolinguists have contributed to an acknowledgment of multilingualism, often promoting social justice through deconstructing monolingual mindsets. Yet, he warns not to be too enthusiastic about these achievements and rather examine “the power relations and conditions that shape the idea of multilingualism as a desirable good” (Duchêne, 2020, p. 93). By solely focusing on multilingualism as a resource or emancipatory, the (re)production of exploitation and domination through multilingualism is neglected. An example of this complexity is the recruitment of staff in Austrian refugee shelters based on language skills. The lack of minimum standards for employees and the need for different language skills on the ground led to cases of hiring people solely based on the ability to speak a certain language. Simultaneously, there is a lack of promoting extra-occupational training, which leads to lateral entrants remaining in low-skilled and low-paid working positions (Füchslbauer & Hofer, 2021).

On an individual level, language is generally considered a function that creates identity. “Language is proving to be very central in the formation of social identity since it is both a symbol and resource of forming group identity” (Mukhtar & Tanveer, 2024, p. 163). Language thus serves as an expression of social identities, which are particularly important in the context of migration, when people move between different linguistic and cultural contexts. People move not only through other (linguistic) worlds in a lexical sense, but also in terms of identities (Mukhtar & Tanveer, 2024). However, these aspects cannot be discussed only on an individual level when considering the influence of power dynamics. Thus, Busch (2013) offers an alternative perspective, critically reflecting on the relationship between the individual and society. She suggests a subject-oriented approach that focuses on three main angles: the speaking and acting subject; the discourses that position the subject; and the spaces where subjects and discourses meet. Thus, speakers are highly influenced by language ideological debates and discourses about language and linguistic coherence. Foucault (1977, p. 25), for example, used the term “discursive police” to describe the unwritten rules that speakers reactivate in every discourse.

Therefore, language can be a highly political subject, indicating attitudes towards migrant societies. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the discourse on language and politics has focused on “integration through language,” implying that learning the language of the nation-state is essential for migrants to integrate (Busch, 2013). Instead of acknowledging the reality of societal multilingualism and acting accordingly, the insistence on monolingual nation-states can be seen as a reaction to the perceived loss of national sovereignty due to globalization (Hogan-Brun et al., 2009). Capstick (2020) emphasizes that migrants often face social pressure to learn the dominant language of their host country. This expectation is not only functional, in the sense of better opportunities on the labour market, but also goes hand in hand with expectations of belonging and civic identity. “Successful” migrants are those who have a very good command of the dominant language in their countries of arrival (Capstick, 2020, pp. 92–93). Thus, the language of the state functions as a form of gatekeeping.

These perspectives demonstrate the interplay of power dynamics in language, discourse, and positioning. In postcolonial studies, language is often discussed as a means of power, considering the “systematic imposition of colonial languages” (Shakib, 2011, p. 117). Because language carries culture, beliefs, myths, and history as well as serving as a tool for communication, it became a powerful tool for cultural change during the colonial process (Fanon, 1961/1967). These practices played an instrumental role in assigning low prestige to non-European languages and cultures and in establishing the superiority of the colonizer’s language and culture (Migge & Léglise, 2007, p. 297). Busch (2013) shows that this hierarchical ranking of languages is still highly influential. She illustrates that Austrian population statistics listed languages until 2001 in categories according to status, migration history, and ideologies. For example, the distinction between “English/French/Italian” and “other European languages,” as well as the classification of Spanish as a European language and Arabic as an African language, illustrates historically influenced worldviews (Busch, 2013, pp. 98–99).

These power relations also go for academia, as there are specific academic orders in which certain languages, practices, and forms of knowledge are privileged over others. These power dynamics within the academic system have a direct impact on research practices. That might explain why (a) power imbalances and language hierarchies in research (Holmes et al., 2022) and (b) the analysis of multilingual data with the documentary method have only been addressed more recently. Especially, empirical forced migration research contributed to a broader discussion of these topics (Treiber & Kazzazi, 2024), which are eventually important for every qualitative research project in migration societies.

3. Analysing Multilingual Interviews With the documentary method

Understanding foreign realities is the basic challenge of all qualitative research methods (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014, p. 314). Not only do languages differ, but the way people express themselves also varies between generations, social groups, and regions. These dynamics affect both, research participants and the researchers themselves. Working with material in foreign languages presents an even greater challenge (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014). This applies to the analysis of data but also to ethical considerations, elicitation, transcription, and publication. As the term “interpreting” already implies, neither spoken nor written words can be translated literally; both need to be interpreted from one language system into the other (Müller, 1989). Thus, every translation produces ambiguity (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014). Additionally, “what is said, what is being narrated, is shaped by socio-economic status, level of education, experiences” (Treiber & Kazzazi, 2024, p. 3). In migration research, interactions between the different participants are embedded “in migration-political dispositifs (foreigner, integration, control, security, etc.)” (Treiber & Kazzazi, 2024, p. 3). Using institutionalized and codified terms as immigrant or refugee “makes speaking a performative act of social inequality” (Treiber & Kazzazi, 2024, p. 4). Thus, a sensitive and (self-)reflective stance must be taken by the researcher.

It becomes evident that understanding interviews in multilingual settings, including participants who do not have the same shared knowledge and interact in contexts of social inequality, is a complicated process. Not only do languages have to be interpreted, but also contexts, positions, and dominant discourses must be critically reflected throughout the process. This requires an act of translating foreign realities and consequently a processual “de-self-understanding” (Breuer, 2009). Bhabha (2000) sees self-alienation as a necessary part of “cultural translation” in order to create a space in-between. Researchers are challenged to

balance between empathic participation, distanced observation, and critical self-reflection in order to translate the context of research within the different positions of all participants. According to Nohl (2024, p. 7), the multidimensional comparison that comes with the documentary method is well-suited to understand intersectional inequalities as it sheds light on “how postcolonial conditions are experienced in the context of certain gender, class, or educational position.”

