Spaces of linguistic non-understanding in linguistic ethnography (and beyond)

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1. Introduction

The notion of reflexivity, which we understand here as "the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher" (Denzin & Lincoln 2018, 246), has been instilled to qualitative researchers. Moreover, it can be considered as one of the "constitutive features" of ethnography (Rampton, Maybin, and Roberts 2015). For linguistic ethnography in particular–a research methodology aimed at unravelling "how people use language, what they believe about language, and why" (Heller 2008, 250)–one might assume this reflexivity to–among other matters–concern the researcher's own linguistic repertoire and the language varieties involved in their research (Martin-Jones, Andrews, and Martin 2017). This seems especially pertinent in the current era of globalisation and superdiversity (Vertovec 2010), in which doing ethnography in institutional settings often implies encounters with linguistic diversity (Blommaert and Rampton 2016; Piller 2016). Researchers who are, like ourselves, interested in multilingualism and language barriers in institutional settings, will inevitably interact with participants whose "native" languages and sociocultural backgrounds are different to their own while conducting fieldwork.

There is, however, little scholarly reflection about how linguistic issues influence ethnographic research projects, at the level of data constitution, analysis or dissemination (Gibb and Danero Iglesias 2017). Ethnographic curricula seem to downplay the methodological complexity of doing research in the face of linguistic differences by presenting attempts to gain understanding in a multilingual setting as straightforward (Holmes et al. 2013). Discussing linguistic ethnography in particular, Costley and Reilly (2021) call it ironic how a discipline which is focused on meaning-making and which has contributed extensively to the discussion of multilingual interactions, has given little attention to the linguistic dimension of its own analytical practice. How can a research tradition which attaches great importance to reflexivity overlook the impact of linguistic support (in the form of translations by professionals or scholars)?

The reluctance among (linguistic) ethnographers to extend their reflexivity to this dimension of their research can be linked to the influence of so-called "impostor syndrome", i.e., the idea that a researcher's authority might be undermined when they are transparent about language issues and the way in which those impact the process of data gathering and analysis (Borchgrevink 2003; Rosales 2021). Indeed, the anthropological ideal of being fluent in the native language of the group one studies has been so persistent in ethnography, that methodological issues regarding language have long been "silenced" (Borchgrevink 2003; Gibb and Danero Iglesias 2017; but see Gibb, Tremlett, and Danero Iglesias 2019 for rich descriptions regarding the learning of a second language for conducting ethnographic fieldwork). According to Pavlenko (2005, 20) there is a "contradictory combination of linguistic arrogance and insecurity" among linguistic anthropologists, which causes them to ignore "the linguistic aspect of cross-linguistic research". Surprisingly, reflections about the limits of the researcher's own linguistic repertoire, the use of translation and interpreting in research, and the analytical implications of translation and interpreting are more common in other scholarly disciplines (for overviews see Hennink 2008; Resch and Enzenhofer 2018). Within this significant body of literature (which incorporates accounts from sociology, psychology, health research, and nursing), the term "cross-language research" is used to refer to research practices in which there is a mismatch between the linguistic repertoire of the researcher and that of the researched. Although these efforts towards reflexivity are important, they consider language as a mere methodological issue rather than the core focus of research, as is the case for us as linguistic ethnographers.

This chapter responds to pleas urging to demystify this "under-discussed area of researcher praxis" (Holmes et al. 2013, 286) and calls to create awareness and transparency about the effect of the ethnographer's (limited) linguistic repertoire (Rosales 2021). In doing so, we attempt to contribute to a "methodological multilingual turn" (Costley and Reilly 2021, 5), a paradigm shift deemed necessary to install "a contemporary linguistic ethnography" (ibid., 10). Secondly, this chapter also grew from the unease we ourselves felt as early career ethnographers. Unaware of the experiences of other scholars on this topic, we worried about how–during interpreter-mediated consultations in our institutional fieldwork settings–we did not understand everything that happened in real time. It was only afterwards–at the level of analysis, after independent translators were called upon–that we were able to comprehend all linguistic utterances. Lastly, this chapter also aims to demonstrate how this ethnographic tension constitutes a possibility rather than an inconvenience only, by describing how the role of language in "ethnographic misunderstanding" (Fabian 1995) can offer potential analytical opportunities. All in all, we believe it is worth sharing our honest, ethnographic reflections about the multilingual obstacles we face, because (a) it might alleviate the risk of alienating (early career) researchers who–when encountering linguistic issues during fieldwork–feel alone in their experience, as common educational practices do not provide practical guidance, and (b) it renders particular linguistic tensions visible and therefore turns them into a conceptualised object of discussion which allows researchers to examine its nature and share frustrations, or even best practices about how to navigate the issue. To do so, this chapter introduces the concept of "spaces of linguistic non-understanding", a notion which addresses the fieldwork presence of a language in which the researcher is not proficient. The chapter will show

how the concept is particularly useful in the context of institutional ethnographies as it focuses on interpreter-mediated interactions, which require a second level of language support at the stage of analysis, while also highlighting the ways in which it can be extrapolated to other types of research.

