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Engaging with spaces of linguistic partial understanding in multilingual linguistic ethnography

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Abstract: This paper gives an account of the impact of spaces of linguistic non-understanding and spaces of linguistic partial understanding in the first author's linguistic ethnographic doctoral study of lawyer-client communication within UK immigration legal advice meetings. The paper uses the researching multilingually framework as a lens for exploring how the researcher's positionality as a native speaker of English, an elementary-level learner of Arabic, and a non-speaker of other languages she encountered were material to the research process. Data in the form of researcher reflections, notes and records made about the impact of language(s) at different stages of the project is drawn on to examine the role of linguistic support – in the form of input from translators – at each stage, and the exercise of linguistic reflexivity in relation to this dimension of the research. The paper argues for the need, when doing ethnographic research in contexts of linguistic unpredictability, to be reflexive about the literacy practices and language ideologies of people involved in linguistic support, since these are also part of the language ecology that shapes the process of knowledge production. Thus, linguistic reflexivity is part of a practice of epistemological accountability in multilingual linguistic ethnography.

Keywords: researching multilingually; linguistic ethnography; spaces of linguistic non-understanding; linguistic reflexivity; translator identity

Abstract and keywords in Arabic: تشرح هذه المقالة أثر مساحات عدم التفاهم اللغوي ومساحات ذات التفاهم اللغوي الجزئي الذي تم ذكرهم في دراسة الدكتوراه للمؤلف الأول التي تمحورت حول الإثنوغرافيا اللغوية المتعلّقة بالتواصل ما بين المحامي والموكل ضمن اجتماعات المشورة القانونية للهجرة في المملكة المتحدة. تستخدم هذه الورقة إطار البحث اللغوي المتعدد كعدسة لإكتشاف كيف كان موقف الباحثة في عملية البحث كون لغتها الأم اللغة الإنجليزية وتعتبر مبتدئة في اللغة العربية وبالإضافة إلى عدم تحدّثها للّغات الأخرى التي مرّت عليها خلال

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عملية البحث. تأتي المعلومات المطروحة على شكل انعكاسات الباحث والملاحظات والسجلات المتعلقة التي تبيّن أثر اللغة أو اللغات في مراحل مختلفة من المشروع بأكملها. الهدف من المعلومات هو فحص دور الدعم اللغوي في كل مرحلة من البحث، يكون على شكل مداخلات من المترجمين، بالإضافة إلى ممارسة الإنعكاس اللغوي فيما يتعلّق بهذا البعد من البحث. تُناقش هذه الورقة حاجة الأشخاص المشاركين في الدعم اللغوي للإنعكاسية في البحث الإثنوغرافي المذكور في سياق التقلّب اللغوي من خلال الممارسات والنظريات اللغوية؛ كونهم جزء من علم اللغة البيئي الذي يشكّل عملية إنتاج المعرفة. لذلك، تُعد الإنعكاسية اللغوية جزء من ممارسة المساءلة المعرفية في الإثنوغرافيا اللغوية متعددة اللغات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: البحث اللغوي المتعدد؛ الإثنوغرافيا اللغوية؛ مساحات عدم التفاهم اللغوي؛ الإنعكاسية اللغوية؛ هوية المترجم

1 Introduction

In this paper we give an account of the impact of “spaces of linguistic non-understanding” (van Hest and Jacobs 2022) and spaces of linguistic *partial* understanding, within the first author’s linguistic ethnographic doctoral study of refugee and asylum legal advice giving in the UK (Reynolds 2018). The paper focuses on the role and impact of linguistic support in different parts of the study, where the linguistic mix in the research site was unpredictable and the first author (hereafter “Judith”) encountered languages in which she has varying levels of competence. Linguistic support here refers to the input into a research study, in the form of translation or interpreting or other language-related services, of individuals with linguistic competencies that the researcher or research team lacks (van Hest and Jacobs 2022). Our rationale for offering this exploration of researcher experience is to take a step towards being more epistemologically accountable (Mauthner and Doucet 2003: 424) in multilingual linguistic ethnography featuring spaces of linguistic non-understanding and partial understanding, by critically reflecting on how the involvement of others as language experts affects the processes and the products of research on multilingual contexts.

In the study under discussion, the languages encountered included varieties of English, Arabic, Chinese, Farsi and Tigrinya. Judith is an L1 (native) speaker of English, an LX speaker (elementary-level learner) of Modern Standard Arabic, and an L0 non-speaker of Chinese, Farsi and Tigrinya. Thus, the research involved Judith engaging with both spaces of linguistic non-understanding and spaces of linguistic *partial* understanding. To manage this, translation and interpreting assistance was procured at several different stages of the research process. Consideration of how to approach the multilingual aspects of the study was guided by principles of intentionality and purposeful decision-making arising from the researching multilingually framework (Holmes et al. 2013, 2016) and the exercise of “linguistic reflexivity” (Rolland et al. 2023: 647) (see further below). This was supported through discussions with both the second author, Prue, as her primary doctoral supervisor and other supervisors. When writing up the study into a doctoral thesis, decisions were also driven by a goal of transparency about the impact on the study of the different linguistic practices engaged in (Rolland et al. 2023: 653). Extending prior work emphasising the importance, in ethnography and linguistic ethnography, of being reflexive about how the multilingualism of researchers and research participants impacts on the research (Creese et al. 2015a; Martin-Jones et al. 2016), this paper focuses attention on the need to also be reflexive about the language practices and ideologies of people involved in linguistic support (van Hest and Jacobs 2022), since this is also part of the language ecology that shapes the process of knowledge production (Temple 2002).

Following this introduction, we discuss the concept of researching multilingually and how it is relevant to linguistic ethnographies in institutional spaces, and the concepts of spaces of linguistic non- (and partial) understanding and linguistic reflexivity. Then, after a brief overview of the research context and data, in the analysis and discussion section we examine what spaces of linguistic non-understanding and partial understanding were manifest at different stages of the doctoral study, and how they were engaged with through linguistic support. We focus on the impact of the identities and practices of each linguistic expert on Judith's conduct of the research. In our discussions and conclusions we argue for linguistic ethnographers who work with interpreters and translators to exercise reflexivity towards not just their own linguistic repertoires and identities, but also those of the linguistic experts they work with, and for transparency in reporting on how this affects the processes and outcomes of such research.

