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Lost in Translation? Openness, Reflexivity and Pragmatism as Guiding Principles for Cross-Language Qualitative Research

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Key words: cross-language research; foreign languages; translation; gap of understanding; openness; reflexivity; pragmatism

Abstract: In increasingly globalised and linguistically diverse societies, cross-language constellations in qualitative research are becoming more probable and necessary. Based on experiences we gained during our research in foreign language settings, we reflect on three guiding principles of qualitative research—openness, reflexivity and pragmatism—and how they are applied when dealing with the manifold challenges of linguistic understanding. Taking up ongoing discussions about this issue, we provide an account of a reflexive methodology aware of its preconditions and limitations. We argue in favour of a confident approach towards language difficulties and point out that qualitative research has always demanded the chosen methods to be flexible enough to adjust to challenges in the field.

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1. Introduction

In a world of increasing transnational migration, globalised communication streams and internationalised working contexts, hermeneutic approaches to interview research appear to be questioned in a new way. The problem of gaining "knowledge of others"[1] (SCHÜTZ, 1942, p.330)—besides being a general challenge to any qualitative study that has been discussed for a long time—is twisted in a unique way, as the researchers are not only confronted with different milieus or life-worlds but also with different languages. They may barely speak

1 Here we refer to "Fremdverstehen"(OEVERMANN, 2001, p.67), which literally means "understanding of the other" but does not translate well into English. The term recalls the epistemological challenge that any attempt to gain knowledge about others has to rely on techniques and methods of interpreting their utterances, since we cannot look inside the head of others. This was also reflected in a philosophical, mostly phenomenological debate on the "Knowledge of Other Minds" (AYER, 1953; see also MALCOLM, 1958) or the "Problem of Other Minds" (AUNE, 1961).

these languages or have never thought that they would become relevant for their professional life. Therefore, meaning needs to be transferred from one language into another, which requires new adjustments of the research process: language differences have to be reflected starting from the first ideas for the research, followed by the first steps into the field, the actual interview, the analysis, and finally the publication of the findings (BAUMGARTNER, 2012). Based on insights we gained during two different cross-language research projects, we reflect on these questions from a meta-perspective. We are interested in the general epistemological problems of qualitative research and how they apply specifically to the challenges of conducting research in and with foreign languages. Just like the movie "Lost in Translation"[2], in this article we do not focus literally on translation processes. We rather reflect on typical problems that go along with different constellations found in two cross-language research projects. Consequentially, instead of bringing concrete solutions to the manifold problems of translation, we promote a rather abstract *procedural knowledge* of how to conduct qualitative research in cross-language settings. [1]

First, we discuss the epistemological background of our research and the methodological implications of the translation problem. In this section, we argue that research settings free from gaps of understanding are ideal type constructions that can never be achieved completely (Section 2). Afterwards, we outline our studies and draw on empirical examples focusing on the interview situation and the analytic interpretation of transcripts since they are the most crucial stages of cross-language research (Section 3). This leads to the conclusion (Section 4) that adhering to the guiding principles of qualitative research—openness, reflexivity and pragmatism—helps to navigate the rugged coastline of qualitative research in cross-language settings. [2]

2. Methodological Reflections on Cross-Language Interview Research

2.1 Epistemology and methodological background

Our work as qualitative researchers is based on the assumption that all of our surroundings are socially constructed by processes of sensemaking which lead to "intersubjective" typifications that make up and pass on the knowledge of society (BERGER & LUCKMANN, 1967, p.79). In other words, processes of sensemaking constitute the inventory of society. The resulting meaning structures make up the taken-for-granted assumptions and basic rules of social conduct. Hermeneutics are the analytical counterpart to these mostly non-intentional processes of the "Social Construction of Reality" (BERGER & LUCKMANN, 1967). Their aim is to understand and *re*-construct the processes of sensemaking (SCHÜTZ, 1953), which is attained by a methodical *dissociation of the taken-for-grantedness*. This specific, somewhat artificial research attitude allows the researcher, discharged from the everyday life pressure of having to act, the distanced position to track and name what implicit knowledge and application of social rules are at the bottom of an observed social behaviour. This comes close

2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lost_in_Translation_(film) [Accessed: September 6, 2021].

to GOFFMAN's (1974) deliberately naïve attitude towards the social. As he was interested in how interaction settings are stabilised, he looked beneath the surface of social life in order to dig out its grounding rules. For this endeavour, he methodised a question every person implicitly faces when entering and adopting to a perfectly normal and self-evident situation: "What is it that's going on here?" (p.8). This deliberate estrangement is essential to a methodised understanding of the social which, as OEVERMANN (2001) pointed out, has to be distinguished from practical understanding in everyday life. In order to achieve this position of bewilderment, researchers following a hermeneutical approach have to rely on *protocols*, for example transcripts of interviews or documents found in the field. Only this *textual fixation* of observable interactions and utterances such as conversations allows the researcher the necessary distance and time for an analytical, explicating "understanding of the other" (p.67)[3]. Cross-language settings are usually not considered in these terms. However, as we want to argue, they confront researchers with specific constellations of estrangement that need proper reflection in order to be included in qualitative research. [3]