3.1. The Documentary Method in a Nutshell

The documentary method is grounded in the sociology of knowledge (Mannheim, 1929/1952), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967/2004), and, especially in later discussions, habitus theory (Bourdieu, 1976). It aims to reconstruct “atheoretical” knowledge in everyday practices that is based on “conjunctive spaces of experience” (Mannheim, 1922–1926/1980, p. 219). Garfinkel (1967/2004, p. vii) viewed social reality as an “ongoing accomplishment” and thus emphasized a constructivist approach to analysis. He described the documentary method as “ethnomethodology,” which focuses on the formal mechanisms that produce order by analysing the implicit rules and structures of everyday actions (Meuser, 2007, p. 217). According to Garfinkel (1967/2004, p. 78, as cited in Meuser, 2007, p. 217), the documentary method as an “ethnomethod” is “recognizable for the everyday necessities of recognizing what a person is ‘talking about’ given that he does not say exactly what he means.” The meaning can be analysed by considering the context of the utterance. Focusing on “how something is said or done” reveals the “modus operandi” (Wagener, 2022, p. 191, emphasis in original). This, in turn, reveals information about the actors’ habitus, which implies internalized patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting (Bourdieu, 1982). “One central strategy of the documentary method is to analyze the multidimensionality of habitus or milieus by comparing different cases” (Wagener, 2022, p. 192).

The patterns of meaning and orientations, which can be reconstructed with the documentary method, are part of a “collective stock of knowledge in such a way that they [the research participants] actually do not know what they know” (Bohnsack, 2010, p. 110). Finding such patterns requires a sequential and comparative approach. Mannheim (1929/1952) coined the terms “existential determination” and “context dependency” to describe types of everyday knowledge that shape reality perception. A researcher’s interpretation of interviews is strongly influenced by their own existential determination and context dependency (Nohl, 2006). Therefore, comparing different sequences within and between cases, as well as using interpretation groups, is highly relevant.

The documentary method takes a praxeological stance (Bourdieu, 1976): Rather than differentiating between subjective and objective approaches, the documentary method distinguishes between practice-based knowledge and communicative generalized knowledge (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014). Generalized knowledge is usually conscious and can be made explicit through communication. However, practice-based knowledge refers to experience-based knowledge that is incorporated and acquired through practice.

Interpreting interviews with the documentary method involves three main steps: formulating interpretation, reflecting interpretation, and generating types (Nohl, 2006). The starting point is the formulating interpretation. First, the interview is topically structured using a differentiation of paramount topics, subordinated topics, subsubordinated topics, and sometimes subsubsubordinated topics (Bohnsack, 2010).

Next, the transcribed sequences are interpreted thematically by summarizing the content using the researcher's words. These reformulations of the thematic content help alienate the researcher from the text (Nohl, 2006). The interrogative pronoun for this step is "what?" with a "focus on the explicit and immanent meaning" (Wagener, 2022, p. 198).

"For the *reflecting interpretation*, on the other hand, it is essential to transcend the explicit meaning of an expression to reach its implicit meaning" (Wagener, 2022, p. 198, emphasis in original). The focus shifts from the question of "what" is being expressed to "how" it is being said (Nohl, 2006, p. 31): How is the topic being explored, and in which frames of orientation is it being dealt with? In this step of the documentary method, the context in which the participants operate is strongly incorporated into the analysis, which can reveal the influence of postcolonial discourse on the *modus operandi* (Nohl, 2024, pp. 9–10).

"The empirically controlled analysis of the frame of orientation or the *habitus*, respectively, is based on comparison with other cases" (Wagener, 2022, p. 198). For the basis of comparison, it is thus important to have minimum and maximum contrasts to identify the different orientations. Considering colonial power dynamics, it becomes crucial to include "previously unheard voices" for comparison, which help to "uncover contexts of utterance and actions that would be overlooked" otherwise (Nohl, 2024, p. 6). Due to "narrative compulsions," narrations are especially close to the experiences of the narrator (Kallmeyer & Schütze, 1977, p. 188). Therefore, such passages are of particular interest for analysis.

3.2. Analysing Different Types of Multilingual Interview Material

As illustrated in Section 2, multilingualism in research must be considered within its political, economic, and social dynamics. Generally, "attention must be given to the hidden and tacit contexts of research participants' utterance" (Scheurich, 2023, as cited in Nohl, 2024, p. 4). Thus, it is not enough to simply include different languages in a research process to enable marginalized and oppressed groups to participate in discussions without requiring knowledge of the researcher's language. Rather, a reflexive multidimensional analysis that pays attention to the contexts of utterance, the position of the researcher, as well as the limitations of decolonizing attempts in research, must be taken into consideration.

As Berg et al. (2025) show by comparing two research projects in multilingual settings, "there is no one-size-fits-all approach to multilingual research." By critically reflecting upon questions of inclusion and exclusion, positions and power relations, as well as data quality, they argue for "project-specific solutions." The corresponding decisions lead to different kinds of material, of which we will now discuss interviews with people who do not speak in their native language and interviews that involve interpreters. Another scenario, that will not be discussed in this article, is when the researcher and interviewee both do not speak their native language and use a *lingua franca*. This situation must be examined from a postcolonial perspective, as shown in Section 2.

3.2.1. When Speaking in Another Language

Interviewing someone who does not speak their native language might come with a lack of fluency in the spoken language, which may limit one's ability to express oneself. However, the terminological repertoire demonstrated is highly interesting because it indicates the speaker's social positioning (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 61; Schittenhelm, 2017, p. 103).