2 Literature review

2.1 Researching multilingually

Multilingual research practices are not new, and literature examining aspects of how to conduct what is often termed "cross-language research" (Resch and Enzenhofer 2018) exists in a number of fields. Within this body of work, some qualitatively-oriented scholars have urged a greater focus on the role of translation and interpreting – whether done by a researcher or by others – in multilingual knowledge production (e.g., Andrews 2013; Enzenhofer and Resch 2011; Martin-Jones et al. 2016; Temple 2002; Temple and Young 2004). These voices call for researchers to examine more closely the methodological, epistemological, and ethical dimensions of conducting research across languages and involving linguistic support in their work. For example, Temple and Young (2004: 164) draw on translation theory to highlight that in research within an interpretivist or social constructivist paradigm, it is impossible to regard a translator or interpreter as a neutral instrument since they are active agents in the processes of knowledge construction.

Recently there has been a growing call for researcher recognition of the wider impact of multilingual practices and language choices in research processes, and an examination of the significance of this impact (Gibb et al. 2019; Holmes et al. 2016, 2022; Martin-Jones and Martin 2016). The concept of researching multilingually – how researchers conceptualise their project, and make choices about generating, analysing, interpreting, and reporting data when more than one language is involved – invites researchers to recognise and account for the multilingual elements of their research as an integral part of their researcher practice and research outputs (Holmes et al. 2013). A researching multilingually approach includes considering and acknowledging in what ways, and with what consequences, a researcher's own linguistic resources intersect with the languages of the research context, research site, and others involved in the project. Figure 1 conceptualises the researching multilingually process (see Holmes et al. [2022] for a more detailed discussion). The researcher action dimension points, first, to the researcher's developing awareness concerning the possibilities for the use of more than one language in the research process; second, the need for reflexivity and reflection in considering the possibilities and particularities of a study; and third, the need for informed and purposeful decision making about which languages to use where, why, and how, a stance described as "intentionality" (Stelma et al. 2013). Two further dimensions of the research include, first, the research spaces of the research itself (the phenomenon under investigation, the context, the researcher's linguistic and

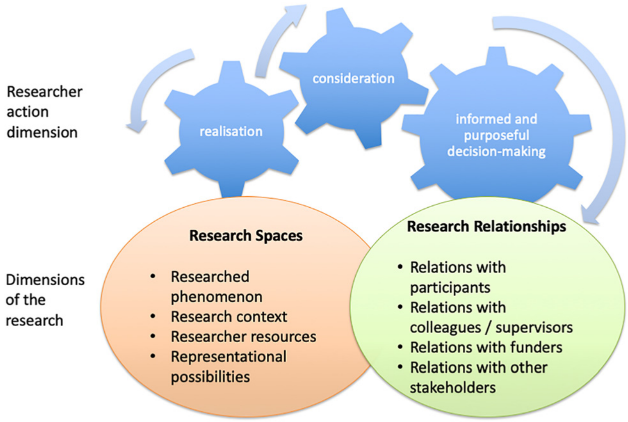

Figure 1: The researching multilingually process (Holmes et al. 2022: 7).

other multimodal resources, and the languages used in representing the research to stakeholders); and second, the relationships that underpin the research – with participants, other researchers, supervisors, funders, gatekeepers, and stakeholders. Language is central in negotiating these relationships (Krog 2018).

Researching multilingually is also concerned with four deeper themes (Holmes et al. 2022). The first concerns the hegemonic structures – funders, gatekeepers, community organisations, the academy, the publishing industry – which prioritise and legitimise certain languages over others in the research process, for example prioritising English as a global language which marginalises other languages and their speakers preventing grassroots change (Tesseur 2022). The second theme of power relations invites researchers to reflect upon the complex, intricate, and multiple connections between people in different research spaces and relationships, and upon how unequal relations may be constituted and enacted through language choices or practices, which may in turn constrain aspects of the research (Temple and Young 2004). Exercising reflexivity in research processes and relationships when negotiating language choice and use is crucial in understanding how hegemonic structures and power relations affect voice ("the capacity to make oneself understood", Blommaert 2005: 255) in research. We discuss linguistic reflexivity further below.

Third, there is the need to decolonise methodologies. Smith (2012) argues that researchers need to be sensitive to local languages, epistemologies and methodologies when investigating how knowledges are understood in research spaces. By recognising and acknowledging other ways of being, knowing and expressing the human condition, researchers can make deliberate and critical choices about their research approaches and underpinning epistemologies, or at least critically reflect on these after the event. Finally, researching multilingually also invites researchers to critically reflect on how they conceptualise language, i.e., how they recognise and discuss the historicity and political dimensions of named languages in their research. Who benefits, who loses, and what is at stake for whom (Heller and Duchêne 2007) as a result of working in certain chosen languages, is an important question when some languages are seen as more 'standard', more prestigious, or more acceptable than others.

Together, the dimensions of researching multilingually – researcher action (being purposeful about decisions concerning the multilingual elements of the research) and attending to the research spaces and relationships – provide researchers with a conceptual map for recognising and describing their researcher processes concerning languages. The dimensions also support researchers to be more critical and transparent about the role and impact of languages in the research process.

2.2 Researching multilingually in linguistic ethnography in institutional settings

Linguistic ethnographers have long been interested in communicative practices, including multilingual practices, in institutional settings. As well as studies examining educational contexts (e.g., Creese and Blackledge 2011; Jaspers 2005), relevant work for this paper has focused on public-facing institutions' service interactions with transnational migrants within healthcare (Moyer 2013) and legal and bureaucratic advice (Codó and Garrido 2010) in Barcelona; asylum evaluation procedures in Europe (Jacquemet 2015; Maryns 2006; Maryns and Blommaert 2002); and legal advice to migrant or minority ethnic populations in the UK, US, Belgium and Australia (Baynham et al. 2018; Dieckmann and Rojas-Lizana 2016; Jacobs and Maryns 2023; Trinch 2001). Of these studies, the majority examine interaction in languages that the linguistic resources of at least one of the authors allows them to analyse without linguistic support. As notable exceptions, Maryns (2006) does include some interactions featuring languages that she is not familiar with but limits the level of her analysis of these interactions; and Moyer (2013) acknowledges the support of a translator with processing and analysing data in Urdu, a language unfamiliar to the researcher.