2.2 Ways of dealing with the challenges and possibilities of cross-language qualitative research

The qualitative research community has been reflecting increasingly on the issue of cross language research in recent years, thus appreciating an increasingly linguistically diverse social reality (BAUMGARTNER, 2012; BETTMANN & ROSLON, 2013; CAPPAI, 2008; FRYER, 2019; INHETVEEN, 2012; KRUSE, BETHMANN, NIERMANN & SCHMIEDER, 2012; KULL, PETERSEN & CAMP, 2019; PFAFF, HUMMRICH & RADEMACHER, 2012; ROTH, 2013; SQUIRES, 2009; TEMPLE & YOUNG, 2004; WELCH & PIEKKARI, 2006). In these reflections, various research constellations and language associated challenges during the research process have been described. But to date, no effective and conclusive way for dealing with the *gap of understanding,* that comes with cross-language settings has been established. As we argue in the following, this should not surprise due to the fact that this gap cannot be closed but only be bridged and managed. Put differently: the language barrier that appears at several stages during cross-language research results in multifaceted *translation problems*, for which one can only find compensation strategies. In the following, we discuss some of these problems and typical ways of dealing with them. [4]

First of all, in spite of all methodological reflections, it still seems a common practice in cross-language research to ignore that there is a problem. In a major research review on cross-language qualitative studies, SQUIRES (2009) found that most researchers barely pay attention to language issues and present results as if the language used is irrelevant. However, not considering the methods of translation, one's own language skills and the hermeneutical scope defined by these aspects obviously does not suffice for a reflexive methodology that is aware of its (linguistic) limitations. [5]

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3 All translations from non-English texts are ours.

In a more problem-conscious variation of that type of research, crossing languages is seen as a sole technical problem that needs to be addressed when preparing interviews for analysis. In these cases, professional translators, interpreters, techniques such as "quality checks" by an independent interpreter, or forward and backward-translation are "used to ensure agreement of a 'correct' version of the text" (TEMPLE & YOUNG, 2004, p.163). Even though "objective" translation is not possible, these professionals are understood to eliminate any subjective bias. That is, anticipating the dangers of language barriers when it comes to the actual hermeneutic interpretation of text, in these approaches the researcher's readings when transferring interviews from one language into the other are cut out. This is meant to protect the data from "over-interpretations", that is from reading meaning into a text that is not "there". Consistently, as KRUSE and SCHMIEDER (2012, p.251) pointed out, academics following this strategy are sceptical that fine-grained procedures aiming at latent structures of meaning are possible at all. Instead, they assume that interview data should undergo an unbiased, computer supported content analysis, thereby falling back on a rather positivist epistemology and treating interviewees as mere "informants" from whom "pure" facts are gathered. Therefore, the authors argued that calling for content analyses of text underestimates the necessity of a deep sequential interpretation of language for a sufficient understanding of the process of sensemaking. [6]

Additionally, as scholars like CHIUMENTO, RAHMAN, MACHIN and FRITH (2018), INHETVEEN (2012) or LAUTERBACH (2014) showed impressively, interpreters and translators should rather be seen "as an active co-constructor of data influenced by their intersubjectivities" (CHIUMENTO et al., 2018, p.606). These mediators tend to introduce their own interpretations and readings of what was said—not only during written translations, but during oral ad-hoc interpretations in the interview situation as well. This becomes especially visible in interpreter-mediated interviews which can entail effects such as the loss of details, modifications of the text regarding facts as well as negotiations between interviewee and interpreter concerning the meaning of statements in the interview situation without involving the researcher (INHETVEEN, 2012; LAUTERBACH, 2014). [7]

This is complemented by another important insight. Linguistically presuming that meaning is both, practically produced *in* and expressed *by* language (DURANTI, 1997; DURANTI & GOODWIN, 1992), there is no neutral standpoint from which to translate. Even very close, word-by-word translations will not meet the exact semantic notions of the original text: "you cannot find the correct reproduction of a statement, with identical meaning, by just picking the right semantic equivalent in another language" (INHETVEEN, 2012, p.34; see also SCHROER, 2009). To be exact: approaches suggesting that language differences are merely a difference in words ignore the interplay of semantics and syntax. This is crucial, since in order to capture meaning, one needs to take into account these layers of language. As language is used and understood in concrete situations and within specific contexts, words and sentences may mean (slightly) different things, refer to different life-worlds and reflect different experiences. Consequently, there is not just one single or correct translation of a text. In that sense, as TAROZZI (2013, §32) pointed out, a nuanced and balanced "interlinguistic translation" is comparable to a hermeneutic approach towards a text and can therefore even play a role for a first coding of the transcript. [8]

