

## More than just translation: challenges and opportunities in translingual research

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**Abstract.** With research in multilingual and intercultural settings becoming more and more common, issues around “translation” have attracted increasing attention in the social sciences. Drawing on their first-hand experiences of doing research in multilingual settings, the authors suggest that processes of translation create moments of friction and hesitation that, in turn, allow for the production of new and hybrid spaces of understanding that cut across linguistic and cultural borders. It is argued that the act of translation gives space for increased critical reflexivity regarding methodological issues, such as working with a translator, positionality, and the communication of academic terms, which are explored here. In particular, the article relates these issues to wider concerns which may be relevant to social science research more generally, but are often all too easily overlooked.

### 1 Introduction

Translation is part of a wider process of doing multilingual and intercultural research, which is increasingly the focus of academic attention, particularly in human geography, as well as in the social sciences more generally. This attention is in part a result of the increasing possibilities for comparative cross-national and cross-cultural research projects to take place, giving rise to opportunities for intellectual endeavour at a scale that was previously more difficult to access. It is also, no doubt, related to drives through funding initiatives requiring academics to engage in multinational research ventures. The increasing mobility of academics across national, cultural and language borders, as well as changing publishing practices, has also pushed issues around translation into the foreground of academic debates.

In this paper, the authors explore some methodological issues around the practices and consequences of translation with regard to social science research, drawing on their first-hand experience of the complexities of doing research that involved working in “multilingual constellations” (Meyer et al., 2007:12). Our aim is to unpack and unravel the complexities of multilingual research settings in order to contribute to a better understanding of such settings and the research process therein. It seems that “translation” may serve as shorthand for the various issues around language, communication, and culture that doing intercultural research raises. It is therefore suggested here this focus provides a useful stimulus for considering some of the more general difficulties of doing social research that may otherwise be glossed over. In particular, it is suggested that the focus on “translation”, here and in related debates, could be opened up to potentially include a wider range of concerns and positions, perhaps through what might be called a “translingual” or “transcultural” methodological approach.

A growing body of literature dedicated to multilingual issues is emerging from within human geography, urban planning and other related disciplines. Researchers (such as Booth, 1993; Helms et al., 2005; Müller, 2007) have drawn attention to significant cultural differences between culturally-specific academic discourses, and the “cultural gaps” that need to be bridged when doing cross-national and multilingual research. Other scholars have reflected on issues related to the dominance of the English language within geography, criticising, for example, the general lack of thought invested in reflecting on the positions of non-English speakers as well as a linguistic power imbalance within “international geography” (Helms et al., 2005:248). A perceived “Anglo-American hegemony” (see for example Aalbers, 2004; Rodríguez-Pose, 2006; Hassink, 2007) has been explicitly related to the dominance of English language journals in the academic mainstream, and the subsequent marginalisation of off-network scholars (Belcher,



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2007). This has also been linked to the issue of power, as “linguistic hegemony empowers some (native speakers mainly) while disempowering others”, allegedly leading to a less rich, diverse human geography (Hassink, 2007:1282).

On a purely practical level, given the limited capacity for most people to learn more than a few languages, and the rise of a global academic community in the context of globalisation (Hassink, 2007), there is surely some need for agreement on one or several lingua(s) franca. However, as other authors have pointed out, the issue of language can be an emotional one, and there has been a tendency for emotive arguments to obscure the more constructive dialogic endeavours to address these issues (Rodríguez-Pose, 2006). There is also an implicit assumption about native English speaking researchers’ willingness to subject themselves to some of the uncomfortable situations described by non-Anglophone colleagues, perhaps reflecting the lack of publications by native-English researchers about carrying out research in non-Anglophone environments (although see Smith, 2003; Deans, 2004; Watson, 2004).

A further related current of academic thought focuses on the transferral of meaning within the specific act of translation. Müller (2007), for example, discusses the concept of power in relation to translation. He argues that translation is complex, political and subjective. Müller’s account looks beyond semantics to emphasize the agency of the translating geographer and the critical potential of translation, which requires addressing the institutionalisation of a naturalised meaning hegemony. In this vein, the conception of translation can be further pinned down and described as making sense of and transferring meaning from one time-space context into another; beyond the translation of language, it also involves translation of the meaning of social and cultural practices and artefacts. In practical terms, this may mean carrying out interview analysis in the original language, and only translating excerpts at the final version stage, with footnotes explaining the significance of different terms (Smith, 2003). This technique is known as “holus-bolus”, a strategy for maintaining “intellectual honesty” which also draws attention to the “contingency of meaning” (Müller, 2007:210). The aim is to produce richer insight into diverse cultural understandings of concepts, as well as maintaining an awareness of the different implications of different terms.