Even though scholars interested in institutional communication have emphasised the challenges and imperatives for researchers arising from contemporary global flows of migrants and information, and the resulting superdiversity evident in linguistic practices (Blommaert and Rampton 2016), at the time of Judith's doctoral study there was little transparency in the linguistic ethnographic literature about how researchers can and do work with unfamiliar languages in their research, a fact also noted by van Hest and Jacobs (2022). The only approach gaining substantial attention was multilingual team ethnography, wherein project teams by design include speakers of languages featuring in the research site as a solution to the challenges of researching multilingual contexts (see e.g., Creese et al. 2015a). Within this approach, reflexivity about the linguistic repertoires of researchers and research participants is emphasised as important; but a team-based design is not open to doctoral candidates pursuing research as sole researchers.

2.3 Spaces of linguistic non-understanding

Drawing on their own experiences of conducting linguistic ethnographic doctoral research that examines the impact of superdiversity and multilingualism in service encounters in Belgian institutional contexts, van Hest and Jacobs have proposed the term “spaces of linguistic non-understanding (LNU)” (van Hest and Jacobs 2022: 20) to invite greater discussion around this phenomenon. They define spaces of LNU as research spaces in which ethnographers, while collecting and/or analysing data, encounter and engage with communication in languages of which they have no understanding. They argue that whilst spaces of LNU require additional resources (in the form of linguistic support) and careful handling to ensure correct and complete transcription, analysis and interpretation, they also represent an affordance for researchers seeking an emic understanding of the positionality and experience of those service provider participants in the research site who share the researcher’s linguistic repertoire (and who thus also experience these spaces of LNU as a dimension of their work). Van Hest and Jacobs importantly point out that since linguistic diversity is an increasingly frequent dimension of institutional service encounters in a range of professional contexts, it behoves researchers to engage with spaces of LNU in their research in order that they can adequately represent the complexity of communication in such contexts. The chapter offers valuable methodological guidance to other linguistic ethnographers approaching projects involving spaces of LNU, and comments on epistemological implications, foregrounding the importance of reflexivity and how this connects to the researching multilingually framework.

Given the overlaps between Jacobs’ research context and Judith’s research study focused on in this paper (both examined communication in immigration legal advice, in Belgium and the UK respectively), it is unsurprising that many of van Hest and Jacobs’ (2022) observations about spaces of LNU also applied to Judith’s study. We also take the discussion further here by reflecting on Judith’s experience of engaging with a space of linguistic *partial* understanding, through varieties of Arabic appearing in her data set; and by extending our consideration of spaces of LNU beyond the data collection and analysis experience, into research spaces relevant at other stages of the research journey.

2.4 Linguistic reflexivity

How then do we understand linguistic reflexivity and its value in linguistic ethnographic research involving spaces of linguistic non- and partial understanding? We draw on Rolland et al. (2023) who argue that linguistic positionality is less recognised than other positionalities in reflexive approaches to research (2023: 647, citing Cormier 2018), and propose that the term “linguistic reflexivity” can more explicitly promote practices of researcher reflexivity about the impact of language use and language choices in research across disciplines. Rolland et al. (2023: 647) describe linguistic reflexivity as “a researcher’s reflexivity towards the language(s) used (or not used) by all those present in the research process – participants and researchers included.” They also advance that there is an “ethical imperative” for adopting this practice in order that the power relations inherent in multilingual research processes are adequately recognised and accounted for (Rolland et al. 2023: 647).

Reflexivity in qualitative research is generally recognised as an exercise in deconstruction of “the representational exercise itself” (Macbeth 2001: 35), with the goal of better understanding the processes of knowledge production and making these more transparent. Linguistic reflexivity of the kind described here is a dimension of what Macbeth (2001: 35) calls “positional reflexivity”, with a focus on how the impact of the language practices, attitudes and ideologies of the researcher and others shapes the analytic exercise. There are certainly ethical imperatives for this, but as van Hest and Jacobs (2022: 33, drawing on Martin-Jones et al. 2016) recognise, there are also epistemic ones, since we are driven to be more explicit about how claims to knowledge in and about multilingual contexts have arisen, therefore inviting deeper critical engagement with, and understanding of, the grounds for and limitations of our research findings (Creese et al. 2015a). We therefore advocate, alongside others we have cited in this section, that exercising linguistic reflexivity about multilingual research practices leads to greater epistemological accountability (Mauthner and Doucet 2003).

Importantly, we want to highlight that linguistic reflexivity can be directed towards different research spaces and research relationships. Often, linguistic reflexivity may manifest as a consideration of the impact on research of the linguistic repertoires and linguistic ideologies of the researcher, for example in engaging with participants in the field and in deciding how to represent participants’ language practices in research outputs (e.g., Ganassin and Holmes 2019; Vakser 2016). Where an interpreter or translator becomes involved in fieldwork and data collection, linguistic reflexivity has previously involved asking questions about that person’s contribution to how the participants understood and engaged with the research, and what kind of data was collected (e.g., Andrews 2013; Backhaus 2022; Resch and Enzenhofer 2018; Temple 2002; Temple and Young 2004). Notably amongst these researchers, Temple, Young and Backhaus all emphasise the need to explore and acknowledge the identity and perspectives of the interpreter or translator as contributor to the process of knowledge-making.

Very few researchers have given a reflexive account of the involvement of a translator in research processes outside of fieldwork, for example in data analysis. In the context of linguistic ethnography, Kalocsányiová and Shatnawi (2022) analyse the practice of collaborative transcription of multilingual data by a researcher and a language expert working together; and van Hest and Jacobs (2022) interrogate the process of having audio-recorded data in languages not familiar to the researcher transcribed and translated by a translator. Both accounts discuss methodological and epistemological implications of involving linguistic support workers in data transcription and analysis, but there is relatively little exploration of what impact the linguistic ideologies and practices that such linguistic support workers bring with them have on the processes and products of the research. In this paper, informed by an interest in the hegemonic structures surrounding languaging in all aspects of social life (see Holmes et al. [2022]), we focus on how the identities and practices of Judith's linguistic support workers were material to her research and to her engagement with the spaces of linguistic non- and partial understanding that she encountered.