First, in section 2, we discuss the scarce literature available on the topic. Section 3 provides a conceptualisation of spaces of LNU, applied to our own doctoral research projects. In the same section we also outline the temporal aspect of spaces of LNU, by showing how they get filled and (re)adjusted over time as they pass from data collection to data analysis. Section 4 outlines our strategies and recommendations with regards to working with translated data transcripts and sheds light on our interactions with translators when revising their work. In section 5 we argue that while language difference may hinder grasping the intricacies of the complete multilingual encounter, these spaces of LNU simultaneously entail analytical opportunities for understanding the emic perspective of certain research participants, i.e. the service providers. Finally, in section 6 we present our conclusions.

2. Researching multilingually

Although concrete reflections about the management of linguistic differences between researcher and research participants are scarce, we can find ontological conceptualisations about what it means to do multilingual research, both in linguistic ethnography (Martin-Jones, Andrews, and Martin 2017) and applied linguistics (Andrews, Holmes, and Fay 2013). Holmes et al. (2013; 2016), from an ontological perspective, coined the term "researching multilingually" and define it as follows:

> "The process and practice of using, or accounting for the use of, more than one language in the research process, e.g. from the initial design of the project, to engaging with different literatures, to developing the methodology and considering all possible ethical issues, to generating and analysing the data, to issues of representation and reflexivity when writing up and publishing." (Holmes et al. 2016, 101)

Accordingly, Holmes et al. (2013) propose a theoretical and methodological framework containing two conceptual dimensions: the dimension of spatiality, and that of relationality (see also Holmes et al. 2016; Andrews et al. 2020). With regard to the spatial dimension, they describe "researching multilingually" as taking place in four different multilingual research spaces: the researched phenomena, the research location, the researcher's linguistic resources, and the representational possibilities (see Ganassin and Holmes 2020 for an application of the framework). The relational dimension, on the other hand, concerns the people with whom the researcher collaborates, as well as the languages involved in those relationships. There are some parallels with the three principles put forward by Costley and Reilly (2021), which were designed in light of conducting linguistic ethnography specifically. Their first principle is called “researching multilingually” and addresses the impact of language, in a holistic manner: not only in relation to data collection and analysis but by creating a space in which research can be multilingual in every aspect, including the language used between researchers in meetings, emails, and dissemination. The second principle, “researching collaboratively”, comprises the decentralisation of epistemic authority: instead of romanticising the “lone ethnographer”, research projects should acknowledge all involved participants and collaborators. Although, Costley and Reilley (2021) do not mention them explicitly, we can only encourage this endeavour to also render the translators and interpreters employed in the research project visible. Finally, the third principle “researching responsively” states that linguistic ethnography must be flexible, and that researchers need to adapt their projects to the (linguistic) circumstances. Researching multilingually can thus be seen as “a theoretical and philosophical stance that any researcher operating in multilingual contexts can adopt” (Ganassin and Holmes 2020, 850). The breadth of the frameworks and principles put forward by Holmes et al. (2013) and Costley and Reilly (2021) implies that “researching multilingually” can be conceived of from many different points of view, including cases in which researchers are fluent in the languages of their participants, as well as research where translation and interpreting is used for languages the researcher has no command of.

From a methodological perspective, there is some literature which provides insights on how to carefully revise translated data to ensure validity of findings, as erroneous translations can lead to erroneous conclusions (Thompson and Dooley 2020; Pavlenko 2005). Pavlenko (2005, 241) for instance stresses the need to use professional translators and interpreters to minimize the influence of translation “mistakes” on research findings. Also, according to her (2005, 244), “[n]ative speakers should assist the researcher with a low level of L2 competence both in checking the transcripts of the recordings and in offering interpretations of their own and others’ performances” (see also Bashiruddin 2013). In doing so, Pavlenko (2005) follows Gumperz’ (1982) approach of collaborative analysis to check understandings with participants. Thompson and Dooley (2020) propose “bilingual comparison and testing” as a translation technique, in which groups of bilinguals are asked to evaluate the equivalence of source and target text.

Concerns about validity and methodology tie in with epistemological reflections on the local implications of multilingualism in research. Winchatz (2006) for instance focuses on the analytical opportunities of language difference. In her discussion of ethnographic interviewing in a lingua franca, she noticed that the occurrence of linguistic misunderstandings and their subsequent repairs were highly valuable, as they triggered a process of further discovering the emic perspective (see section 4 for a definition of this concept) behind her participants' language use: when she asked her participants the meaning of a certain word, they found themselves instigated to describe it in more detail. In doing so, their account of the actual topic became more explicit. In a similar vein, Duran (2019) offers an extensive account of the linguistic diversity in her research into the multilingual resources of Burmese refugees. Obstacles she faced included participants who intended to help her with her research but stated they could not do so due to their limited English skills. Realising that certain stories would go untold, she started working with language brokers, who made certain cultural differences explicit and, in this way, facilitated more thorough understanding. Other scholars have similarly stressed the need to recognise the way in which interpreters leave their mark on the research data, or to even acknowledge the interpreter as a co-researcher (Andrews 2013; Androulakis 2013; Temple and Edwards 2002). This chapter argues that the same can be said about translators.