Bourdieu, whose theory of habitus influenced Bohnsack's further development of the documentary method, assumes that linguistic habitus is shaped by one's own socialization. Every person has a "certain tendency to speak and to say certain things" (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 41). Bourdieu assumes a hierarchical classification of social groups that is negotiated along linguistic lines. He uses the term "legitimate language," which is spoken by the "ruling class" and excludes people who do not speak this language (pp. 56–57). It thus becomes clear how much language influences social positioning and the level of action that is to be reconstructed using the documentary method. Capstick (2020) discusses Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital in the context of migration, concluding that migrants are often unable to use their linguistic capital in their migrant life situation or convert it into cultural capital.

As described in Section 2, language influences social identity and thus affects the level of action. The question arises as to how migrants can be enabled to represent themselves with their linguistic capital in the interview situation, simultaneously bearing in mind that power dynamics may prevent the full presentation of themselves. For us, it seems to be of fundamental importance, especially concerning the documentary method, to let the interviewees themselves decide in which language they want to talk about their social world and their actions. For example, the decision to conduct the interview without an interpreter, even if the interviewee has only a limited knowledge of the dominant language, can be interpreted as an action. A positive horizon for this decision could possibly be to position oneself as capable of speaking the language of the nation state, or it could represent the interviewee's desire to show their migrant reality. Simultaneously, this choice might also demonstrate a self-presentation as a "successful migrant" in terms of the dominant European discourse on integration through language (Busch, 2013).

Schittenhelm (2017, p. 108), who has conducted multilingual research and worked with the documentary method recommends specifically marking language switching. The "alternating use of two or more languages or dialects within a single conversation or utterance" is referred to as code switching and can signify resistance, solidarity, or assimilation in migrant and postcolonial life situations (Rojas, 2025, p. 13). In interpretation using the documentary method, this means analysing the situations in which code switching occurs by reconstructing the practice of action. According to Rojas (2025), postcolonial influences on linguistic practice must be taken into account. The documentary method succeeds in mapping this level with the step of reflective interpretation. In this step, the context in which the participants operate is strongly incorporated into the analysis, which can reveal the influence of postcolonial discourse on the *modus operandi* (Nohl, 2024, pp. 9–10).

3.2.2. When Involving Interpreters

The use of interpreters enables the participants in the interview to articulate their own relevant content in their native language (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014, p. 17) and reduces power imbalances in the interview situation (Uçan, 2019, p. 118). Three different levels must be examined here: the interview situation, in which interpreters are used; the transcription of the recorded interview; and the translation of the transcription by translators.

When both interpreters and translators are brought in to assist with research using the documentary method in order to create a space in which the linguistic capital of the interviewees can be made visible, other methodological questions arise: Who is addressed by the interviewees (at the action level in the

interview situation) and how? Does linguistic and/or cultural proximity create a conjunctive space of experience? What are the tasks of the interpreter and translator? How can linguistic capital be successfully reconstructed as part of the habitus when interpreters are involved in the interview situation and the researcher has no access to the language of the interview?

Enzenhofer and Resch (2011) problematize the handling of multilingualism in German-language migration research, which, for a long time, did not transparently present the challenges of multilingualism in the research process in studies, or swept them under the carpet. They developed very specific recommendations for the use of interpreters, such as separating the roles of interviewer and interpreter and transcribing in the original language. Both also call for different translation suggestions to be disclosed and for insights to be gained from comparing translation alternatives. According to the same authors, the decision as to who should be employed as an interpreter should also be made in a considered and conscious manner, especially if political or religious attitudes could play a role in the interaction between the interviewee and the interpreter (Enzenhofer & Resch, 2013).

Schittenhelm emphasizes that it is not only the content level of an interview that is important, but also the question of “how a topic is brought up” (Schittenhelm, 2017, p. 103), which can be influenced by the selection of interpreters, as demonstrated by the empirical example in Section 4.3.

Within the context of the documentary method, the focus is therefore not only on how to conduct and interpret interviews successfully in multilingual settings. Considering that language and linguistic expressions themselves can provide insight into social experiences (Schittenhelm, 2017, p. 104), the question must be asked how this social experience can be made accessible for interpretation by researchers who do not speak the same languages as the interviewees. Schittenhelm (2017) has developed guidelines for the use of external translators (who are not involved in the research) in the context of the documentary method, who transcribe the audio recording and translate it into writing in order to prepare it for interpretation. These are now discussed in connection with the above-mentioned questions.

In addition to recommending that translators be informed of the objectives, Schittenhelm emphasizes that the character of the interview situation and the narrative should be preserved in the written transcription (Schittenhelm, 2017, p. 108). Particularly in reflective interpretation, which addresses the question of “how” a topic is dealt with, it is very important whether a topic is dealt with many pauses, quickly, or thoughtfully, or when and how approving comments are made by other people. For researchers who do not understand the language of the interview, this can only be understood if it is translated accurately in writing.

Another recommendation is to disclose ambiguities in translation and to indicate alternative translation options, which also involves including words or notes from the translator in the original language (Schittenhelm, 2017, p. 108). In an article about a research project in which interviews with Japanese students were evaluated in a documentary style, Masek and Mattig (2024) criticize Schittenhelm’s approach of involving third parties in the translation process. They suggest that the researchers themselves should carry out the translation, following a multi-step procedure. The original Japanese text was transcribed, translated step by step, and grammatically adapted. While the fourth version is “clear” English, the first three intermediate stages reveal linguistic peculiarities and make the foreign language experience visible. These transitions are central to the empirical analysis (Masek & Mattig, 2024). Such a step-by-step translation, as

proposed by Masek and Mattig, is crucial for reconstructing the action-guiding orientation frameworks, depending on the context of the translation. Although this procedure is understandable on a theoretical level, the question of feasibility arises, especially for researchers who are working alone on a doctoral project, for example, or for teams in which not all languages relevant to the research are represented.

