

Angela Treiber · Kerstin Kazzazi ·
Marina Jaciuk *Editors*

Translating Migration

Everyday and research practices
of interpreting in the context of flight
and migration



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Translating Migration. Methodological Approaches, Epistemological Questions, Theoretical Approaches

Angela Treiber and Kerstin Kazzazi

Abstract

In the course of globalization and transnationalization processes, it is true for numerous professional fields of practice and research that conversations can no longer be conducted in the first language of the respective participants. In the context of refugee, asylum and migration regimes and policies, the complexity of translation and communication processes becomes particularly clear. Without the help of interpreters, migrants and refugees are often unable to communicate in conversations (interviews, hearings, therapy), which usually entail vital decisions. Also in qualitative social research, such as ethnographic or sociolinguistic field research on flight and migration, the increasing diversity of languages in research fields requires the involvement of language mediators/interpreters in the research process. Here, too, multi-layered, multilingual situational communication constellations arise in the conversational constellations that are already characterized by hierarchical relations of inequality and emotionality. Interpreting in migration-related multilingual, often tense situations has directed research interest above all to procedural strategies to be developed contextually in order to overcome linguistic as well as culturally conditioned communication barriers.

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1 Translating as Trans-lating. Recent Translation Concepts

In the course of globalization and transnationalization processes, it is true for numerous professional fields of practice and research that conversations can no longer be conducted in the first language of the respective participants. Not infrequently, the interlocutors even have to communicate in a third language, i.e. a language that is a foreign language for both sides.

Particularly in the context of refugee, asylum and migration regimes and policies, the complexity of translation and communication processes with their power-infused practices and forms of dealing with social and cultural difference becomes apparent (cf. Bachmann-Medick, 2015; Wintroub, 2015). In most cases, migrants and refugees from different countries of origin are not able to communicate in their respective languages of origin, be it in interviews (Scheffer, 2016; Thielen, 2009), hearings with public authorities and court employees, counselling and therapeutic conversations with social workers, doctors, therapists or even carers or accompanying persons.

Official and judicial procedures, such as those regulated by asylum and immigration law, therefore require the involvement of interpreters.¹ This is also urgently required in the therapeutic field in order to ensure that the migrant interlocutors, who often experience highly precarious phases of life and situations, can express themselves in a language familiar to them. This is because telling stories in a familiar language makes it easier to affectively remember and express (dramatic and traumatic) experiences (Hillebrecht et al., 2019; Kläui & Stuker, 2010; Morina, 2007; Morina et al., 2010).

In qualitative social research, too, such as in ethnographic or sociolinguistic field research on flight and migration, the increasing diversity of languages in the research fields requires the involvement of language mediators/interpreters in the research process, often with the task of post-translator and with the role of gatekeeper (Rickmeyer, 2009, p. 46ff). Here, too, multi-layered multilingual situational communication constellations emerge in the conversational constellations, which are already characterized by hierarchical relations of inequality and emotionality.

Interpreting in migration-related multilingual, often tense situations has focused research interest primarily on procedural strategies to be developed contextually in order to overcome linguistically as well as culturally conditioned communication barriers. Initial impetus came from the English-speaking world in the

¹ Interpreting (for spoken words) and translating (for written words and as a generic term for transmission and transformation processes).

form of specialist literature for translation in the social, legal and medical spheres under the name *Community Interpreting*.² They pursue different models of translation theory with different normative claims, such as neutrality and objectivity or adequacy, and discuss the weighting of the roles of the actors involved (cf. Larkin et al., 2007; Squires, 2009; Edwards, 1998; Temple & Edwards, 2006; Temple & Young, 2004).

For the practice areas of so-called community interpreting and for qualitative conversation and interview research in the context of foreign languages, there are also only a few empirical studies to date (Kruse & Schmieder, 2012; Pöllabauer, 2005; Bergunde & Pöllabauer, 2015). The contexts of the participants in the interview or conversation situation, their different expressive abilities, subjective as well as culturally shaped attitudes and, in particular, role images and role assignments of the translator are focused on here as factors of the translation process (cf. Kruse & Schmieder, 2012). They show that expectations of interpreters are motivated in different ways, e.g. via group assignments and identifications (Kolb & Pöchhacker, 2008; Pöllabauer, 2005) and range from rejection, mistrust and scepticism to expectations of solidarity and advocacy for neutrality (Pöllabauer, 2005; Bergunde & Pöllabauer, 2015; cf. also Scheffer, 2016, p. 33f). The positioning of interpreters and the expectations placed on them are ambiguous and contradictory. They are questioners and respondents at the same time, as interpreters and mediators, neutral mediators and actively involved interlocutors with different possibilities for action depending on the procedure (Dahlvik, 2010).

2 Interpreting as a Research Subject

Interpreters, as trans-lators, play a decisive role in shaping processes of understanding and comprehension. However, they can also create or trigger non-understanding and misunderstanding, prevent or enable being understood and, in the context of certain procedures, even make it impossible for the interviewees to refuse to understand and be understood (Bahadir, 2010, p. 126).