3 Research context and data

The linguistic ethnographic study in focus explored how linguistic and cultural diversity impacted on communication in face-to-face legal advice meetings between immigration lawyers and asylum-seeking and refugee clients in the UK (Reynolds 2018). The main research site for the study was a not-for-profit legal advice service situated in an English city, where Judith secured permission to carry out participant observation as a volunteer-researcher over a period of seven months during 2015–16.

During the fieldwork stage, Judith worked closely with the asylum and immigration lawyer at the advice service, attending and audio recording advice meetings about asylum and refugee family reunion cases where the prior informed consent of all attendees had been obtained. Audio recordings of 22 advice meetings (around 17 h in total) were generated, including same-language interactions using English and interpreted interactions using English, Arabic, Chinese, and Tigrinya. A sub-set of 14 meetings were subsequently transcribed and analysed, first to explore the range of communicative practices used to give and receive legal advice, and second, to understand how the communication was framed and constrained by the prior history of the legal case and the multiple surrounding institutional contexts. Of the 14 meetings in the data set, one meeting featured English–Chinese interpreted talk and 4 meetings featured English–Arabic interpreted talk. Other meetings not included in the data set featured Tigrinya and varieties of Arabic. The study was written up into a doctoral thesis for examination in the UK higher education context.

Our primary data constitute reflections, notes and records made by Judith about the role of language(s) in the research process as her doctoral study proceeded. We draw on these sources to offer a post-reflective examination of how spaces of LNU and spaces of linguistic partial understanding were engaged with in different phases of the study.

4 Analysis and discussion

4.1 Research planning and informed consent processes

From the beginning, Judith was aware that she would be entering a research site where the mix of languages in use was both unpredictable and unlikely to coincide with her own linguistic repertoire. This researching multilingually problem was framed in the following way in the introduction to the thesis:

> The key issue for this study is how a communicatively-focused research project can be planned and carried out when the mix of linguistic and cultural diversity in the proposed research context of asylum and refugee law advice meetings is unpredictable. The unpredictability encompasses project planning, data collection, data processing and analysis methods and techniques. (Reynolds 2018: 22)

Thus, spaces of linguistic non-understanding were anticipated from the start of the project. In the first year of research planning, we had regular supervisory discussions about how to handle this, also involving Richard Fay and Jane Andrews, the other supervisors initially involved in the project. Discussions centred around the fact that ethnographic research can often be experienced as unpredictable in different ways (e.g., access negotiations, field experiences, and/or the focus of analysis may shift the project away from initial expectations), and that it was necessary to adopt a flexible approach. The impossibility in this setting of having control over the linguistic mix was acknowledged, and the consequent need to integrate reflexivity, resourcefulness and responsiveness about the languages featuring in the study into the research process, were foregrounded.

Nevertheless, Judith did what she could to anticipate the linguistic mix that she might encounter in the field, and to prepare constructively for this. As well as desk research to confirm the range of nationalities of individuals applying for asylum at the time and languages spoken by these groups, Judith asked asylum solicitors during early interviews what the most commonly encountered client languages currently were. Arabic, Farsi, Dari, Tigrinya, Amharic, Urdu, Punjabi, French, and several varieties of Kurdish were mentioned, with Arabic and Farsi being the most prevalent. Of these, Judith had extensive linguistic resources in French and some limited resources in Modern Standard Arabic or MSA (but no other varieties of Arabic), which Judith was learning at elementary level at evening classes at the time out of personal interest. This important step was a means of raising Judith's awareness of the potential researching multilingually dimensions of her project, leading her to consider the researching multilingually challenges and affordances it would involve (the steps of realisation and consideration, in terms of the researching multilingually framework).

In parallel, Judith started making informed and purposeful decisions about how to manage linguistic practicalities in the project. Recognising that she would need linguistic support to engage with some participants, and to process and analyse any data that she collected featuring languages she does not understand, Judith started looking for both sources of funding that would allow her to pay for professional language services, and contacts in her network who might be willing to provide support on a voluntary basis. Two small research grants from a fund for doctoral researchers connected to Judith's home University supported the bulk of the language-assistance work procured in the project, whilst a small amount of work was sourced through the goodwill of contacts.

Even though the study was funded through a research council large grant project focused on researching multilingually (grant ref: AH/L006936/1), no provision had been made in the budget for any language support work for the study. Whilst these needs could not have been anticipated at the stage of writing a funding application, this situation illustrates the lack of attention paid by both researchers and funding bodies to the practical and financial demands of seeking to do research work across multiple languages, a structural and awareness deficit that has also been commented on by others (see e.g., Gibb et al. 2019; Tesseur 2022: 45–46).

As a further step, as Judith was developing her literature review she looked for examples (discussed in the previous section; also see Reynolds [2018: 98–99]) of how other ethnographers and linguistic ethnographers working in multilingual contexts had addressed linguistic dimensions of their data collection and analysis. Regarding data collection, very few accounts were found of how others had managed processes of negotiating access and securing informed consent with participants whose linguistic repertoire was different from that of the researcher. An exception was the ethnographic doctoral thesis of Farrell (2012), who recounts relying on the assistance of interpreters already present in the legal advice setting to interact with and gain consent from asylum-seeking clients in the legal advice meetings that she observed in Scotland. Broadly, the literature review confirmed (highlighted by this Special Issue) that even in linguistic ethnographies of multilingual settings, attention is rarely given in published outputs to the role of language in the research process and the linguistic strategies employed by researchers.