For the purpose of this chapter, it is useful to not only include reflections on doing research *with* interpreters or translators, but to also consider aspects of doing research *on* interpreters, since we observe many interpreter-mediated interactions within our institutional settings. In the realm of Interpreting Studies (IS), a subfield of applied linguistics concerned with interpreters' practices, reflections on the implications of language difference for knowledge production are, strangely enough, rather absent. An exception is Wadensjö (1998, 99), who states that "to gain insight into processes of face-to-face interpreting, and the peculiarities and particularities of this mode of communication", the choice of languages to include in the observations "naturally falls on those in which I have linguistic and cultural competence". She also argues that including more languages is possible, on the condition that people who have competence in those languages are involved in the project. Whether that refers to researchers or external translators remains unclear, but we can assume the first.

Following Holmes et al. (2013, 298), there is a need for "exposing multilingual research praxis" in light of "further theoretical and methodological refinement". This chapter aims to respond to that call by contributing to the three perspectives discussed in this literature review. From an ontological perspective, we propose a conceptualization of spaces of linguistic non-understanding (LNU) in section 3. Then, on a methodological level, in section 4 we provide an account of our own strategies when handling our multilingual data, and formulate practical recommendations on the matter in the form of key principles. We link this to an epistemological perspective, which we further explore in section 5 by discussing the analytical pitfalls and opportunities that spaces of LNU can entail.

3. Spaces of linguistic non-understanding (LNU)

This chapter introduces the concept of *spaces of linguistic non-understanding*, a notion not to be confused with the research spaces proposed by Holmes et al. (2013) which we discussed above: whereas they propose an overarching conceptual framework, our aim is to offer a more detailed conceptualisation of one specific aspect of researching multilingually which is situated mainly within what Holmes et al. (2013) define as the space of the researcher's linguistic resources. Spaces of linguistic non-understanding (henceforth "spaces of LNU") refer to instances in which the researcher, while collecting and/or analysing data, encounters (stretches of) interaction which unfold in languages outside their own repertoire. Whenever research participants converse or communicate in a language that is unintelligible to the researcher, this seems to form a (temporary) obstacle in the face of gaining understanding of the situated practices. This dynamic is especially prominent in linguistic ethnographies, where linguistic and communicative practices are at the centre stage.

3.1. Background: linguistic diversity in an abortion clinic and an immigration law firm

To navigate this concept, we draw on our own doctoral projects, which involve linguistic ethnographic inquiry. In doing so we use excerpts of our fieldnotes[1] and show transcripts in their working document state. Through such an open and reflexive account, we aim to demonstrate the hidden realities of doing (multilingual) research which are usually left out of methodological sections.

Our research settings can broadly be categorised as "service provision encounters", where a professional offers a service (medical, legal or administrative) to one or more clients. In those encounters, there is a pattern in when and how spaces of LNU *open up*. Both our data sets involve ample moments in which a client and a third person (typically an interpreter or a companion) interact in a language the researcher has no command of. Our mother tongue is Dutch, and given the location of our data collection (Flanders, the northern part of Belgium), Dutch can be considered the main language of our fieldwork settings as well. We were both educated in English and French. Additionally, the first author has proficiency in German and Spanish, and basic competence in Italian. However,

[1] The process of making fieldnotes is one of the main features of an ethnographic research approach, and implies the written description of observed events in the researchers' fieldwork setting. Fieldnotes in their turn constitute a crucial part of the ethnographic dataset. For clear guidelines on ethnographic fieldnotes in general, see Emerson et al. (2011). For the role of fieldnotes in linguistic ethnography in particular, see Copland and Creese (2015).

in many of our observed institutional encounters, the languages spoken by the clients and the interpreters fall outside our own linguistic repertoire.

The first author, Ella, conducted linguistic ethnographic fieldwork between February 2020 and December 2021 in an abortion clinic. The aim of her research is to understand the discursive and interactional nature of multilingual abortion consultations, as well as to gain insights in how language barriers and multilingualism come into play in this particular setting (see van Hest and De Wilde 2021). Ella observed, and in most cases recorded, 83 abortion consultations and took fieldnotes in the process. Her focus was mainly on clients who needed language support or who had only basic competence in Dutch or in another lingua franca such as English or French. For these women, there was often an "interpreter" who provided oral translation between them and the healthcare professional throughout the counselling session. This was usually the client's partner, a relative, or a friend who came along to the consultation and interpreted from Dutch (the native language of all staff members in the clinic) or a lingua franca (French or English) into the native language(s) of the client. The spaces of LNU during the fieldwork in the abortion clinic fieldwork thus opened up every time the interpreter or companion was interacting with the client in their native language which Ella did not have command of. This was mainly Bulgarian or Turkish, and sometimes Chinese, Slovak, Czech, or Romani.

The second author, Marie, conducted a multi-sited ethnography in two law firms specialised in immigration law. Data was collected between 2018 and 2020, in the form of observations, audio recordings of 72 legal consultations, and additional interviews. The consultations, most of them between lawyers and applicants for international protection, discuss possibilities for asylum. The interactions which Marie observed took either place in a lingua franca (French, English or sometimes Dutch) or they were interpreted by means of a (professional) interpreter or a companion (friend, family member, acquaintance) with a certain level of proficiency in a language shared with the lawyer and a language shared with the client (see M. Jacobs and Maryns 2021; M. Jacobs 2021). The spaces of LNU most often opened up in cases where an interpreter was present or where two or more "visitors" discussed a particular matter in another language than the one the service provision communication was taking place in. Varieties of Arabic as well as Afghan languages (Farsi, Pashto, Dari) are most prominent in the corpus. Other, less recurring languages present in the data set include Somali, Kurdish, Turkish, Tigrinya and Russian.