Additionally, one must acknowledge epistemologically that our status within the social world influences the way we approach and use language. This includes questions of how language is connected to power (FAIRCLOUGH, 1989; MACHT, 2018). During interview research, this demands the researchers to reflect on their own language standards and not to presume, "for instance, that interviewees are familiar with dominant ways of conducting interviews" (FAIRCLOUGH, 1989, pp.48). This sensitivity for differences in the usage of language applies to the various forms of translation problems during the research process, not only to the interview situation as such (WELCH & PIEKKARI, 2006, p.422). This includes for instance an awareness for the fact that translation processes during analysis inevitably establish meanings that can forestall the understanding of the original utterance.[4] In that sense, BAUMGARTNER (2012) suggested staying as long as possible within the language of the informants during the research process—beginning with the interview and ending with a complex coding list. Only for the final cross-case analysis and the presentation to the academic peers the results should be translated into what she calls "target language"—which is mostly English (p.19).[5] This is meant to let the informants express themselves as freely as possible and to avoid loses and "refractions" of meaning. However, the success of this approach depends highly on the language skills of the researchers and their research budget. Not least, it runs the risk of overcharging them: not everyone is capable of speaking five languages as BAUMGARTNER does. [9]

This leads to anthropological or ethnographical methodologies which sometimes advocate the idea of a thorough appropriation of the language of the field of research (MALINOWSKI, 2014 [1922]; SENFT, 2012; SPRADLEY, 1979). *Prima facie*, this proposition seems quite logical, yet it also has its limitations. First, it is an illusion to assume that researchers could completely shake off their biographical imprinting and become truly linguistic "natives". Instead, in most interview situations, it will be clear that the researchers know the language of the respondents only to a certain degree. Thus, they will always remain outsiders to the field and to the linguistic matrix to some extent. Additionally, and related to this, a position that prefers going fully native underestimates the "outsider's advantage" (WELCH & PIEKKARI, 2006, p.430) language differences may imply, meaning that being a foreigner, in some cases, has the upside that respondents open up more easily. Finally, insisting on mastering a certain language first would mean one could only conduct research within its own linguistic domains. Then, a

4 In postcolonial translation theory (BANDIA, 2008) it is even emphasised that any linguistic matrix has its own form of expression. From this stance, every translation even means to impose a new dominant matrix on a text, thereby shattering parts of its original meaning (BANDIA, 2017).

5 For a critical reflection on transferring meaning into different languages, especially English, see MACHT (2018).

multitude of influential studies, ranging from the early works of the Chicago School to recent migration studies, would be disqualified.[6] [10]

2.3 Procedural knowledge: Adhering to the guiding principles of qualitative research

This brief review of recent reflections gives insight into ways of handling some dimensions of the translation problem in qualitative cross-language interview research. However, the various practical solutions and compensations strategies one can find (BAUMGARTNER, 2012; FRYER, 2019; HO, HOLLOWAY & STENHOUSE, 2019; INHETVEEN, 2012; WELCH & PIEKKARI, 2006) also show that the problem cannot be resolved or omitted—which is due to the problem and not to the solutions. Instead, we argue that it is epistemologically impossible to eliminate the translation problem completely. One way or the other and at several stages during research, meaning needs to be transferred from one linguistic matrix into the other, with all the above-mentioned problems potentially attached to it. Therefore, practical research guides will always have their limitations, since they are derived from specific research contexts and will never cover all possible translational challenges. [11]

This is why we want to explicate and elaborate more general *procedural knowledge* about cross-language research, rather than giving a concrete how-to-guide. It is our concern that despite all the difficulties and risks that come with it, research within foreign language contexts can provide meaningful insights and valid results—if the basic rules are applied. This leads us back to the very foundation of text based, hermeneutic research. Hermeneutics in social sciences always means adapting to new contexts, leaving behind one's own taken-for-grantedness and making creative efforts to bridge the gap of understanding between researchers and respondents. Especially the guiding principles of *openness, reflexivity and pragmatism* (STRÜBING, HIRSCHAUER, AYAß, KRÄHNKE & SCHEFFER, 2018, p.85; see also ROSENTHAL, 2005a) aim to anticipate these uncertainties, calling up the necessity and the ability to adapt the researcher's perspective to the research settings. They were developed to manage the irritations which are, for example, due to milieu and class affiliations and sometimes appear to be even greater than differences in language. [12]

In this article, we argue that the challenges arising from the translation problems are *structurally similar* to the general problem of the understanding of the other. Therefore, if adopted consistently, the guiding principles of qualitative research also provide a robust meta-knowledge for questions that occur in different stages of cross-language research. Based on experiences gained in our own research, we want to demonstrate how applying these principles leads to reflected "compensation strategies" (RESCH & ENZENHOFER 2018, p.131) that take the translation problem seriously, address specific analytical issues and take certain

6 The early works of the Chicago School were migration studies that were based and conducted in peculiar spatial and social milieus of US-American cities and always included the handling of language differences, see for example THOMAS and ZNANIECKI (1996 [1918-1920]) or WHYTE (1943).