As the fieldwork stage approached, Judith took action to plan how processes of informed consent could be managed in the study. According to Perry (2011), researchers working with participants whose linguistic repertoires are different from their own have a responsibility to ensure that participants can access the study, and are not disenfranchised purely by the languages they speak. They should be given full information about the study in a language that they understand, a valid means of indicating for themselves whether or not they agree to take part, and then sufficient linguistic support for them to take part. This approach suggests that written translations of participant information should be procured in relevant languages. Due to funding limitations, Judith could not procure translations of her participant information in every possible language that she might encounter in the field; and even doing this would not cater for any individuals with low literacy levels in any of the relevant languages. Therefore, she decided to use a combination of written information provided in English and two other key languages, and oral information exchange mediated through interpreters for individuals who could not access one of the written versions (as Farrell [2012] had done), to engage with client participants. This was Judith's attempt to minimise the linguistic vulnerability (vulnerability arising from a mismatch between an individual's communicative repertoires and those of people they need to interact with, Reynolds and Brickley 2024) of participants belonging to the linguistic minority in the research. For a more detailed account of linguistic vulnerability, engagement with interpreters, and the process followed to secure informed consent in the field, see Reynolds and Brickley (2024).

Based on Judith's information about the likely linguistic mix, she commissioned translations of the participant information form into MSA (the most commonly encountered written form of Arabic) and Farsi from a commercial translation company advertising its services to academics. She then asked two fellow PhD students in her network, L1 users of Arabic and Farsi respectively, to review the translations and recommend any changes. Judith's aim here, following advice given by Young (2016), was to verify the accuracy and usability of the translations received from these language professionals. This proved to be an important step, since both students recommended a range of changes to correct typographical errors, improve the stylistic and pragmatic accuracy of the translations and make them read more clearly to participants. Examples of recommended changes to vocabulary items are shown in Table 1 below (see Reynolds [2018] for further detail).

Table 1: Example amendments to translations of Participant Information Forms.

	Term used by professional translator	Term recommended by PhD student reviewer
Arabic	الاتصال *al'atisaal*, communication (via telephone or internet)	التواصل *al tawasul*, communication (directly between humans)
Farsi	فرایند *faraayand*, process (formal register)	پروسه *proosa*, process (less formal register)

(from Reynolds 2018: 100)

During this exercise Judith found herself in a space of linguistic partial understanding in relation to texts that were to become research tools for her. Farsi and Arabic are not similar structurally but in their written form they do use the same alphabet (there are four additional letters in Farsi, compared to Arabic). In working with both students, Judith found her basic familiarity with the Arabic script essential to being able to engage with and understand their comments and suggestions, and when reviewing the Arabic version, her awareness of simple grammatical principles of written Arabic was also helpful. This extract from Judith's reflective journal documents one exchange she had with her Farsi-speaking student colleague about the exercise (UKVI refers to UK Visas and Immigration, the government agency for immigration monitoring and enforcement):

> … she tells me the document has been very literally translated with the result that it does not read at all clearly to a Farsi speaker. The translator has stuck as closely as possible to the source text, and [NAME] said that as a result the Farsi is not easily legible, with very complicated sentences. She is trying to edit it to make it more readable, which is great but means a lot of changes. She explained it by saying that she is a research student too and so understands the context, whereas the translator is probably not part of a university community and so doesn't necessarily understand the context. For example she said that the university ethics committee had been particularly badly translated; and she recommended that we delete the Farsi translation of "Home Office" since there is no direct equivalent in Iran or Afghanistan, making the Farsi phrase used unclear. [NAME] rightly pointed out that any participant in my research will know what I mean by UKVI and that we should not gloss this, as it is the UK border agency whom we are referring to.
>
> reflective journal entry, 11 December 2015

The verification process uncovered how the texts produced by the professional translators, who were not necessarily familiar with the discourses of academia or of immigration law, were decontextualized from the context and focus of the research, utilising vocabulary and style that was not suitable or entirely accurate. This is a significant point, given that guidance about translating unfamiliar languages in research processes often stresses that it is better to employ language professionals to ensure a more accurate product (Pavlenko 2005, cited in van Hest and Jacobs 2022: 18). Importantly, Judith had no direct contact with either professional translator, since the service model and fixed-fee structure of the commercial translation services company that she used did not allow for the translator to raise queries about the source text or the context directly with Judith as their client. Had this been part of the company's service model, the end product could have met her needs more fully.

Judith's actions were an example of how she sought help from linguistic support workers to respond to an emerging challenge defined by a space of linguistic non-understanding in her study. We argue that Judith's experience demonstrates the need to be critically aware of potential drawbacks with professional translations, and highlights that the product of a translation process can depend on both the identity and linguistic and contextual knowledge of the translator working on a text (Temple and Young 2004), and the institutional structures surrounding the translation activity (in this case, the service model and fee structure). Judith deliberately approached PhD students to support her with this verification exercise because she hoped that, based on their own experiences as student researchers and discussions with her about the study, they would understand the intended function of and audience for the document and be able to check that the translation was effective for this purpose. Of course, as international students themselves, Judith's student colleagues were also well aware of UKVI and their role in policing immigration. The comments of her Farsi-speaking colleague evidence that the most contextually appropriate translation will be produced by individuals with adequate knowledge of the source and target contexts, in addition to linguistic knowledge. Our analysis here demonstrates how not only the linguistic identities of the linguistic support workers, but also their professional/occupational identities and associated institutional constraints, were material to how adequate participant information forms were produced.

In the end, the Farsi version of the form was not used during fieldwork because Judith did not encounter any Farsi speaking clients; but the Arabic and English versions were used with a number of participants. This illustrates the linguistic unpredictability that she faced, and the associated challenges and resource demands of planning for researching multilingually in ethnographic studies in superdiverse contexts.

4.2 Fieldwork stage – non-understanding and partial understanding in data collection

During observations of legal advice meetings, Judith had similar experiences to those described by van Hest and Jacobs (2022: 28–32) of opacity and non-understanding of parts of the interaction where languages were not within her repertoire. Judith's fieldwork notes documented this:

> This [interview observation] is interesting and challenging because it is in Tigrinya – my first, and a language where I have not taken any steps to deal with it yet.
>
> fieldwork diary entry, 8 March 2016

> There were two times when [lawyer] left the room to get information, during which the client and interpreter had long conversations in Chinese and it became clear afterwards that he was raising questions that he wanted to ask [lawyer] when she came back. It wasn't entirely clear to me however how many of the questions came directly from him, and how many came from the interpreter.
>
> fieldwork diary entry, 18 May 2016

The first diary entry above signals the unpredictability of the linguistic mix in the research site, and the consequent challenges for the researcher to "deal with" unfamiliar languages. It is worth noting that this meeting did not feature in the thesis, because of the linguistic barriers: Judith was not able, in the time available, to find and recruit a suitable Tigrinya-speaking research assistant to transcribe and translate the data. The multilingual nature of the research data may therefore influence and/or limit the focus of the analysis if suitable linguistic support cannot be procured.