3.2. The time aspect of spaces of LNU

Spaces of LNU are temporally dynamic. In a "classic" research endeavour, the first instance where spaces of LNU open up, is during data collection, be it through participant observation of talk (e.g., uttered by an interpreter and a client during a service provision encounter) or through asking interview questions with the help of an interpreter. At that point, the spaces of LNU are orally produced utterances, stretches of talk which the researcher hears and observes but cannot understand. These locally incomprehensible sequences do, however, shape the researcher's understanding of the interactional development of, in our case, the institutional encounter, as they are part of the communicative event. Note how spaces of LNU are not necessarily limited to speech. In other research contexts, spaces of LNU can also take the shape of written materials, such as signage in public spaces.

The second instance where spaces of LNU open up is at the time of data processing and analysis, in our case during and after transcribing ad verbum and translating our audio-recorded data. At that point, the stretches of talk incomprehensible to the researcher actually become visible spaces in the transcript. First, we transcribe the audio-data for those parts of the interaction we can understand. All the incomprehensible parts are "left open", indicated with AAA (in the case of Ella) or blank spaces (in the case of Marie). Then, external translators are called upon to fill in those blank spaces: they are provided with the audio-recordings as well as the partial transcripts and asked to fill in the parts that we have left open by means of (a) transcription of the originally spoken language and (b) an "as literal as possible" translation of the turns into Dutch.[2]

The "visual gestalt" (Jaffe 2012, 218) of such "filled in" transcripts is shown below. The example comes from Ella's abortion clinic data. Figure 1 is a screenshot of a part of a Word document before it was sent out for translation. Figure 2 shows the same transcript after translation, or what Halai (2007) would call the "transmuted" text. It is this spatial visibility of the stretches of talk that we could not transcribe ourselves within the data transcripts, together with the translation process of literally "filling in the blanks" that inspires our word choice "spaces" of LNU.

ZV: no. (.) and have you thought about what you want to do with the pregnancy?

NP T: AAA

C: AAA

NP T: yeah. okay, so we have eh (.) two childrens.

[2] Some caution is needed when sharing sensitive audio-data and transcripts with externals. In our case, we had translators–who were mainly freelancers, but sometimes colleagues or even students within our research department–sign a confidentiality statement, in which they explicitly committed to keeping the data confidential, and to refrain from taking on the assignment should they recognise any of the participants. The transcripts were pseudonymised to erase all traces of the participants' identities, such as their names or places of residence.

Figure 1: screenshot of a data transcript before translation

ZV: no. (.) and have you thought about what you want to do with the pregnancy?

NP T: ами дали помислиме какво искаме да правиме със (.)бременноста
Goh, of we hebben nagedacht wat we willen doen met (.) de zwangerschap.

C: ами, кажи че не (.) не можем защото имаме две деца и нямаме помощ (.) [kak…
Goh, zeg dat we niet (.) niet kunnen omdat we twee kinderen hebben en geen hulp. Hoe…

NP T: yeah. okay, so we have eh (.) two childrens.

Figure 2: screenshot of a data transcript after translation[3]

So far we have discussed the research materials, showing the before and after of translated transcripts and conceptualising the blank spaces as spaces of LNU. The next two sections will highlight the process behind the filling of these spaces of LNU.

4. Revising translated data

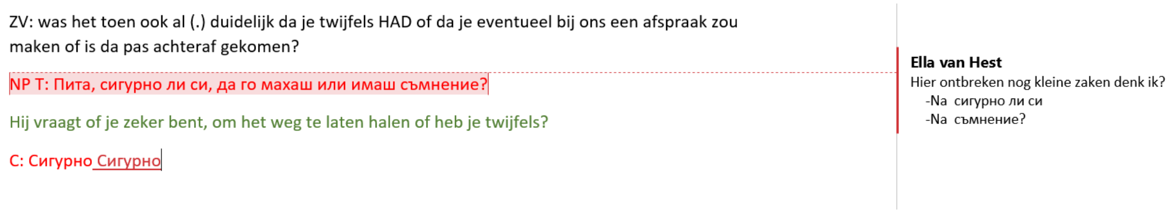
Techniques proposed by some scholars, such as revision by an expert panel or member checking with native speakers (Thompson and Dooley 2020; Pavlenko 2005), which we discussed in section 2, are not always feasible in doctoral projects due to limits in budget and time. Moreover, within our institutional context, where the clients only briefly visit the research setting, "member checking" is not at all straightforward. In this section, we discuss the strategies that we deploy to safeguard the reliability of our research data. In sections 4.1 and 4.2 we provide two concrete examples which show how we aim to minimise the impact of LNU at the stage of analysis. Section 4.3 deduces a list of key principles from these empirical examples.