Schittenhelm recommends accurate labeling of language-specific proverbs and metaphors in translation (Schittenhelm, 2017, p. 108), which are collectively and culturally influenced (Bittner & Günther, 2013, pp. 186–189). This is particularly important in the context of the documentary method, as the use of metaphors has an impact on the methodological approach. Among other things, Bohnsack (2021) describes metaphorical density as a criterion for selecting passages for reflective interpretation (pp. 138–139). The use of metaphors is therefore of fundamental importance for the entire interpretation. Language is context-bound and must be placed in its historical context (Mannheim, 1922–1926/1980, p. 220), which makes the question of the interpretation of specific proverbs, also with regard to linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 2005), all the more urgent in a multilingual context.

4. Empirical Examples

As we have shown so far, multilingual data is by no means less valid in terms of interpretation—rather, it makes the processes of understanding and interpretation more clearly visible. Researchers are therefore called upon to show openness to ambiguities, to tolerate them, and to understand language as a social practice. This also requires acceptance of flexibility in interpretation and in different readings. Those who seriously engage with multilingual migrant societies, the diverse facets of language, and methodologically controlled research can develop a keen eye for boundaries, ambiguities, and divergent interpretations through multilingualism. In our view, the documentary method offers a very suitable methodological framework, which we now illustrate with examples from our research.

4.1. Project Descriptions

The research of Tamara Tries is based on recent discussions in social work, which consider refugee camps as places of precariousness and exclusion (Devlin et al., 2021). In contrast to the circumstances in refugee camps, the global definition of social work emphasizes the promotion of empowerment and liberation of people and an orientation on human rights (International Federation of Social Workers, 2018). On the one hand, social work discourses reflect on and discuss their own entanglement in problematic selection mechanisms of refugee policies (Scherr, 2018), the risk of unconscious involvement in structural discrimination (Prasad, 2021), positioning in the field, and the further development of social work approaches to action (Lang, 2021). This tension can be summarized as “striving for inclusion while managing exclusion” (Spindler, 2018, p. 575).

On the other hand, a lack of minimum standards for qualifications and requirements for employees in refugee camps (Österreichischer Städtebund, 2023) creates opportunities for lateral entry into these positions. Additionally, there is a lack of promotion of extracurricular training, so lateral entrants often remain in low-skilled, low-paying positions (Füchslbauer & Hofer, 2021, p. 68). Thus, people working in camps to accompany and counsel refugees form a highly heterogeneous group. Given these circumstances, this study explores different understandings of the professional role and action-guiding orientations. To gain

broad insights, episodic interviews were conducted with ten employees and ten inhabitants of refugee camps in five different states of Austria. Additionally, ethnographic observations were made in the camps.

Victoria Mehringer addresses the intersection of forced migration and disability, an area that has largely been overlooked in research thus far (Lätzsch et al., 2021). The focus of this research is on the subjective experiences of parents who are confronted with changed living conditions and new social contexts in Germany as a result of forced migration and must cope with the disability of a child in this new situation. The study examines their everyday practices and routines and the interactions resulting from the convergence of the social categories “migration background” and “disability.” Five interviews were conducted with parents from Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Ukraine as part of the dissertation project. Four interviews were conducted with the help of non-professional interpreters who were informed about the objectives of the interview in advance and received training in conducting interviews in the context of qualitative social research (e.g., conversation techniques, principles of qualitative research). Care was taken to ensure that all interpreters had learned the foreign language as their mother tongue and had a C1 level of German. The recorded interviews were then transcribed by certified translators in the original language, and the foreign language sections were translated into German. The translated interview material was interpreted using the documentary method.

While the research questions and theories of the projects differ, they are similar in that they both focus on multilingual research contexts of migration societies and employ similar methodological approaches.

Analysing the interviews using the documentary method provides insight into two forms of knowledge: generalized and practice-based. In Tries’ research project, an understanding of professional roles can be found by analysing generalized knowledge using the formulating interpretation. Employees and inhabitants of refugee camps consciously express how they understand the role of someone working in a camp. Assuming that this understanding is reflected in daily actions would overlook the complexity of social realities and fail on basic principles of qualitative social research. To understand how employees actually act and on which orientations their actions are based, the reflective interpretation reconstructs practice-based knowledge. Contemplating the entire data set reveals conjunctive spaces of experience.

This is also the main aim of Mehringer’s research: to reconstruct behavioral patterns that significantly determine how people navigate new realities and that are not readily apparent to outsiders at first glance. New realities arise from the fact that families are geographically located in a new country context. On the other hand, navigating reality as a family with a child who has a disability or chronic illness is also a “new world,” i.e., a reality in which previous courses of action may no longer apply. In this context, the documentary method has the potential to reveal social realities and the logic of individuals who, in a sense, are forced to find their way in two new worlds. This is interesting because they are exposed to “double” othering processes in social contexts, as both people with a migration background and parents of a person with disabilities.

4.2. Example 1: Code Switching as Acting

In Tries’ research, several interviewees opted to conduct the interview in German, even though it was not their native language. Some interviewees explained that it was a welcome opportunity to practice their

language skills. As described in Section 3.2.1, this choice can also be analysed within the dominant discourse on integration through language (Busch, 2013) and thus indicates a form of positioning. Research partners sometimes used their smartphones, most often Google Translate, when struggling to find a word or expression. During the interviews, it became clear that stories can be told in an understandable way, even with a limited vocabulary.

As already mentioned, using institutionalized terms “makes speaking a performative act of social inequality” (Treiber & Kazzazi, 2024, p. 4). The aim was to avoid certain terms during the interview, waiting for the interviewee to introduce terminology, to then pick up on the terms suggested by them. The following excerpt shows the endeavour to avoid institutional terminology for the place of interest: the refugee camp. In camp studies, there is a debate over which term to use for refugee camps, as terms such as “home,” “shelter,” or “centre” trivialize the underlying aim of control, as well as the precarious living conditions (Pieper, 2008). In German, the term *Lager* (camp) is heavily associated with the former Nazi regime (concentration camps), making it difficult to find adequate terminology. This shows that the different terms in different languages transport very different connotations, which cannot be fully translated in multilingual research.