Translating (foreign) language is not a mechanical process. Embedded in migration-political dispositifs (foreigners, integration, control, security etc.) and part of the interaction between the participants of the conversation with different life backgrounds, it is a complicated process of understanding. What is said, what is narrated, is shaped by socio-economic status, level of education, experiences.

²The term was coined in reference to *Community Work*, which is used in the USA for various unpaid services by lay people (cf. Petrova, 2015).

The participants in the conversation do not have the same shared knowledge, i.e. what is said is not understandable for everyone (Scheffer, 2016, p. 40, Rienzner, 2010, 2011). In particular, the use of institutionalized and codified terms in the procedural language (e.g. *foreigner*, *immigrant*, *refugee*) of migration policy makes speaking a performative act of social inequality. The same applies to the recourse to idealized and generalized definitions of meaning, such as those used in lexical definitions (e.g. *family*, *integration*, *violence*). The respective conversational situation then receives too little attention and so-called imputation practices tend to be promoted (Kruse & Schmieder, 2012). These are closely related to power positions of social inequality and interpretive sovereignty (Bourdieu, 1990). One thinks, is convinced one understands what the other is communicating, and yet one hears only the interpretation already generated. Microanalytical approaches make the inequality in encounters and its consequences for the process of understanding transparent (TREIBER/KAZZAZI; HOLLWEG).

For a long time, correct translation was generally regarded as an “unproblematic service that can be expected as a matter of course” (Scheffer, 2016, p. 34), and this not only in the field of administrative procedures. Even in qualitative research, the involvement of interpreters and translators (both native and foreign) has been problematized surprisingly little, at least in the academic field, especially in the context of field research (cf. Berman & Tyyska, 2011; Enzenhofer & Resch, 2011, 2013; Fröhlich, 2012; Lauterbach, 2014; Kruse & Schmieder, 2012; Stegmaier, 2013; Hillebrecht et al., 2019; Uçan, 2019). Increasingly, interpreting, translation and transcription processes considering phenomena of the field as well as understanding between researchers and study participants and interlocutors receive attention, and epistemological questions gain interest here. This is because these multilingual situations are of particular heuristic importance overall. Linguistic uncertainties can also promote closeness, leading to the request to explain and elucidate what is meant. Misunderstandings can lead to an exchange of content and thus bring new aspects into play in order to open up other subject areas and develop new questions. Last but not least, they reveal methodological and content-related problematic aspects of monolingual research (Inheteen, 2012, p. 30ff).

Interpreting and translation are coming into focus as research objects in qualitative social research (Schittenhelm, 2017) as well as in translation studies and the everyday practice of interpreters. Discussions focus on the significance and scope of cooperative working practices with local language mediators and methodological procedures that require close cooperation and familiarity with the research questions. The interpreters become visible as actors in the research field (NOWAK/HORNBERG; HOLLWEG). The (post-)migrant spaces of multilingualism and translanguaging (cf. Dirim & Mecheril, 2010) promote reflections on the positioning of

ethnographers in the research field; they allow one to question one's own language competencies and reveal the use of language as a symbolic power of colonial heritage (RECKINGER; CAN).

3 Translation as a Transcultural Space

The heterogeneity of linguistic expressions, the varieties and variations of languages in their socio-cultural, spatial imprints refer to the dimension of translation for cultural understanding (Geertz, 1987; Hangartner, 2012). This extended sense of the term as "cultural translation" (Kruse, 2009; Renn, 2002) is based on the metaphorical transfer of translational action to the handling of difference and has gained paradigmatic quality in the social and cultural sciences and also in translation studies with regard to questions relevant to the theory of science (Asad, 1986; Hanks, 2014; Leavitt, 2014).

Culture is understood here as a frame of reference for specific meaning-making, which shapes language and is simultaneously shaped by language, which structures perception, experience and bodily practice. Words receive their meaning in contexts of life and meaning (see examples in the contribution by TREIBER/KAZAZI) and are in turn also themselves reality-constituting through the act of linguistic categorization.³ Even if the same language is spoken, it is necessary to perceive the different socio-cultural locations of the speech of the participants in the conversation and to take them into account in a translating, mediating way. In this way understanding is made possible. The German expression "speaking another language..." [*eine andere Sprache sprechen*] for unsuccessful or marginally successful communication refers to this connection. The sociologist Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez formulates the following about the transfer from one linguistic-cultural field of reference to another in this broader cultural-theoretical context: "*The translation project that arises in the encounter does not follow the goal of articulating a universal commonality, but represents the attempt to find a language in difference.*" (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2008).

She thus describes the communicative transformation of what is spoken in conversation as a transcultural space, as an *interspace* of different social imprints that shape language and are shaped by language. Language is therefore not static, but

³This is the basic assumption of the so-called *linguistic relativity hypothesis* (also: *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis*), which, for example, in the modified version of "Thinking for Speaking" by Dan I. Slobin, has again become the focus of linguistic research interest since the 1990s (cf. Slobin, 2014).

contextual in its meaning. Cultural/milieu-specific, situational or individual connotations of expressions give rise to semantic gaps, quasi gaps for decoding what is meant (Resch & Enzenhofer, 2012). This applies to encounters within “the same” language, but especially to encounters in multilingual spaces.