4.1. A necessary revision request

The first example comes from Ella's research in the abortion clinic. Figure 3 shows a screenshot from a Word document that Ella was revising after it came back from the translation agency. The document is a transcript of an

[3] ZV stands for *zorgverlener* (healthcare provider), NP T stands for *niet-professionele tolk* (non-professional interpreter), and C stands for *cliënt* (client). The consultation took place in lingua franca English. The first turn of NP T and the turn of C were originally uttered in Bulgarian and for data processing translated into Dutch: *Gosh, whether we have thought about what we want to do with (.) the pregnancy. Gosh, say we can't (.) because we have two children and no help. How...*

audio-recorded consultation between a Bulgarian woman (C, client) and a nurse (ZV, zorgverlener, service provider). The person acting as an interpreter (NPT, niet-professionele tolk, non-professional interpreter) is the client's young niece. The screenshot represents the authentic interaction, and therefore, features Dutch and Bulgarian. A translation into English is provided below.


ZV: was het toen ook al (.) duidelijk da je twijfels HAD of da je eventueel bij ons een afspraak zou maken of is da pas achteraf gekomen?

NP T: Пита, сигурно ли си, да го махаш или имаш съмнение?

Hij vraagt of je zeker bent, om het weg te laten halen of heb je twijfels?

C: Сигурно Сигурно

Ella van Hest
Hier ontbreken nog kleine zaken denk ik?
-Na сигурно ли си
-Na съмнение?

Figure 3: screenshot of a translated data transcript with a revision request from the researcher

English translation of the main transcript:

ZV: Was it already clear then that you had doubts or that you would possibly make an appointment with us or did that only come later?

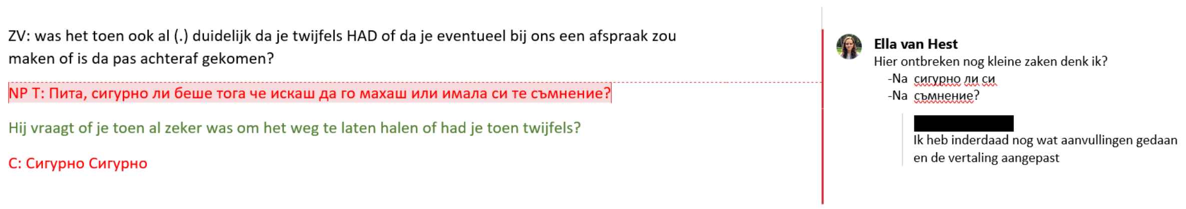
NP T: He asks if you are sure, to take it away or do you have doubts

C: sure, sure.

English translation of Ella's comment in the margin, addressed to the translator:

Ella van Hest: Here are still some small parts missing, I think? After сигурно ли си *(Bulgarian for "are you sure")*. After съмнение *(Bulgarian for "doubt")*?

Ella listened carefully to the audio-recording, while reading the transcript where the spaces of LNU had been filled in by a translator. Every time she suspected the presence of an open space of LNU, i.e. an instance where something in the audio that had not been represented in written text, she put a comment in the margin. For the Bulgarian transcripts, Ella resorted to Google Translate as an additional support tool, because she needed the transliteration of the Cyrillic alphabet (which she is not proficient in) into Latin characters, in order to identify the (absence of) spoken content from the recording in the written transcript. The "translation mistake" that occurs in the transcript above, was corrected by the translator in the new version, presented in Figure 4 below. The same visualisation strategy as above is used.


ZV: was het toen ook al (.) duidelijk da je twijfels HAD of da je eventueel bij ons een afspraak zou maken of is da pas achteraf gekomen?

NP T: Пита, сигурно ли беше тога че искаш да го махаш или имала си те съмнение?

Hij vraagt of je toen al zeker was om het weg te laten halen of had je toen twijfels?

C: Сигурно Сигурно

Ella van Hest
Hier ontbreken nog kleine zaken denk ik?
-Na сигурно ли си
-Na съмнение?

[redacted]
Ik heb inderdaad nog wat aanvullingen gedaan en de vertaling aangepast

Figure 4: screenshot of a translated data transcript after the revision request is implemented

English translation of the main transcript after revision:

ZV: Was it already clear then that you had doubts or that you would possibly make an appointment with us or did that only come later?

NP T: He asks if you were sure you wanted it removed or did you have doubts at the time

C: sure, sure.

English translation of the translator's reply to Ella's comment (in the margin):

I have indeed made some additions and adjusted the translations.

Comparing the initial transcript (Figure 3) with the revised version (Figure 4) reveals that the filling of one particular space of LNU, the turn of the NPT, i.e. the non-professional interpreter, changed quite substantially: "He asks if you are sure, to take it away or do you have doubts" becomes "He asks if you were sure you wanted it removed or did you have doubts at the time". The first version of the transcript would have steered Ella's interpretation in a faulty direction (Thompson and Dooley 2020), as this erroneous translation seems to imply that the interpreter at work in the consultation wrongfully changed the temporal dimension of the nurse's question. Such an alternation on the part of the interpreter would have hindered the nurse's attempts to gain correct information about the mental wellbeing and the decision-making process of her client–an observation highly relevant to Ella's research about the discursive enactment of language barriers in processes of information exchange during abortion consultations between healthcare professionals and clients (see van Hest and De Wilde 2021 on contraception). This, however, is not what happened and, because of Ella's methodological techniques to deal with spaces of LNU this is also not what she reported. This observation does, however, highlight how translation (mistakes) can leave a mark on ethnographic analyses and has the potential to undermine the validity of certain arguments. Without spaces of LNU, Ella would have detected the transcription mistake immediately. Instead, a careful revision of the transcript–admittedly, a time-consuming process–, was needed before the mistake could be detected.