In most camps, it was possible to talk to both employees and inhabitants. Usually, the employees were interviewed first. Most of them referred to the camp as “home” (*Heim*), an indication of the institutional use of language. It was then interesting to see which terms inhabitants would use. The following interview with the young man Km (pseudonym), who was living in a refugee camp in Austria, was conducted in German and is translated into English for this article (Table 1). The translation follows Schittenhelm’s (2017) recommendation to preserve the character of the interview situation and the narrative in the transcription.

Table 1. Interview with Km (pseudonym).

Original transcript	Translated transcript
Y: ähm dieses Haus in dem du jetzt wohnst für was ist das da? Warum gibt's dieses Haus?	Y: ahm this house you are currently living in what is it there for? Why does this house exist?
Km: ah (1) im <i>Camp</i> ?	Km: ah (1) in <i>camp</i> ?
Y: Genau	Y: Exactly
Km: (5) ich verstehe nicht was ist deine Frage	Km: (5) I don't understand what is your question
Y: Du wohnst in einem <i>Camp</i> sagst du?	Y: You are saying you are living in a <i>camp</i> ?
Km: ja	Km: yes
Y: warum gibt's diese <i>Camps</i> ? (1) F-Für was sind die gut äh (1) warum sind die überhaupt da?	Y: why are those <i>camps</i> there? (1) w-what are they good for ah (1) why do they even exist?
Km: äh (1) weil es gibt äh (1) Menschen? (2) äh in Österreich gekommen (1) äh sie möchten (1) äh hier (1) sie möchten äh (1) warten Interview und äh Be-Bescheid bekommen (1) ja das ist gut dass Österreichische machen Idee das das ist gut	Km: ah (1) because there are ah (1) humans? (2) ah came to Austria (1) ah they want (1) ah here (1) they want ah (1) to wait interview and ah get de-decision (1) yes it is good that Austrians make idea it is good

Note: (1) indicates a pause; the number refers to the length of the pause in seconds.

In what follows, we will break down the first two steps that are involved in interpreting interviews with the documentary method.

4.2.1. Formulating Interpretation

The interviewer asks about the purpose of the house, Km is currently living in. Km asks for clarification if she means the camp, which she affirms. As Km does not understand the question, the interviewer reformulates the question. Km then replies that camps are there for people who come to Austria and want to wait for their asylum interviews and decisions, which is a good idea made by Austrians.

4.2.2. Reflecting Interpretation

By asking for the place the interviewee is currently staying in, the interviewer reveals the shared knowledge that this is not a permanent residence, but a station for a limited period of time. She then invites the interviewee to debate the purpose of the building. Km introduces a term for the house: the camp. By switching to the English term, he rejects the institutional language that suggests calling the place “home.” This code switching can be seen as a form of resistance. Reformulating the initial question, Y picks up on the term “camp” and thus validates Km’s choice of terminology. She then continues in a plural form. Initially, having asked about the camp in which Km is staying, she now takes the question to a more general level by asking about the purpose of “such camps.” By using the word “such,” she also demonstrates a distanced stance to the places in question. Asking “what are they good for” directs the conversation to a valuation of camps in a positive manner. This is then weakened with the next question, why they even exist, putting the existence of camps into question. Km’s answer includes eight breaks ((1) and (2)) as well as seven “ahs”. If he were a native speaker, this would clearly indicate an explorative movement towards the content of his answer. Not being a native speaker, this can just as well show his search for specific words in a foreign language. Both interpretations show that this is not a question he is usually confronted with in his current living conditions; whether this refers to the content of the question or the need to answer it in a foreign language cannot be answered at this point. By expressing that “humans come to Austria,” Km again resists the institutional language, which was demonstrated by many other interviewees who referred to “refugees.” This becomes particularly evident in comparison to other interviews, which cannot be displayed here. Saying that they “want to wait” on the one hand implies the will and commitment of humans towards the waiting process. On the other hand, the purpose of camps is classified as a waiting area, which indicates a certain level of passiveness created by the circumstances that the camps stand for. This passiveness ends when the asylum interview and the asylum decision have been carried out. He concludes by evaluating that this system is a “good idea” made by Austrians. With this statement, he points at the actors in power of decision-making: Austrians, a group he is not part of. Assessing the idea as “good,” he possibly refers to the proposition of Y asking what the camps are “good” for. Also, he might address Y, who can be read as part of the group “Austrians”: the group in power of decision-making Km is dependent on.

4.2.3. Discussion of the Analysis

The interpretation of this excerpt illustrates various aspects that have been discussed on a theoretical level in this article. First, it shows that a high proficiency in the language of the interview is not a valid requirement for participation. Even though this passage is not a dense narration (hence especially close to the experience of Km), it uncovers the context of utterance (Nohl, 2024) in a very rich way. Clarification processes that seem to be rooted in language barriers at first sight offer negotiations of terminology and thus insights into the positioning of the participants (Bourdieu, 2005; Schittenhelm, 2017). By critically reflecting upon the position

of the interviewee as well as the position of the interviewer, power dynamics and social inequalities that shape the setting of the interview can be identified. In this sequence, Km expresses those dynamics and dependencies by introducing the group “Austrians” that is in control of power over institutions and asylum procedures, while he has to submit to this authority. This clearly demonstrates the hierarchical classification of social groups (Bourdieu, 2005). It is thus crucial to acknowledge that the interviewer Y is most likely perceived as part of this group in power, which influences the dynamic and thus the conversation between Y and Km.