methodological precautions. However, these strategies are also based on the confidence that cross-language research can be methodised and an understanding of the "linguistic others", that is, speakers of other languages, can be achieved. So far, such hints toward procedural knowledge of conducting cross-language research were only mentioned incidentally, mainly indicating to be "reflexive" and "adaptable" when it comes to translation issues (FRYER, 2019, p.1654; see also INHETVEEN, 2012). In the following, we strive to come to more concrete terms. [13]

3. Methodologically Reflected Pragmatism and Flexibility

Our methodological considerations in this article are based on experiences we gained during our research in two cross-language research projects. In both projects, the interviewers and interviewees did not speak the same first language. In the first project, the interviews took place in a (linguistic) context familiar to the interviewers, whereas in the second project the interviews were conducted in the (linguistic) home context of the interviewees. This led to various translation problems. Both studies are outlined briefly (Section 3.1), before exemplifying our methodological insights empirically in regard to the study set-up (Section 3.2) and insights resulting from fine-grained sequential analyses (Section 3). [14]

3.1 Two research projects in cross-language settings

The first research project[7] addressed the phenomenon of "foreign burglars", i.e. people travelling from abroad and committing domestic burglaries in Germany. The study was conducted in the light of a public debate on "foreign burglars", who were made responsible for the rise in residential burglary in Germany by 57.52% between 2006 and 2015 (BUNDESKRIMINALAMT [FEDERAL CRIME POLICE OFFICE], 1994-2016). Nevertheless, little was known about their personal backgrounds, motives, or criminal methods. Against this backdrop, the objective of the research was to reconstruct their backgrounds as well as their own interpretations of their criminal acts. We conducted biographical narrative interviews (ROSENTHAL, 2005b) with 30 people from abroad who were imprisoned for burglary in Germany. After 13 out of 16 German State Ministries of Justice had granted permission to the survey, access to interviewees was provided through gatekeepers in corresponding prisons. Sampling as well as analyses followed grounded theory methodology, the latter especially drawing on systematic comparisons and extensive line-by-line sequential analysis of relevant passages from each interview, which led to the reconstruction of recurring patterns (STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1990). We were able to secure a great variation of cultural, social and language backgrounds in a sample of interviewees from 14 different countries[8]—and thus were confronted with just as many different languages, hardly any of which we spoke ourselves. The fact that the

7 The study was a one-year research project conducted by the Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony and funded by the German Forum of Crime Prevention and the Police Crime Prevention. For insights into the project see WOLLINGER and JUKSCHAT (2017a, 2017b).

8 Namely: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Georgia, Kosovo, Croatia, Libya, the Netherlands, Poland, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Hungary.

interviewees were inmates in German prisons added dimensions of trust and power to the specific social and linguistic dimensions of the interview situation. Hence, the main challenge was to find a language sensitive research design that satisfied qualitative research standards as well as practical and economic concerns. [15]

In the second research project we explored worldviews of unemployed people[9]. We focused on people who are deprived in multiple ways and depend on social support of different kinds, mainly welfare benefits and examined how the interviewees interpret the world and their lives, how they position themselves in society and what their ideas of solidarity and charity are. The research was based on the assumption that world interpretations and coping strategies of deprived people are highly influenced by the social contexts they live in. This included structural conditions like welfare regimes and the regulation of social support as well as semantical aspects, specifically cultural discourses and religious traditions. In a comparative perspective, the research project was based on data collected in two countries, which differ from each other religiously and with regard to the welfare regime: Great Britain with a liberal welfare state regime, an Anglican state church, a religious plurality and a considerable Puritan tradition on the one hand, and the catholic Republic of Ireland with a late-developed and still fragmented welfare state on the other hand. Given these countries, the data collection was carried out in English, by researchers—the principal researcher, the research assistant and four student assistants—who are German first-language speakers with experiences in English to different degrees and by one British-Canadian and UK-based fellow who had conducted interview research in deprived neighbourhoods of British cities before (VINCETT, 2016). Using theoretical sampling (STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1990), we gathered 36 single narrative interviews (ROSENTHAL, 2005b) and four group discussions (BOHNSACK, PRZYBORSKI & SCHÄFFER, 2010) with people who visited social support services like foodbanks, job clubs and community centres. We found these institutions via internet research and contacted them via e-mail. Some were referred to us by our local research fellow. After the contact was established, we introduced ourselves to the staff on site. These social workers and volunteers served as gatekeepers to the communities and helped setting up the interviews. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim by native English speakers. The hermeneutic in-depth interpretation of the transcripts (REICHERTZ, 2004) was performed collectively by the research team, with the support of dictionaries and native speakers. [16]

9 The research project was based at the University of Leipzig (Germany) and funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft [German Research Foundation] from 2016 to 2019. For further information, see http://www.woup.info/en/ [Accessed: September 6, 2021].