4.2. An unnecessary revision request

The second example comes from Marie's research and concerns an immigration law consultation that deals with an application for asylum on the basis of sexual orientation. Asylum claims with a gender-based focused are considered particularly vulnerable and therefore treated with a certain level of interactional delicacy (M. Jacobs & Maryns under review; Verhaeghe, M. Jacobs & Maryns under review). The transcript features an interpreter

Arabic-Dutch, an asylum seeker from Iraq and his lawyer, and was translated by Marie herself (Dutch to English) and an independent translator (Arabic to Dutch). When analysing the transcript, Marie came across an interesting rich point, shown in the excerpt below:

> Lawyer: Yes and have you had problems before? Concretely, in France, because of your sexual orientation?
>
> Interpreter: هل كانت لديك مشاكل حاسمة في فرنسا, بسبب مشكلتك الجنسية؟
>
> *Have you had crucial problems in France because of your sexual problem?*

The way in which the neutral term "sexual orientation" (as used by the lawyer) is problematised by its interpretation as "sexual problem" (in the interpreter's rendition) is interesting for a sociolinguist. Yet, as someone who relied on translations to interpret the mediated data, Marie only felt comfortable to make this micro-discursive claim about the connotations of the discourse of non-heteronormativity after having discussed this particular excerpt with the translator of the interpreted turns and with a colleague, active in migration studies and proficient in Arabic. Marie suspected that the word choice might be attributed to the independent translator (at the stage of analysis) rather than the interpreter (at the stage of observation), but this assumption turned out to be unfounded: both sources emphasised that the phrasings of the translated transcript were correct, and that an analysis based on this linguistic evidence would be justified.

4.3. Key principles for working with translated data

With our two examples, we aim to inspire other researchers not necessarily to follow our pragmatic approach but to design their own ways of managing multilingual fieldwork analyses without getting discouraged by its messiness. We summarise what was covered in the two examples and offer guidance for researchers by means of the following key principles:

- When researching multilingually and working with translators to fill in the spaces of LNU, additional work and thus time is needed. When making a project time line, it might be interesting to take this into account.
- Not having proficiency in (one of) the transcript's languages does not mean the researcher cannot hold any control over their interactional data. By carefully listening to the audio data and auditorily identifying spaces of LNU of which they suspect they have not been visually represented, the researcher can revise translation conducted by externals.

- We recommend researchers who work with external translators to provide clear guidelines on the aims of the research project (cf. Andrews 2013), to encourage translators to be careful in their translational decision, such as altering word choice.
- Researchers need to be extremely careful when formulating fine-grained discursive claims about the former spaces of LNU.
- Researchers need to walk a fine line between trust and control when working with translated data transcripts. Although it can be useful or even necessary to (re)discuss translations and interpretations with translators, colleagues and native speakers, the researcher who conducts multilingual research has to come to terms with the fact that there will always be a degree of filtering at stake.
- Reflexivity and engaging in discussions with translators and native speakers of the data you are working with are key in all forementioned principles.

5. Analytical pitfalls and opportunities of spaces of LNU in multilingualism research

Whereas the previous section focussed on data processing and foregrounded a methodologically relevant perspective (cf. section 2) on undertaking research that involves spaces of LNU, this section moves on to the data analysis phase of the research process and tries to shed light on the analytical pitfalls as well as opportunities spaces of LNU entail. In doing so, the section reflects on researching multilingually from a more epistemological perspective.

We start by examining a case from the abortion clinic of Ella’s research. The consultation involves a Turkish speaking couple from Bulgaria. Both the client and her partner have limited competence in Dutch and basic competence in German. They use both languages actively in the consultation. At various instances, stretches of talk occurred in Turkish between the client and her partner in order to help each other to translate words from Turkish into Dutch or German, with the husband often acting as an interpreter. These instances constitute the analysis’s “spaces of LNU”. Some clarification on the abortion procedure in Belgium is needed before presenting our analysis. Belgian law stipulates that women who opt for abortion receive counselling first. Between this counselling session and the actual abortion treatment, there is a mandatory waiting time of six days. Throughout Ella’s fieldwork, it became clear that this timeline is often unclear to the clients. Many women thought they had booked an appointment at the clinic to have their abortion and were surprised when they found out they still needed to make a second appointment. This recurring observation shaped Ella’s understanding of the interactional development in multilingual consultations throughout the fieldwork. While Ella was observing this particular consultation, she wrote down the following in her fieldnotes:

> *"Client starts panicking and crying when she understands that it [the abortion treatment] will not be under [full] anaesthesia. (...) Again, I suspect that the client and her husband assume that the procedure will take place today. (...) When she [the nurse] announces that she will make an ultrasound, the husband asks if he should wait outside. Annelies [the nurse's pseudonym] replies that he can, and that I will wait outside as well. I stand up and leave the room. (...) I hear Annelies' voice from the surgery, [saying] that this will "not hurt", that it is "just an ultrasound". Therefore I really think that the client thinks that the abortion will take place today [and right now]. Later I also hear how the husband asks something like "is that it?" and so I really think it [the fact that the abortion is not performed right now and that now only an ultrasound is made] is not clear." (fieldnotes, originally in Dutch, from 2 March, 2021)*