The second diary entry records Judith's lack of clarity about who was the principal (in Goffman's terms) of the questions that the lawyer was asked. It reflects van Hest and Jacobs' (2022) comments about how the dynamics of multi-party interactions are often not apparent, or may be misleading, to the researcher where there are spaces of LNU. It was only after the Chinese parts of the talk in this meeting were transcribed and translated to English, that Judith was able to appreciate how the interpreter in this meeting had put the client's questions to the lawyer, but had also asked many questions of her own. Analysis revealed this interpreter's role in the meeting to shift, but overall to be much more that of a co-client than a simple linguistic intermediary (see Reynolds 2018: 235–265).

Judith also experienced occasional partial understanding, in the form of recognising odd words or grammatical constructions, where Arabic was being used in meetings. The below extract from her fieldwork diary, written after sitting in on such a meeting, illustrates her own positive feelings about this, but also reflects on the limited scope of her own Arabic repertoire:

> … feeling of satisfaction at recognising the word for 'certificate' (although now ironically I can't remember it!!), and at being able to sort of follow some of the conversation – for example I could recognise the word marriage, marriage certificate, some of the dates and time periods discussed. The reason for the refusal centred on this and so I was really lucky that the subject matter being discussed was such that I have a certain amount of the necessary Arabic vocabulary. It wouldn't necessarily have been like this had they been discussing an issue of credibility around escape from torture, for example.
>
> fieldwork diary entry, 8 February 2016

The comments made here and in other places in Judith's reflections illustrate a particular dynamic that she experienced, of having a certain level of knowledge and awareness about the Arabic language, yet still being in a position of relative ignorance about the interaction overall. This interaction featured talk between a Sudanese client and an interpreter from Libya, and in the same entry Judith recorded that she needed to find out "how much difference there is between Libyan Arabic and Sudanese Arabic" and that there did not seem to have been too many problems of mutual comprehension between client and interpreter. Like Jacobs in her own study (van Hest and Jacobs 2022: 31), Judith experienced an "illusion of understanding"; but she also knew that she did not have the linguistic knowledge to evaluate this for herself, or to even know whether client and interpreter were speaking to each other using different varieties of Arabic or the same variety; or to what extent any linguistic accommodation or other strategies for negotiating understanding (Bremer et al. 1996) across different varieties were being used in their exchanges with each other. Van Hest and Jacobs (2022: 22–23) emphasise the temporal dynamicity of spaces of LNU, noting that a researcher can move from a space of non-understanding of an interaction during data collection to a later space of understanding of the same interaction, achieved via translation input. Judith's experience highlights that, like spaces of LNU, spaces of linguistic partial understanding can extend across time until the point that linguistic support enables the researcher to deconstruct them.

4.3 Data processing and analysis

In linguistic ethnography, approaches to transcription and linguistic analysis can vary widely depending on the researcher's focus and research questions (Rampton 2007). In some studies researchers collect a large amount of audio data, but only transcribe and analyse those parts of the data which showcase interactions or communication features relevant to their research goals. This study used a discourse analytical approach applying tools from interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz 1999) to examine the meso-level activity type structure (Linell 2010) of legal advice communication in this multilingual and intercultural context. Advice interactions in the data set were also analysed transcontextually (Rock 2013) to identify how communication in each meeting was framed and constrained by the surrounding institutional structures and texts defining this, and by previous communicative events related to the client's legal issue. To support this approach to analysis, substantially the whole of each audio recorded advice meeting needed to be transcribed and considered in the analysis.

4.3.1 Procuring linguistic support

Methodologically, the process of procuring linguistic support in this stage of the research closely mirrors that described by van Hest and Jacobs (2022). That is, Judith transcribed the English language data herself, anonymising confidential personal data in the process. Judith recruited two research assistants (RAs) using her limited research funding to carry out transcription and translation of the Arabic and Chinese parts of each recorded meeting respectively. The funding did not extend to procuring support with analysis. RAs entered into confidentiality agreements governing data security and management before they received audio files, and completed their work in the documents that Judith sent them containing the partial English transcriptions. Once the assignments were complete and returned to Judith, she reviewed them whilst listening over to the audio file, sometimes like van Hest (see van Hest and Jacobs 2022: 25) utilising Google Translate to help her to identify the place of particular utterances in the transcript and navigate the script and the audio together. Judith raised any queries she had with the relevant RA. In these exchanges Judith encouraged each RA to raise and discuss any issues they had encountered.

Partly due to her experience with the participant information forms described above, Judith recruited RAs based on three carefully chosen criteria. First, RAs should not be connected to any of the research participants in any way. Second, RAs should have, or be studying for, a higher-level translation qualification, preferably in the legal translation field, and preferably have some experience of interpreting themselves. Third, RAs should have some familiarity with postgraduate study in the UK, sufficient to appreciate the context, ethics requirements and standard of practice needed for the work. Judith therefore used academic contacts and networks in her search, and recruited a Mandarin Chinese-speaking RA from China, who was undertaking a Masters in translation studies in a UK university having studied legal and business translation at undergraduate level; and an Arabic-speaking RA from Palestine, with an MA in applied linguistics from a UK university, who was working as a professionally qualified Arabic–English legal translator and interpreter and who was recruited through contacts in the ongoing wider *researching multilingually* project. As mentioned, Judith was unable to find an RA meeting her criteria to work on the meeting containing spoken Tigrinya.