3.2 Study set-up: The example of an interview-study in a complex multi-lingual setting

As language related issues are relevant in all stages of cross-language research, they have to be reflected right from the beginning, when setting up a study. The research project on imprisoned people from 14 countries that committed burglary in Germany is an example for that. In the following we describe the approach and unfold the methodological reflections that guided our decisions globally, always alternating between pragmatism and methodological strictness. [17]

The research team decided to conduct interviews ourselves in those cases where the interviewees could speak German or English fluently (8 out of 30 participants), since our first language was German and we estimated our English skills to be sufficient. This not only facilitated us to gain first-hand data and field experiences. It also enabled the researchers to work with the original transcripts throughout the whole research process (BAUMGARTNER, 2012). [18]

However, in most of the cases no common language between researcher and interviewee existed. As recommended by some scholars (ENZENHOFER & RESCH, 2011; KRUSE et al., 2012), we then drew on bilingual speakers for data collection, transcription and translation. Due to the limited research budget, we were not able to recruit interpretation and translation professionals. Instead, we chose to engage mainly students of social sciences or linguistics who already had experiences in qualitative research and/or translation. They were paid on a freelance basis for interview conduction, transcription and translation of the transcript. We integrated them as co-researchers influenced by their intersubjectivities, rather than as "neutral" translators and/or "objective" data collectors. They were trained prior to research and supervised throughout the research process, which included accompanying them to the first interview and debriefing after each interview. In a training, they were informed about the research topic and key principles of qualitative interview research, schooled in interview techniques, transcription rules and made aware of the unique challenges involved in the translation process. [19]

This conscious decision for bilingual co-researchers was grounded in reflections on the specific interview setting in prison as well: in this setting, it was essential to build confidence between interviewer and interviewee and to overcome power relations inherent in "total institutions" (GOFFMAN, 1961, p.11). Confronting an interviewee in this context with two people (researcher and interpreter) and talking in a language they do not understand, would have been counterproductive in this sense. Drawing on native speakers sharing the interviewee's linguistic background, therefore, had various advantages: First, for the interviewees, the interview was a very rare opportunity to talk to someone in their first language in prison. The *communication vacuum* they experienced there led to a great willingness to narrate. Second, being able to talk in their first language the interviewees could be sure that prison staff were excluded from what they talked about. Third, due to the common cultural background, the interviewers were often perceived as allies by the interviewees and not as state representatives. The latter strategy proved very helpful in terms of confidence building between interviewee and interviewer, leading to a great openness to narrate also on sensitive issues. At the same time the common linguistic and cultural background sometimes also led to complicity between interviewee and interviewer to different degrees. In one case, for example, the interview digressed from the actual topic towards a talk on local characteristics and beauties of the interviewee's region of origin. In another case the interviewee misunderstood the interview as a personal relationship-offer, as is documented in the following lines of the interviewer's postscript: "He asks me, if I know friends of him and says that we can meet again in a friendly atmosphere".[10] [20]

Examples like these illustrate some of the pitfalls that may go along with the use of lay bilingual co-researchers. They indicate how important it is to professionally train them in advance and accompany them during the whole process−not only regarding interview techniques and other research tools but also concerning the attitude of research, expectations and potential role conflicts. Researchers should be aware that this requires considerable (time and human) resources. [21]

All interviews conducted by these bilingual co-researchers were recorded, transcribed (and kept) in the original language and subsequently translated into German. Regarding translation, we favoured a "documentary translation" (WETTEMANN, 2012, p.110). This approach advocates for a more or less word-by-word translation and not trying to reproduce the message in the most natural manner for the target language as it would be the case with "instrumental translation" (p.111). Additionally, we asked our translators to comment on things they thought to be specific or relevant regarding the cultural context etc. and to highlight terms and phrases in the translated transcript they found hard to translate adequately. Thereby, we were able to refer back to the original document whenever questions or uncertainties about the meaning of a statement arose during analysis. [22]

The decision for combining very different strategies in dealing with these challenges reveals a pragmatic hands-on approach, which is of course partially due to the ambitious one-year-time line and the economic limitations of the project. However, we are also convinced that it led to the desired effect of getting to know more about the backgrounds, motives and methods of "foreign burglars". The grounding principles of qualitative research, we argue, proved to be a valuable guide in such extremely challenging research settings. Following the principle of openness, for example, priority was given to enable interviewees to unfold their "relevance structures" (SCHÜTZ, 1953, p.11), irrespective of the concrete interview setting. Regarding the interviews in German or English, we observed that the respondents, forced to express themselves in a foreign language, sometimes used unconventional metaphors to express their thoughts. These "irritating" expressions often became fruitful focal points during analyses.

10 German original postscript: "Er fragt mich noch, ob ich Freunde von ihm kenne und sagt, dass wir uns nochmal freundschaftlich treffen können".