Based on her experience in the field, Ella knew that the timing of the procedure often caused ambiguity and she interpreted this stretch of interaction as an example of this tendency: when the nurse announced she would make the ultrasound and asked the client to take off her pants and underwear, Ella thought that the client assumed that the abortion procedure would start there and then. Later, when transcribing the audio-recorded parts of the interaction which she was not able to hear (well) from her position in the corridor, Ella saw this initial assumption further confirmed in the nurse's discursive moves. The nurse's insistence on performing "just an ultrasound [not the abortion itself]" seemed to anticipate a misunderstanding about the nature of the upcoming medical activity. Ella interpreted the client's visible state of panic as an indication of such ambiguity, and it seems plausible that the nurse came to the same conclusion. However, later on in the analytical process, when a Turkish translator filled in the spaces of LNU, Ella realised that her initial perception of the client's misunderstanding was wrong. The transmuted (Halai 2007) transcript showed how the client tells her husband in Turkish "now she will just look how many months", which indicates that she had indeed understood that the nurse was performing an ultrasound all along. **There was thus an illusion of misunderstanding on the part of (a) the nurse in the local interaction and (b) the researcher in her initial analysis of what was happening in this consultation**.

An excerpt from Marie's data on lawyer-client consultations in the field of immigration law constitutes a counterexample. The example features a legal advice consultation between a Syrian refugee, his immigration lawyer and an interpreter Arabic-Dutch. The part of the interaction we will discuss further below deals with the question of why the refugee, who has a recognised status in Greece, came to Belgium. While witnessing the interaction, Marie wrote the following in her field notes:

"Dynamic with interpreter is way better than during the previous consultation. There is less chaos, everyone speaks in short stretches. Good translation: the provided answers fit the posed questions." (fieldnotes, originally in Dutch, from 12 November, 2018)

Although Marie encountered spaces of LNU, she did feel comfortable to evaluate the interpreted interaction in a positive way, ascribing the interpretation the quality "good" based on the length of turns and the logics of question-and-answer format. The transcript below, which includes the backtranslations of an independent translator Arabic Dutch, however, proves otherwise.

1. Lawyer: oké en euhm zou u weet u nog hoe dat u die waarom dat u die verblijfsvergunning hebt gekregen. Hebt u dan een positieve beslissing gekregen in Griekenland?
   Okay and euhm would you do you know how or why you received the residence permit? Did you receive a positive decision in Greece?
2. Interpreter: okif akhadht awra9 nidhamia younania, ya3ni talabt loujou2, ammm ?
   And how did you get the residence permit in Greece? Did you request asylum there?
3. Client: euhm bilwa9t li jit mn Turkya euhm 3ala assas ani okamil tari9i ila hona, ena inkamacht euhm bilyounan obasamt, ya3ni lbasma di ijbariya, basamt honak oma9dart atla3 ila ba3d sanatyn, la9adamt loujou2, sawiyt mo9abalat loujou2 ila akhadht awra9 loujou2 kamila, otala3t.
   Euhm so when I came from Turkey euhm with the intention to continue and travel here, I got arrested euhm in Greece and I had my finger prints taken, I mean that the finger prints were obligatory, so I let that happen and I could only leave after two years, so I requested asylum and I did a couple of interviews until I was granted asylum, when I got all the paperwork, I left.
4. Interpreter: Dus mijn bedoeling was dat ik via Turkije, via Griekenland naar hier kwam maar toen ik euh in Turkije zat ik euh daar vast dus euh ik moest vingerafdrukken geven euh en dan heb ik euh daar een aanvraag ingediend tot euh asiel. Ik heb euh asiel gekregen, ik kon niet euh vertrekken van Griekenland, maar daarna kon ik wel euh vertrekken.
   So my intention was to via Turkey, via Greece, arrive here. But then in Turkey I was erm stuck there. So I had to give my fingerprints. Erm and then erm I filed an application for asylum. I got asylum, I could not erm leave from Greece, but afterwards I could in fact leave.

When reading the transcript, the translated turns reveal that important information was distorted during the encounter. Many filtering effects of the interpreter's mediation can be discussed here, e.g. the lawyer's question in turn 1 takes on a different form in turn 2, the asylum seeker's explanation in turn 3 loses all of its coherence in the interpreter's rendition, the notion of paperwork (mentioned in turn 3) disappears from the interpretation. However, from a legal point of view the interpreter's confusion between Turkey (where the refugee passed through) and Greece (where he actually applied for asylum) entails the most high-stake consequence. When discussing this fragment and its translation with asylum lawyers afterwards, they were outraged about the "hidden reality" that the transcript exposed. **There was thus an illusion of understanding on the part of (a) the lawyer in the local interaction and (b) the researcher in her initial analysis of the unfolding talk**.