4.3.2 Implications of translator identity for the research

Several aspects of Judith's experience of using linguistic support to access spaces of LNU or spaces of linguistic partial understanding in her data highlight the importance of the identity of the person offering linguistic support for the product of translation. The first of these concerns familiarity with varieties of the language(s) concerned. Through discussions with various Arabic speakers over time, Judith knew that some varieties of Arabic were more widely understood than others; but her awareness of the degree of mutual comprehension between speakers of different varieties was quite limited. Judith was aware that her audio data included recordings of Arabic speakers from different parts of the Arabic-speaking world (speakers came from Sudan, Syria, Iraq, Libya), and this was an issue of concern for her, illustrated by the following note made after observing a meeting involving a client and an interpreter both from Sudan:

> I found myself wondering in the meeting what differences there are between Palestinian Arabic and Sudanese Arabic – these two gentlemen would have been talking a national dialect for sure, and I would love to know how difficult this is going to be for my assistant.
>
> fieldwork diary entry, 20 April 2016

Thus, Judith was anticipating complications connected to the use of different varieties, yet was musing about this from a position of relative linguistic incompetence (Phipps 2013).

The fact that working across varieties can pose challenges for translators was confirmed when Judith received back from the RA the first completed Arabic transcript, an interaction featuring a client and a non-professional interpreter both from Sudan. The RA reported that many parts of the talk were unclear and he had had difficulty following the dialect of the speakers, commenting that "Sudanese, Moroccan Algerian and Tunisian dialects are the most difficult ones in the Arab world" (email from Arabic RA, 17 July 2016). There were fewer problems of this kind with other recordings, since the idiolects or varieties used by other speakers were more intelligible to the RA. He reported that in addition to Levantine varieties, he was familiar with Gulf and Egyptian varieties of Arabic which helped with Iraqi and Libyan dialects, and that other Sudanese speakers captured spoke a "clearer" dialect than the speakers in the first audio (perhaps because these were clients interacting with professional interpreters from different backgrounds to themselves, and there may have been some linguistic accommodation going on).

A further important dimension of language practices and ideologies in the Arabic-speaking world, which unlike the dialect question Judith had not anticipated, emerged when she reviewed the first transcript together with the audio. Judith realised that the Arabic RA had transcribed client and interpreter speech into written MSA, and not written forms of the spoken Arabic variety that individuals were actually speaking. On querying this, the RA explained:

> For the issue of standard or not, for me, listening to the Sudanese or any other Arabic dialect then writing them in standard language is easier. First, standard Arabic is better for us as

> translators. For all Arab countries, it is unified and easier to deal with. Second, some terms in non-standard Arabic, for example in Sudanese or Gazan dialect, are difficult to be written (transcribed) as their letters consist of many sounds combined together and no similar letters in standard Arabic equal them. Thus, I listen and then write in standard in order to make it easier and professional for translation. For example, the word (listen) in slang Sundanese is (أقوليك), which means (I will tell you). In fact, it does not mean that the speaker will tell the listener anything, but it is used to attract attention or calling. So, I used the word (اسمعني) in standard Arabic, which means listen to me in English.
>
> email from Arabic RA, 16 July 2016

Discussing how to present interactional data on the page, Copland and Creese observe that "script choice can be a political and highly charged process" (Copland and Creese 2015: 200), which can bring to light social contexts and language ideologies. As is discussed by Vakser (2016) in relation to her own experiences of transcribing Russian–English translanguaged speech, when working with multilingual data, translation and transcription both involve choices about the representation of speakers (see also Kalocsányiová and Shatnawi 2022). Unless given detailed instructions, the involvement of RAs can take some control of this away from the researcher. Judith had instructed her RAs that she wanted a verbatim transcription with discourse markers, repetitions and filler words transcribed to the extent possible, but she had not anticipated the impact of either the diglossia that exists in Arabic language use, or the professional language ideologies and practices of her Arabic RA. Diglossia in the Arabic-speaking world involves a standard, high-prestige written form of Arabic – Modern Standard Arabic – used particularly in official or formal contexts across countries and regions, co-existing with a diverse range of geographically-based spoken varieties of Arabic. A legal translator would be used to writing primarily in Modern Standard Arabic, and as the RA's reply shows, this is the most pragmatic, useful and professional approach to transcription in such a context. It also reflects the hegemonic structures present in the Arabic-speaking world that influence which forms of the language are seen as more legitimate and portable. In this instance, the habitual language practices and linguistic ideologies of the RA took precedence over Judith's instructions to transcribe the audio verbatim.

After reflection, Judith took the decision not to take any steps to change the situation and moved forward with the project whilst retaining this transcription practice. She knew that she would be able to do little detailed analysis herself on the Arabic data and would be drawing mostly from the translations (where she needed to, Judith went back to her RA to clarify e.g., misunderstandings in interpretation before incorporating comment on them in the analysis). Also, the transcripts were more intelligible to Judith in the form of Modern Standard Arabic, the variety she has been exposed to in language classes. Finally, and importantly for power relations in her project, Judith wanted to respect the rationale and working practices of her RA (who himself is a working interpreter and offered sometimes insightful comments on the interpreting practices in the data) and preserve the working relationship that had come into existence through their mutual professional connections.

The consequence for the data is that the Arabic transcriptions in Judith's thesis and other written outputs have also been through a process of translation, from the Sudanese, Iraqi or Libyan spoken variety captured in the audio to the Modern Standard Arabic captured in the transcript. This dimension of the data is acknowledged in written outputs (see for example Reynolds 2020a: 97 and Reynolds 2020b: 10) and an account of the researching multilingually experience was also provided in the thesis, including a note that "the outcome serves as an apt reminder that a transcript is a transformed product that represents, rather than exactly reproduces, the original talk" (Reynolds 2018: 114).