One Dutch interviewee, for example, described his burglary as "like going shopping and, additionally, that brings money in the bag".[11] [23]

Due to this expression, it became obvious that for this interviewee burglary became a rather normal practice or routine and was interpreted as a rewarding opportunity to make quick and easy money. Further analyses confirmed this reading and finally led to one out of three types of self-interpretations of burglary reconstructed in the study: burglary "as a quick and easy way to make a lot of money" (WOLLINGER & JUKSCHAT 2017a, p.228). Similar fruitful insights were gained during the analyses of an interviewee from Libya, who presented his life story in a rather broken English mixed with German when he talked about the deviant behaviour he developed in Germany (consumption of drugs, gambling, theft and burglary). This switching between languages appeared chaotic and hard to understand in the interview situation. Later it helped us understand how his burglary practice was closely linked to his experiences in Germany and vice versa.

> "the Polizei [police] one hour s-stop me they make a report (incomprehensible) or why-why from where the Fahrrad [bike] (incomprehensible) or uhh y-you buy you sell you buy oder nein oder you klaut [steal] I say ? you sa I say myself this is easy Polizei this is not (incomprehensible) problem". [24]

Regarding the interviews translated by our bilingual co-researchers, we followed OEVERMANN, and took them "consequently and stubbornly literal seriously" (2008, p.151), thereby relying on hermeneutic analyses. Since hermeneutic analysis enables the reconstruction of the internal, implicit meaning structure of the social interaction documented in the transcript and not just of a concrete expression, it also helps to identify discrepancies in meaning. Thus, translation errors or inaccuracies are revealed. This showed again that taking unconventional and surprising expressions in our translated transcripts literally and being open to learn from them mostly enabled a deeper understanding. In an interview transcript translated by our Polish interviewer to German e.g. we were irritated by the interviewee's self-denomination as "złodziej", i.e. "Dieb" in German and "thief" in English and the description of burglary as his "profesja", i.e. "Beruf/Profession" in German and "profession" in English throughout the interview. Further interpretations confirmed this pattern and finally led to another type, interpreting burglary as a "profession" (WOLLINGER & JUKSCHAT 2017a, 2017b). [25]

Summarising, we experienced that there is not one "correct" way of doing cross-language interview research. Even constellations that appeared problematic at first sight provided fruitful insights into the phenomenon in the end. However, this implies that the specific circumstances of data collection are reflected, a strategy of how to deal with these is consciously chosen and openness and pragmatism

11 German original transcription: "wie Einkaufen gehen und das bringt noch Geld in die Tasche". All transcripts cited here are smoothed slightly and do not contain specific transcription signs. Only incomprehensible passages are marked.

as guiding principles are applied during the interview and the hermeneutic analysis. [26]

3.3 Examples from microscopic analyses of interview situations

So far, we showed how a methodologically reflective, confident and pragmatic attitude can guide a cross-language research project as a whole. Now we want to go deeper into two examples which show more concretely how this approach can be used during interview situations and the subsequent analyses. We argue that the challenges for qualitative research in cross-language settings can be managed well and sometimes even provide new opportunities for understanding. [27]

3.3.1 Openness in situations of non-understanding

As social researchers exploring foreign countries, we may be confronted with situations where we do not understand anything, which means that we are literally lost in translation. Strong accents, talking very quickly or mumbling etc. can cause such non-understanding. However, in qualitative interviews, we are not as lost as it may seem. Relying on situations of non-understanding that we experienced ourselves, we encourage researchers to stay true to the guiding principles of qualitative research and let the people in the field direct the flow of data and not the researchers. In our own research, even if we did not completely understand our respondents, we chose to not intervene but let them present what was important to them. It was our strategy to put trust in our recordings and transcripts and the subsequent deep analysis. As INHETVEEN (2012, p.34) mentioned, the understanding in the interview situation can be rather "superficial". What really matters analytically is the hermeneutic interpretation afterwards, for which we rely on our own language experiences, the help of native speakers and dictionaries. [28]

As an example, we refer to an interview from the project "Worldviews of Unemployed People". We spoke with Oona[12], an elderly woman of about 60 years of age and native speaker of English, in a foodbank in South Wales (SAMMET & ERHARD, 2018). After having consented to the interview, she immediately started to speak very quickly, in a strong accent and without waiting for the recorder to be switched on. This is how the transcript starts:

> "I: Yeah.
>
> O: (incomprehensible) And then you gonna see board up here. I met (the) board. And they put me off. And I went back to my GP (incomprehensible). And he put me shit back on sick paper three months. Now I got a flat, uh, just a flat. (I've stopped my money.) They was giving me fifty pound a week.
>
> I: Fifty pound a week, uh-huh.
>
> O: And then they've took me (little) loan off me now, which was forty pound a week. And my (incomprehensible) is eighty-two pound a fortnight. And (incomprehensible). So I can't pay my bills. I can't go shopping. This give me so much stress, I've had to

12 All mentioned names are pseudonyms.

> go on Dimazepan tablets, which I got to wait now to go back and see the board, which takes three months. So it's three months' time struggling. I can't shop. I can't pay me bills. So I go back on m'debt." [29]