Yet, Km demonstrates forms of resistance to the asylum regime through code switching (“camp”) and rejection of institutional language (“refugee”). By using the term camp instead of *Heim* (home), he demonstrates resistance (Rojas, 2025) in a situation of strong power imbalance. By referring to humans instead of refugees, he positions himself on an equal human level and resists the hierarchical subordination of the social group called “refugees.” At the same time, he critically acknowledges his precarious living conditions by using the term camp, refusing to call this place a home, which would have been suggested by the institutional language. This implies that Km’s living reality is not reflected in the institutional language.

Two passages also show the necessity of openness to ambiguity while interpreting: Due to the multilingual setting, the pauses in Km’s answer can indicate a search for the content of the answer and/or the search for specific words in a foreign language. Km’s evaluation of camps as “a good idea” might target the proposition of the interviewer, but also Y’s position of power in which she is being addressed. While some ambiguities can be dissolved by a multilevel comparison with different cases, other ambiguities will remain and must be acknowledged in their imperfections and as an expression of the research design.

4.3. Example 2: The Power of an Interpreter

The following interview excerpt is from an interview with a mother who fled Ukraine with her son, who is on the autism spectrum, to Germany. The mother was asked in advance whether an interpreter should be arranged and, if so, for which language, given that Russian is often rejected as the language of Ukrainians because of the war (Kulyk, 2024). However, as the mother explicitly requested that the interview be conducted in Russian, an interpreter who is a native Russian speaker with C1 level German and a background in social sciences was called in. However, it was not possible to organize an interpreter who also comes from Ukraine. The interpreter who was called in comes from Russia but has been living in Germany for a long time. The following passage is taken from this interview and describes a situation during the flight (Table 2).

Table 2. Excerpt from the interview with the Ukrainian mother.

Translated Transcript from Russian to German	Translation into English
Dann setzten wir uns in den Zug und fuhren nach...Ah, dort kam es zu noch einer komplizierten Situation. Wir wurden zusammen mit unseren Freunden in zwei Autos zum Bahnhof gebracht. Das Auto, in dem ich mit meiner Mutter saß, verspätete sich. Mein Mann war mit dem Kind aber in einem anderen Auto. Sie stiegen in Stadt x am Bahnhof aus. Dort waren zehn Warteschlangen so lang wie am Leninmausoleum. Alle wollten zum Bahnhof.	Then we got on the train and travelled to city x. Ah, there was another complicated situation there. We were taken to the train station in two cars together with our friends. The car I was in with my mother was delayed. My husband was in another car with the child. They got out at the train station in city x. There were ten queues as long as the one at Lenin’s mausoleum. Everyone wanted to get to the train station.

This passage was selected for reflective interpretation in the research project because it was part of a narratively dense passage and has a high metaphorical density. In the context of this article, it illustrates how multilingualism can be illuminated through the documentary method, with a focus on power dynamics.

Initially, the comparison of the Ukrainian mother in the queue at the train station with a cultural memorial in Russia caused uncertainty for the researcher: Is this formulation a proverb? Does the geographical location of the memorial in Russia, which is waging a war of aggression against Ukraine, have any significance? What is the political dimension of the comparison in relation to Lenin as a person? Is there a biographical component from the interviewed mother, who may have been there before?

These uncertainties should not be ignored, but rather made transparent (Enzenhofer & Resch, 2011), as articulated both in the research project and in this article.

Due to the length of the mother's narratives (up to 30 minutes), it was not possible for the researcher to ask direct questions during the interview. Because of these long sections of conversation, there was no literal translation of what was said in the interview situation, but only a summary of the content so that the researcher could ask questions about the content. Since the documentary method, as described above, moves from the "what" level to the question of how action is produced and in what context it is narrated, this level will now be examined. When examining this "how" level, one (of many) possible interpretation is to consider the action in the interview in the context of power. The interpreter was involved in the interpretation of the passage in order to question the meaning of this formulation (it was not possible to consult another Russian-speaking interpreter for practical research reasons). She concluded that, from the interpreter's perspective, this comparison can be classified as part of the collective knowledge base, as the images of the long queue in front of Lenin's mausoleum are well known.

With this explanation, the passage or comparison of the mother can be read as a code intended to illustrate familiarity and closeness to a cultural frame of reference. This also makes it clear who is addressed as the conversation partner in this passage (and who is not): It is not the German researcher who is addressed in the narrative, but the interpreter from Russia. With the (presumed) shared knowledge of queues at Lenin's mausoleum, which can be read as a symbol of Soviet power, the drama of the escape situation is described, and the intensity of this experience is conveyed to the Russian interpreter with clarity through the metaphor. In this passage, the frame of reference in which the narrative is set is adapted to the interpreter's knowledge. The situation can also be interpreted using Bourdieu's concept of "legitimate language." In this context, this phrase is considered acceptable or socially desirable.

This example shows that the (subjective) position of interpreters influences (Nowak & Hornberg, 2024) or decisively shapes the interview situation. As this interpreter was also involved in the interpretation of this passage, it was not only the interview situation that was influenced by the interpreter; the interpreter also had the "authority to interpret," which was based on her experience and knowledge. The selection of the interpreter by the researcher, who belongs to the majority society, can be interpreted as a powerful act in itself.

This makes it apparent that the selection of interpreters must be reflected upon in the overall situation and in the evaluation of the data, especially when the selection is limited, which corresponds to the reality in a multilingual research context.

The example also clearly shows that the use of language is context-dependent (Mannheim, 1922–1926/1980, p. 220) and that linguistic representation is shaped by power dynamics. The Ukrainian mother's articulation to the Russian interpreter shows that language must be understood as a (social) index of the experiential space and must be described at the level of interaction (Schittenhelm, 2017, p. 104). Limiting oneself to questions of lexical transfer into another language, even if this is done in very small steps, as in the case of Masek and Mattig (2024), for example, would be insufficient in this example.