Gutiérrez Rodríguez draws on Homi K. Bhabha’s postcolonial concept of “cultural translation”. He understands this as a way to overcome the established Western cultural universalism as a notion of timeless, normative rules and orders by pointing to the transformational, the shifts in meaning, the mixtures of languages, the “rearticulation”, and describing translation as a strategy of hybridity, a space in-between created by self-alienation.

The imperfection of translation processes shows itself in the untranslatable remains as cultural difference (Bhabha, 2000, p. 42, 58). Translation thus becomes the way to understand the world, “*to understand the world by understanding translation, giving any particular cultural tradition or cultural text its own space*” (Anfeng & Bhabha, 2009).

The concept of translation or interpreting can be related to specific methods of the social and cultural sciences, especially to field research and participant observation. The special contact situations and cultural translation constellations in research on flight and migration require not only the role of the interpreter to be considered (Clifford, 1997), but also the role of the researcher as “interpreter” (Girtler, 2009), to reflect on his/her work of *Verstehensarbeit* [‘understanding’] and scientific translation. Here, too, role expectations and role requirements, norms and values as well as modes of perception and expectations in the intercultural encounter shape the research process. This is all the more important to take into account in the sensitive field in which the immigrants’ experiences of violence and flight and the confrontation of the native population with them can lead to tense situations.

Listening to and recognizing the multiple voices of what is said by the interlocutors involved requires “de-self-understanding” (Breuer, 2009), i.e. rethinking one’s own horizon of reality (Kruse & Schmieder, 2012) and grasping the foreign horizon of the interlocutor as an alternative horizon of interpretation. In this context, it is important to repeatedly practice a position between empathic participation and a distanced observation perspective, in order to develop the meaningful logic of human (language and speech) behaviour in the context of life and situation as an interpreter or participating observer (cf. Bahadir, 2010; BAHADIR).

4 Translating Migration: Practical Approaches and Theoretical Approaches

From the outlined contexts it emerges that the thematic field of “translating migration” can be considered in two respects and from different perspectives: On the one hand, *interpreting/translating as an everyday practice* of social service, in which clear role distributions are expected and specific *procedures of interpreting and translating* are demanded in each case, e.g. in psychotherapy (Kluge & Kassim, 2006; Kluge, 2017) (emphatically demanded e.g. from the perspective of psychotherapy in BALLER/OTT; formulated in the form of a professional self-expectation by MARKERT); on the other hand, as a *component of the research process* in qualitative social research, in which there are different expectations and role assumptions depending on the research object and design – from the view of the mere necessity arising from the multilingual research field to the reflection on the relevance of relationships and roles of the participants in the conversation with regard to data generation, processing and interpretation (illustrated on the basis of linguistically complex data material e.g. in HOLLWEG’s contribution). Finally, the translation process itself, or the process of making it transparent, can be the focus of research, and *interpreting and translating* can become *the object of research* (illustrated with the example of the multilingual researcher in UCAN’s contribution). This different perspective on translation gives rise to various questions regarding the actors involved, the languages and what is spoken, as well as what is transcribed.

Which concepts, which strategies of translation are legitimized in practice and in what way? What consequences does the transfer of certain ideas and social practices from one context to another have for translation? What needs to be “translated”, i.e. what is “different”? Who decides on the “correctness” of the interpretation inherent in any translation process, i.e. who has interpretive sovereignty over the equivalence of words, concepts, practices and signs? To what extent does the identified and established difference between what is explicitly said and what is translated in conversational situations carry epistemic potential? (For different strategies of non-professional interpreters in the context of refugee and asylum counselling see TREIBER/KAZZAZI).

Does it make a difference which actors translate and mediate for the refugees? What knowledge as well as language and experience capital must a person have in order to be able to participate meaningfully in a consultation or in a scientific study? And what do researchers have to consider, what own competences do they have to possess or develop in order to be able to do justice to the research field? (NOWAK/HORNBERG).

Last but not least, questions arise as to what extent theoretical concepts (culture, third space, social drama, interactionism, social practice) are taken up in a research-guiding or -sensitizing epistemologically profitable way for the analysis and interpretation of translation and thus of representational processes, and in what way they can contribute to revealing them (BAHADIR).

The experience-saturated, self-critical reflection of the ethnological, social anthropological Writing Culture debate more than three decades ago revealed the complex interrelationships of writing down and describing as a process of translation and transformation that was always incomplete due to the circumstances (“*Partial Truths*”, Clifford, 1986, p. 7). A look at the hard-fought discussion shows that at the moment when translation became central to problem orientation, the claim to translation was also fundamentally called into question. While this initially ended in a “crisis of ethnographic representation” (Berg & Fuchs, 1993), it is precisely the sensitive social spaces of refugees, characterized by multilingualism, that demand awareness and increased reflection on translation processes as an action that, while it may be problematized, is in principle necessary for making these specific fields of research accessible.

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