The transcript shows that Oona was very upset about her life situation. She experienced something she cannot understand. This lack of cognitive order and sense is expressed in her monologue. Therefore, her speech does not seem to have a structure and an argumentative goal—especially for the non-native interviewer. However, as the interviewer did not give in to her confusion about not understanding Oona's outburst, the interviewee could unfold her upset. The result is an authentic document of how Oona experienced her life situation and how she tried to repair her loss of orientation. This open and non-directive approach is grounded in the confidence as social researchers that every communication *makes sense*. This trust in the interviewee's ability to communicate in a meaningful way enables them to express themselves in their own manner. In the end, this procedure ensures that, given a proper record and a solid transcript, situations of non-understanding can be analysed as expressions of the field. [30]

3.3.2 Explicating tacit knowledge in the interview situation

In everyday conversations, we assume that people we talk to share our knowledge of basic facts about life with us. This tacit knowledge is what GARFINKEL (1964) called the "Routine Grounds of Everyday Activities". It also includes linguistic knowledge, i.e. the ability to smoothly partake in conversations by sharing a basic stock of semantical and syntactical knowledge. This is different in situations where people do not have the same language background, like cross-language interviews. Sometimes interviewers need to address their limits of understanding and ask for the meaning of certain expressions. As mentioned above, in these methodically controlled settings one ideally would not interrupt the "natural" flow of the conversation by impulsively asking for details. However, in some situations it is inevitable to clarify certain meanings in order to understand central aspects of a remark. In interviews with interviewers coming from abroad, most respondents consider that they have to negotiate linguistic details and, even more, that they can use these explanations to go into more detail about their experiences. Then, the flow of conversation is interrupted only mildly, if at all, and instead the clarification of language issues leads to further elaborations. [31]

We experienced this constellation, for instance, in some interviews with Irish Travellers in Dublin. The community of Irish Travellers itinerated for centuries around the countryside and became acknowledged as an indigenous ethnic group in 2017. They are English speaking but older members of the community still speak their own traditional languages. They experience racism and discrimination in various aspects, which affects their everyday lives (IRISH TRAVELLER MOVEMENT, 2014). These issues were also mentioned in interviews we conducted at a Traveller's halting site in Dublin in 2017. In one of those interviews we spoke with Iris who is 35 years old and a native speaker of English. In a report of stigmatisations and humiliations of Irish Travellers, she introduced the word knacker: "you were often called a knacker", and summarising she expressed her feeling about it: "knacker is a horrible u-word. It's a horrible word used." Thus, it became clear that notions of stigmatisation are condensed in the word "knacker". However, as it turns out, the meaning of the word was not clear to the interviewer, which led to an inquiry that potentially disrupted the interviewee's flow. However, unexpectedly, the following clarification gave more insight into experiences of devaluation, which made the analysis richer:

> "I: What does it mean, like?
>
> Iris: It means like a-a horse that's ready for the bin. Knacker, you're just like you know, and that was this horrible word that was put on travellers. So, it's like every time, even saying it, I feel pain like uh, like an-an instant discomfort in the in the like a defence or you know what I mean, like?" [32]

In this sequence, Iris spoke about general experiences of stigmatisation and social exclusion. In Iris' past, outside the city, Irish Travellers were excluded from social life and not acknowledged as proper members of society. Today, living in Dublin, the experienced degradation and humiliation has become absolute. Being treated like "crap" means they are denied the status as a human being. They are the refuse of society. For this article, we want to go into more detail about this elaboration. Consulting online dictionaries shows that "knacker" is a very multi-faceted word that combines different meanings. LEXICO gave three definitions for the noun:

> *1. "British* A person whose business is the disposal of dead or unwanted animals, especially those whose flesh is not fit for human consumption.
>
> 2. (knackers) *British vulgar slang* Testicles.
>
> 3. *Irish informal, derogatory* An uncouth or loutish person."[13] [33]

While the second and third definition refer to an informal or even vulgar language and give "knacker" an abusive notion, the first definition relates to a (professional) practice of exploiting inedible animal corpses. At this point, analysing how language is used in the field and not just "in the books", it is very interesting which reading the interviewee refers to. Asked about the meaning of the word, Iris gave a short explanation: "a horse that's ready for the bin". Interestingly, she used a notion that is quite close to the one we find in the dictionary but not the same. In her definition we observe a shift from a subject to an object position. She did not refer to the person who has to deal with discarded animals professionally but to the animal, a horse, itself. [34]

Therefore, Iris' explanation of the word makes clear that for her "knacker" is deeply and self-evidently connected to (affective) memories of collective as well as individual experiences of discrimination and humiliation. Hence, her explanation underlines that it is less important what a word literally means but rather what its social function and indexical meaning are (GARFINKEL, 1967; KRUSE & SCHMIEDER, 2012)—in the case of "knacker": denying a minority in

13 https://www.lexico.com/definition/knacker [Accessed: March 31, 2021].