Both examples highlight the risk of conducting research that involves spaces of LNU. There is a pitfall of interpreting stretches of interaction, in a (partially) wrong way. Ella underestimated the level of mutual understanding and overestimated the communicative barrier between the interlocutors in the institutional encounter she observed. She was guided (and misled) by the context (cf. Fabian 1995), and hindered by the fact that she did not have access to the linguistic resources to recognise what was discursively happening in the field. Interestingly, Marie assumed the exact opposite about the lawyer-client interaction that she observed. She overestimated the degree of mutual understanding and underestimated the mediating effect of the interpreting that was taking place– a dynamic that can similarly be attributed to the fact that she did not understand the languages spoken in the field in real time. Both Ella and Marie discovered at the stage of analysis (at their desk) what had actually happened during the service encounters (in the field). This made Ella reflect on how approaching interaction from the paradigm of language barriers, instigates the researcher to identify evidence of misunderstanding and communicative breakdowns. Marie, in turn, started wondering about how the "illusion of understanding" can also be characterised as a degree of "false fluency" (Cox and Maryns 2021, 7). This term which captures how communicative issues remain undetected within a communicative encounter, has often been described in light of the experienced reality of the observed interlocutors within the interpreter-mediated interaction. It is, however also at stake with respect to the perspective of the researcher who falls "victim" to this false fluency and only notices at the level of analysis that misunderstanding, and mistranslations occurred during their observations. Note how post-observation revelations (on the basis of translated transcripts, as described above) are unavailable to service providers or their clients and are privilege of researchers with the resources (and time) to hire independent language assistance.

These two examples clearly demonstrate the pitfalls which research that involves spaces of LNU can entail. On the other hand, the cases also demonstrates that spaces of LNU allow for a unique, "emic understanding" of the perspective of interlocutors with a linguistic repertoire similar to that of the researcher–as the illusion of (mis)understanding misguided not only the researcher's but also the service provider's (initial) interpretation of the situation. In other words: the situated understandings of the researcher corresponded to the "emic" perspective of the service provider with the same language repertoire. Emic understanding–as the conceptual opposite to etic understanding, a binary conceptualisation coined by Pike (1967)–is a central ethnographic lens which allows researchers to interpret what is relevant for a participant in a certain context at a specific moment in time (Lillis 2008). Applied to the examples above, Ella and Marie are–because of the sharedness of repertoire–able to understand how the interaction is meaningful to the service provider "from within", as their real-time linguistic in- and exclusion (next to their familiarity with the everyday routines of the institution) gives them an insider's perspective into the motivations behind the service providers' communicative moves and perceptions (G. Jacobs and Slembrouck 2010). Following Duranti (1997), we can state that we experience a certain level of identification with and empathy for the service providers, who understand the stretches of talk in Dutch, but not those in Turkish or Arabic. This instils us with a level of validity when making claims about the nurse's or the lawyer's local understandings (Hymes 1974). In this way, initial non-understanding presents an analytical opportunity highly relevant for the ethnographer (Fabian 1995).

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, we introduced the concept of spaces of linguistic non-understanding (LNU), which refers to stretches of interaction in a language outside the researcher's own linguistic repertoire, to which they are exposed while doing research. We demonstrated how such spaces have a temporal dimension: they open up during data collection, in our case linguistic ethnographic fieldwork observations in an institutional setting. Later, they get filled through translation and (re)adjusted or confirmed through revision. Treating reflections about these dynamics as an object of analysis in its own right, as we did in this article, rather than as a methodological afterthought (as is often done in non-linguistic domains), sheds light on the way in which researcher efforts to navigate spaces of LNU influences the (legitimacy of the) analysis.

Our comparison of fieldnotes and multilingual transcripts make the epistemic process of doing ethnographic research clearly visible (Martin-Jones, Andrews, and Martin 2017, 194), as it demonstrated how analytical assumptions regarding the communicative event of a multilingual service provision encounter may need readjustment as soon as spaces of LNU are filled in. Combined with our experiences about (re)consulting translators and researchers proficient in the language(s) of our spaces of LNU, this reflexivity revealed processes of sensemaking in (linguistic) ethnography that involves spaces of LNU.

A critique to our approach might be that to fully capture sociolinguistic practices, scholars should simply limit themselves to language varieties in which they have proficiency, especially when studying interpreter-mediated interaction (Wadensjö 1998; see also Biagini 2016). There is, however, a parallel between how institutions are confronted with an increasingly diverse clientele because of global migration, and how we as researchers are confronted with this same linguistic diversity (cf. Andrews et al. 2020). Moreover, it is precisely such linguistic diversity and the dynamics it entails, that can and should be of interest to sociolinguists. Although we recognise that the academic endeavour to understand the discursive dynamics that characterize an institution can never be all-encompassing, we find it more compelling to reflect on the linguistic limitations of studying the authentic multilingual service encounters than to focus only on those speech events which feature languages we as researchers are proficient in. This latter, less favoured option would necessitate the disregard of part of the everyday practices that take place within the institutions we study and, therefore, offers a rather distorted picture of the setting. Our approach, on the other hand, implies the occurrence of spaces of LNU but also provides a close connection into the perspective of the service provider or other people with a language repertoire very similar to the researcher. In other words; although conducting research that involves spaces of LNU renders researchers vulnerable to illusions of (mis)understandings and goes hand in hand with a lot of "additional work", it also opens the door for analytical opportunities. As Fabian (1995, 44) argues: "in ethnography things sometimes go right when they go wrong".

All in all, we believe that "multilingual research practice is indeed possible and permissible" (Holmes 2013, 297), but that qualitative researchers in general and linguistic ethnographers in particular need to engage in a discussion regarding their research practice in multilingual institutional settings. The active conceptualisation of multilingual fieldwork as well as additional analytical attention to spaces of LNU and how they get filled, which we proposed in this chapter, might serve as an ideal starting point for this type of discussion.

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