Finally, a third aspect of the Arabic RA's professional identity and practice was evident in exchanges between Judith and the RA over apparent omissions Judith had noticed in the transcripts when reviewing them. Notably, there were some instances of code-switching into using single English words or phrases in some of the Arabic speakers' talk, yet these code-switches did not appear in the transcripts returned by the RA. Querying this with him, Judith asked whether this was because of conventions of written Arabic or some other reason. In reply the RA said that this was his oversight, apologising and explaining that:

> Here, my justification is that most of the time I focus a lot on the Arabic text in order to produce [a] good English one. … I gave the Arabic text (SL, source language) the priority / superiority over the English (TL, target language) because I am transcribing in Arabic and I wanted to have one stream. This will facilitate my task when I transfer the text into English. Having 99% Arabic text then some (1%) English interference might create confusion for translators.
>
> email from Arabic RA, 22 February 2017

Here we observe that the RA's usual working practices as a translation professional had again overtaken Judith's instructions to transcribe exactly what was on the audio. After Judith raised the discrepancies, he went back and amended the completed transcripts to include code-switches, and represented instances of code-switching more faithfully in work done thereafter. This experience chimes with van Hest and Jacobs' (2022) reported experiences and processes of working with translators to check and correct transcriptions and translations, and illustrates a further way in which the language ideologies of the translation profession that the RA belongs to impacted on the translation process.

4.3.3 Implications of researching multilingually approach

Once transcriptions were completed and checked, Judith had to consider what was possible in terms of analysis with the data in this form. This comment in Judith's reflective journal shows her early thoughts:

> [My RA] has transcribed into Modern Standard Arabic, and I need to reflect on what implications this will have. For starters it means I may have difficulty in analysing for pauses, turn taking etc. if the words don't really match up.
>
> reflective journal entry, 12 July 2016

We discussed the implications of this for analysis in supervision meetings in the later stages of the project. Since Judith's primary analytic interest was in understanding the impact of the structure of the legal advice interaction on the dynamics of communication, and the intertextual nature of these encounters, we concluded that claims could still be advanced about communication features pertinent to the research questions by working with translated data, but that micro-analytic techniques focusing on aspects of the data not evident through the translated transcripts (e.g., prosody, overlaps and interruptions) would not be possible. We agree with van Hest and Jacobs (2022: 27) that great care is needed when making "fine-grained discursive claims" about interaction that has been accessed by the researcher through linguistic support and argue that it is also important for researchers to be transparent about this in their published outputs (see e.g., Reynolds 2018: 114–115).

A second consequence of the approach adopted is that although the study focused on the impact of linguistic and cultural diversity in the communicative context of the immigration legal advice meeting, a major part of this diversity – the details of linguistic interaction as between interpreters and clients who are speakers of different language varieties – was not accessible for analysis and was therefore overlooked. It was not possible to examine whether, for example, a Sudanese client and a Libyan interpreter engaged in any linguistic accommodation or negotiation of meaning as between different dialectal forms, or exercised communicative leniency in their interactions with each other, since the transcripts showed all speakers' words in the standard written language variety. Repair sequences are recorded in the transcripts, but identifying the miscommunication which triggered them is not possible with the data in this form. To address this shortcoming, more time, funding, and input from other research assistants would have been required. As is often the case with projects involving multiple languages (Enzenhofer and Resch 2011), this was beyond the scope and feasibility of the doctoral project.

5 Conclusions

In this paper we have reflected on the first author's researching multilingually processes and practices in a linguistic ethnographic study featuring both spaces of linguistic non-understanding and spaces of linguistic *partial* understanding in an institutional setting. Our aims have been twofold: to explore the dynamics of engaging with these spaces of partial understanding, as well as those of non-understanding, in this kind of research; and to argue that linguistic reflexivity in such work involves recognising and accounting for the impact of not only the linguistic identities, practices and ideologies of the researcher and the participants, but also those of translators, interpreters, and other persons called upon to give linguistic support to researchers, on the research findings and product. Judith's experience of planning for using Arabic in participant information documents, encountering Arabic speakers in the research site, and engaging with an Arabic–English translator to deconstruct interactions in that language for the research, remind us of the 'conscious incompetence' stage of the conscious-competence learning model (Broadwell 1969, cited in Lane and Roberts 2022). That is, Judith had enough (socio) linguistic resources in Arabic to engage in a conscious way with manifestations of this language at different stages, but not enough for full comprehension; instead, she knew enough to recognise what she did not know, but needed to know, in order to do certain tasks or establish certain claims. This assisted her to some extent in working with translators and interpreters in the research; and meant that she was better positioned to evaluate the epistemological impact of the different transformations that the Arabic language data went through in her project.

Both these aspects of our experience in conducting, and supervising, this study respectively highlight that, as Temple and Young (2004) pointed out twenty years ago in relation to research involving English and British Sign Language, researching multilingually is not a neutral act. Rather, it involves negotiating your way through the hegemonic structures and power relations inherent in the linguistic practices and linguistic ideologies featuring in the research. In this case, language-related hegemonic structures relevant to the *research spaces* of Judith's study, which this paper shows had an impact on the research, included the institutional monolingualism of the UK research funding system (through e.g., a lack of consideration of language-related funding needs); language ideologies circulating in the Arabic-speaking world; and established conventions and working practices in the translation profession. These hegemonic structures to some extent constrained the researcher, limiting the extent to which she could investigate pertinent aspects of her data (e.g., the communication dynamics as between speakers of different varieties of Arabic; and the space of LNU represented by the meeting in Tigrinya).

Recognition of these hegemonic structures also fed into power relations in the *research relationships* in the study, for example by impacting on the decisions that Judith took about how to manage the relationship with her Arabic-speaking RA. Thus, when instrumentalising the researching multilingually framework, researchers should strive to be informed about, and mindful of, the political dimensions of language and languages featuring in their work.

Given this, our core argument is that it is necessary for linguistic ethnographers engaging with spaces of LNU and spaces of linguistic partial understanding to be transparent about their research processes and how languages, and the linguistic strategies they have used to engage with them, have impacted on their research products. Being linguistically reflexive about our practices can prompt us 'to ask new questions about knowledge construction in linguistic ethnography' (Creese et al. 2015b: 272) and lead us to present more rigorous work. This is a critical stance which recognises the wider truth that all knowledge production is set within social relations involving ideologies about language and power effects, and that researching multilingually entails making active choices about engagement with, and the representation of, speakers and languages in the products of research (Holmes et al. 2022). These choices must be acknowledged rather than hidden by researchers if we are to claim epistemological accountability (Mauthner and Doucet 2003) for ourselves and our research.

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