society social worth and honour. Without the naïve question of the interviewer which revealed a lack of tacit knowledge this inscribed social function would have hardly become an object of the analysis. This is due to 1. that linguistic strangers are allowed to ask naïve questions and therefore can have an "outsider's advantage" (WELCH & PIEKKARI, 2006, p.430) and 2. that having to explain an expression triggers the personal experiences that are connected to it. However, it needs a combination of confidence in the interview situation to ask about the meaning of seemingly self-evident terms and a reflexive analytic approach that strategically is open for insights that were not intended (ECKERT & CICHECKI, 2020) to make use of these effects productively. [35]

4. Discussion

From a general perspective, managing qualitative research is about finding solutions to the problem of gaining knowledge of the other(s). Reflecting on the examples from our research, we argue that problems due to a language barrier are *structurally similar* to such problems of understanding already described in the "classical" methodological literature of qualitative inquiry (see also KRUSE & SCHMIEDER, 2012). However, in this article we also showed that the challenges of understanding the other(s) in cross-lingual settings are specific, which troubles our research routines. Especially the manifold reasons for communication difficulties, misunderstandings and even situations of non-understanding are striking—and sometimes become frustrating. In this respect, we argued to stay true to the guiding principles of qualitative research which provide all of the tools necessary to find productive strategies to adopt to constellations of language differences. These principles are the crash barriers in general of research as we understand it and, applied consistently, also give support to manage situations of linguistic estrangement. [36]

First and foremost, there is the *principle of openness*, which should guide the whole research process and in particular the interview situation (ROSENTHAL, 2005a). Giving interviewees the possibility to unfold their own relevance structures is a chief principle that also proves helpful in cross-language settings. This has practical implications: interviews should be conducted in a language in which the interviewees can express themselves fluently, preferably in their first language. However, as our examples from the study on burglary demonstrated, other constellations are also possible and unconventional expressions or struggling with language to a certain degree may lead to fruitful insights if taken seriously. That is, one should not automatically intervene, if an interview does not proceed as planned. Instead, one should put trust in the fact that behind every human utterance there is meaning to be discovered. This implies an openness towards not intended insights and irritations (PLODER, 2009). Building on the technique of re-constructing the transcription of the conversation afterwards enables the researcher to compensate for non-understandings and misunderstandings that might occur during the interview situation. [37]

Secondly and related to this, the *principle of reflexivity* reminds the researcher, especially in cross-language research constellations, to adopt method routines to the (language) needs of the field and find pragmatic, hands-on solutions for them (STRÜBING, 2007). This always includes reflecting one's own situatedness and subjectivity that influences the way we conduct our research. Situations of non-understanding and linguistic estrangement refer to our own (language) expectations and normative standards. We have to reveal and reflect on them, to enable a deep understanding of the other. Of course, this is not new. Qualitative research methods require reflexivity and self-observation in any research context. In this sense, they will never be standardisable (STRÜBING et al., 2018, p.85). However, language differences call for special precautions and make the need for reflexivity even more tangible. As shown, from the very beginning of setting up a cross-language research and pragmatically deciding who should conduct, transcribe and analyse the interviews (see also BERMAN & TYYSKÄ, 2011), to finding techniques of dealing with situations of non-understanding and specific semantics conscious choices have to be made in order to manage the language gap. Questions that need answering during this process of finding "compensation strategies" (RESCH & ENZENHOFER, 2018, p.131) are for example: Who does not understand whom lingualistically in which steps of the research process and for what (underlying) reasons? Can the reasons that lie in the linguistic biography of the researcher be changed and by what means? What advantages and disadvantages would that imply for the scope of the research? [38]

Finally, this leads to the principle of methodological appropriateness, which assures that the gained data actually answer one's research question. For this, one cannot rely on a pre-set and fixed method design. Instead, *pragmatism* and flexibility is needed on the side of the researchers. They should be sensitive to what data is attainable in the field and be open to widening the scope of what is useable data. As mentioned above, interviews also deliver analytical insights, even if they seem improvised and do not follow the planned procedure. Regarding the data analysis, this also means to try different approaches towards the text. As we saw, interpreting foreign language data should not fall back on the idea that there is only one true understanding of the transcript. Only in this way, it is possible to establish a methodologically informed analytical view towards the data that does not withdraw from the aspiration to deeply understand the specific logics of the field—some of which one might not think of beforehand. [39]

If followed through, these methodological guiding principles enable qualitative researchers to gain rich and useful data also in "unfavourable" cross-language constellations. These principles allow to anticipate that any constellation of linguistic estrangement in qualitative research entails both potentials and risks the research has to consider. Adhering to the idea that "all is data" (GLASER, 1998, p.8), our aim was to advocate a consistent application of the guiding principle of openness, reflexivity and pragmatism that guarantees a productive outcome even if the research process does not seem ideal and is "spoiled" by (linguistic) irritation. The interview situations we referred to for this article are paradigmatic for these considerations. Even though we cannot give final answers to the multitude of translation problems within qualitative research, our examples demonstrate that cross-language research is manageable and provides productive insights—if conducted pragmatically according to the guiding principles of qualitative research. [40]

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