5. Discussion

The two empirical examples presented in this article show the relevance of including research partners who do not speak the same language(s) as the researchers in their respective research projects. Both projects benefited immensely from the decision to take the multilingual realities of the research topics seriously, as very relevant perspectives would have been neglected otherwise. Language is always embedded in specific contexts of action, in which its function and meaning unfold (Busse, 1987). This paradigm is deeply rooted in the documentary method, which seeks to reconstruct the speaker's practices of action by answering the question of "How" something is expressed. Simultaneously acknowledging power dynamics, positions, and inequalities throughout the research process, the horizons of comparison are broadened and blind spots in the researchers' methodology are, thus, controlled (Nohl, 2024, pp. 9–10). Nevertheless, adopting a multilingual approach with a special focus on power asymmetries presents significant challenges that we have encountered in our projects.

Our main insight is that language, power, and multilingualism cannot be addressed separately in research. Systematically incorporating multilingualism and power relations in our research processes broadened the insights we could gain and made even clearer that language must be understood as a (social) index of the experiential space and thus be described at the level of interaction (Schittenhelm, 2017, p. 104). Taking multilingual realities seriously worked for us like a magnifying glass that uncovered positions, power dynamics, and contexts of utterance. It became clear that not only languages have to be interpreted, but also contexts, positions, and dominant discourses must be critically reflected throughout the process.

Including research partners who are not fluent in the language of the interview offers insights through the demonstrated terminological repertoire and the positions within certain power dynamics of the interviewee, as well as the interviewer. Paying attention to language-related practices like code-switching leads to the identification of forms of resistance and asymmetrical relationships between individuals, social groups, and institutions. Yet, there are also challenges: As shown in the first example of this article, pauses and hesitations in the answer of Km could not simply be analysed as an exploratory movement towards his answer to the question. It could just as well be a search for specific words in a foreign language. Also, his evaluation of camps as "a good idea" might not necessarily reflect his opinion, but might as well be a reaction to the power imbalances between him and the researcher.

On the other hand, including interpreters in the research allows research partners to articulate themselves in their first language. Thus, they can express themselves in more detail, and power imbalances are reduced. The subjective position of interpreters can also be an additional benefit to the research, as it might be closer to the conjunctive spaces of experience of the interviewee. At the same time, the interpreter constitutes a third party in the interview as well as in the analysis. As shown in the second example of the article,

interpreters simply can't translate literally in situations of dense narrations and thus influence the whole interview with their way of summarizing. Including interpreters in the analysis whenever uncertainties arise is crucial, yet this must also be critically reflected from a perspective on power dynamics in regard to the authority of interpretation.

This shows that there is no one right way to go when researching in multilingual settings charged with power imbalances. Reconstructive methods, such as the documentary method, acknowledge that language meaning is embedded in different contexts (Kruse & Schmieder, 2012). Yet, there will always be parts that are "untranslatable," revealing the imperfection of translation processes, the hybridity, and the necessity to critically reflect upon "role expectations and role requirements, norms and values as well as modes of perception and expectations" (Treiber & Kazzazi, 2024, p. 6). Openness towards ambiguity becomes an essential part of the process.

Lastly, many of the power dynamics addressed in this article were rooted in colonial patterns of thinking. Critically reflecting upon our own positions as well as the heritage of Western sciences, we must acknowledge that (a) there is "no way to jump outside one's historically located sociocultural set of semiotic and linguistic (named) categories" (Scheurich, 2023, p. 142), and (b) also the documentary method cannot be delinked from its colonial legacy of Western sciences. Yet, the critical reflection of positions within the comparative and multilevel approach of analysis of the documentary method bears a high potential to uncover power dynamics and inequalities: It enables the conjunctive knowledge to be captured in a multidimensional way (El-Maafalani et al., 2016) and offers a nuanced perspective on social reality, reflecting knowledge from diverse layers of experience (Schondelmayer, 2019). By contrasting cases within and across cases during the evaluation process, the interpretation becomes less dependent on the researcher's positioning. Thus, the horizon of comparison is determined by the material itself and not by the researcher's perspective. This enables ethnocentric and culturalist interpretations to be methodically controlled (El-Maafalani et al., 2016).

6. Conclusion

We have shown that language, especially but not only in the context of migration-related research, is deeply embedded in hierarchies and powerful practices. Language functions as both a means of communication and a social practice that determines participation, exclusion, belonging, and alienation. Therefore, conscious, sensitive, and continuous reflection on these power relations is essential, particularly in research projects involving people in contexts of exclusion and othering. Asymmetrical structures also permeate the research process itself and must be identified, questioned, and methodically addressed. Such research conditions call for a reflexive multidimensional analysis that pays attention to the contexts of utterance, the position of the researcher, as well as the limitations of decolonizing attempts. The entanglements of language, power, and methodological issues require interpreting and translating processes not only in regard to multilingualism but also to the multi-layered contexts of research.

Every research project might require different approaches and decisions, yet researching in migration societies demands critical reflections upon questions of inclusion and exclusion, positions, and power dynamics. The documentary method offers one solution to systematically address those questions. Yet, there are several limitations associated with the choice of methods and theories. Working with the documentary method, practices of action can be reconstructed. Results offer insights into orientations of

daily actions, but cannot explain the motifs behind them. In contexts of severe power imbalance, it also becomes more challenging to reconstruct the *modus operandi* as the conjunctive spaces of experiences are highly influenced by the positioning of interviewees and interpreted from very different positions of the researchers. The necessary process of self-alienation can only be implemented up to a certain degree. Further, the power dynamics of the academic field hierarchically structure languages, practices, and forms of knowledge, which leads to logistical constraints in research designs (e.g., due to the costs for interpreters and translators).

In conclusion, we argue that a high level of ambiguity tolerance is necessary to navigate through the entanglements of language, power, and multilingualism in qualitative research projects. Migration societies are characterized by hybridity and ambiguity. Those aspects also become more apparent in research processes. Embracing the imperfection of translation processes, indissoluble ambivalences, logistical constraints, and impossibilities to fully think outside the box of one's own positioning opens a research journey that reveals at least parts of social realities. Eventually, this implies that some ambiguities that occurred in the research will remain as they are in the results: inconclusive, versatile, and imperfect.

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Data Availability

Due to the sensitive nature of the data and the confidentiality commitments made to participants, the data cannot be shared.

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Only Grammarly was used for grammar and style improvement; no generative AI or LLM tools contributed to the content.

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

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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.

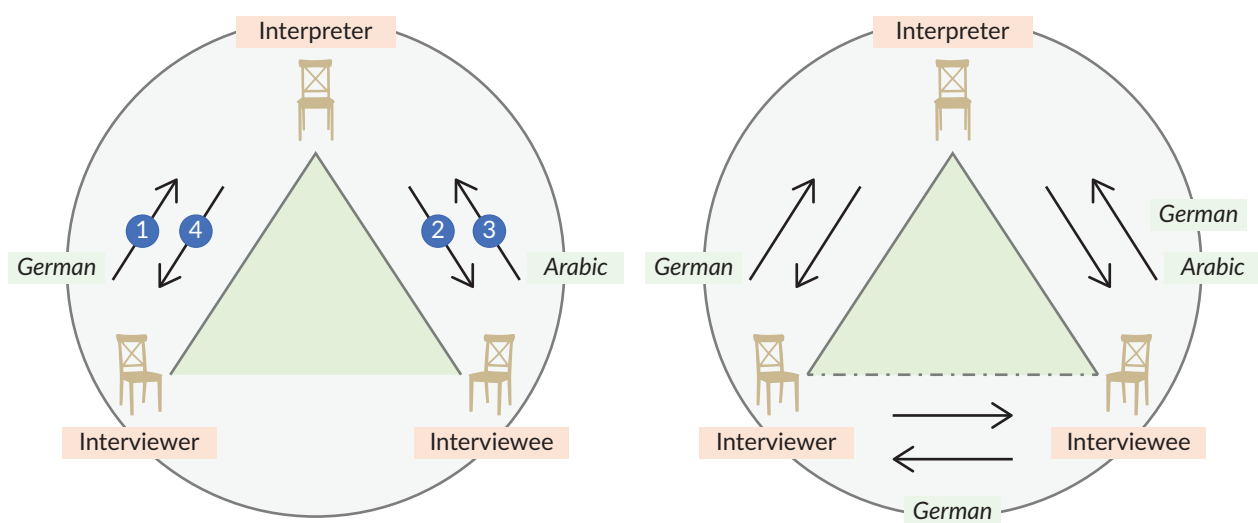


Figure 1. The ideal typical translation situation (left) and interpreting in/translation as community (right).

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 recentring 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 alternately:

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 themselves.

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(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 (Sebold, 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).

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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.

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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-Möllnbeck, 2009; Tuiider, 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 Gül (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
<u>no</u>	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)
<i>later</i> [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 not 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 not 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 relatives 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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ARTICLE

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

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

2. Researching Multilingually (State of the Art)

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. Research Context

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.1. In Data Collection

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.2. In Data Analysis

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

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

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

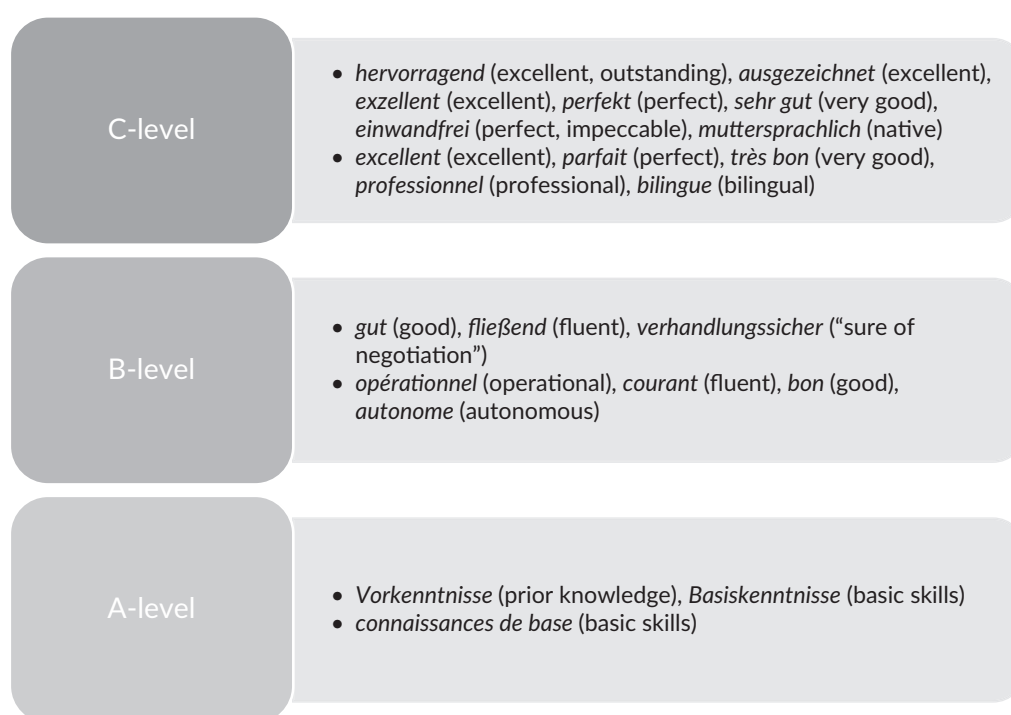


Figure 1. Categorisation of competence levels.

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

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

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

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

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

4.3. In Data Dissemination

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6. Conclusion

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

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