It seems, then, that translation demands from geographers a high degree of sensitivity to contextual factors, including cultural difference and similarity, and uneven power relations (Smith, 2003). It could even be argued that translation involves comparison between different subjectivities, as it involves recognition of the translator’s (or researcher’s) agency, as well as an awareness of the cultural influences that frame this. In this sense, translation can occur in both “inter-” and “intra-” cultural contexts because, as Best (2003) argues, even when seemingly the same language is used there is potential for misunderstanding between the interviewer and the interviewee, given the nuances of language. This suggests

that “language” and “culture” are not monolithic entities. As a practical element of meaning-making, language is one aspect of culture; while culture itself is less a set of localised and bounded attributes (Hastrup and Fog Olwig, 1997), and more a system of dynamic flows and relations, including everyday practices, which contribute to self-understanding (Shurmer-Smith, 2002).

Seeing language as a reflection of different cultural influences also implies consideration of issues around positionality perhaps otherwise overlooked, including aspects such as age, class and gender. Moreover, working in two languages and the act of translation produces moments of friction and hesitation. It may well be at these particular junctures that meanings and conceptualisations are challenged by new ideas and thoughts. In fact, the “hybrid spaces” which Smith (1996) identifies between intercultural researchers and their respondents could be treated not just as a language issue, but rather as the spaces which exist between all researchers and “others”. Similarly, the issues at stake here may be related to wider concerns about research in human geography beyond multilingual contexts. Ultimately, the opportunity for increased reflexivity generated by the experience of “intercultural” research could be applied in all social research settings, including in an “intracultural” context. This suggests that rather than a clearly-defined boundary between “inter-” and “intra-” cultural research practices, there are areas of overlap and similarity, a point which is returned to throughout the paper as well as in the concluding paragraphs.

In this paper, the authors, who are all based at Sheffield University, each write about their experiences of doing research in multilingual contexts, and about the implications these particular settings had for their research projects. Each of our contributions has a distinct focus, reflecting personal experiences and individual thoughts; but we also find some common ground, which is drawn out in the conclusions. There are many roles that can be taken in intercultural research, and each one of the situations described in this article has approached intercultural research in a slightly different way. Each of the three sections is written in the first person and as three distinctive voices, it is hoped that this multi-faceted discussion will enhance current debates.

## 2 Interpreting interviews

The first reflection here deals with some issues of using a translator in research. The approach that has been used has drawn on a wide collection of past academic experiences of using a translator and others working with different languages. Importantly, it has not only stuck to literature on translation; the approach has also drawn on social and cultural theory surrounding the understanding of different cultural contexts (Best, 2003). For my research, the particular issues arose when living and researching everyday food

practices in a southern city in Hungary. Using a translator allowed space for questions to be raised that led to an increased understanding of that particular cultural context, and although at times using a translator was limiting, conversely it meant that arresting moments could often be seen, similar to what Smith (1996) calls hybrid spaces, where new meanings were fashioned in both cultural contexts.

In transnational research the role of the translator to help in negotiating different situations has been acknowledged. Twyman et al. (1999) discuss how the translator, in the context of simultaneous translations, when listening back to the recordings away from the pressure of an interview situation, explained words as something slightly different from the simultaneous translation. Similarly, when I received translated interviews via email, before visiting Hungary, some areas of the interview transcripts did not make sense. There were issues that were beguiling to both the research assistant and me. When discussing in person these nuances in each other's languages, it was often found that words had slightly different meanings. This is to say that when going through the translations with the translator, she often revealed her own dissatisfaction with her choice of written translation. These small discrepancies, which were passable translations, enough for the basic meaning to be understood, often however glossed over the intended meaning of the interviewee.

Through the course of this process there were many examples of this. I have chosen one that seems to be most appropriate. This is an extract from one of our interviews:

*I try to buy it somewhere else, yes. Because it is scary... Well, meat... I don't like to buy meat in the Tesco, as I am not really satisfied with it. That means, if I have the opportunity, and I do a bigger meat-shopping, then – well, the other day I was susceptible inclined to go to the butcher's in Szamos street, as I trust in butchers more than in the meat counter at the hypermarkets.*

In this example the word “susceptible” was the direct translation in accordance with the dictionary, but when the meaning of the word was examined, this translation was not what the translator believed was being expressed. The literature on consumption has long gone past the idea that consumers are duped into buying products (Miller, 1998:1). Therefore I felt that it was important to know what was meant by the word “susceptible”. Did the interviewee believe that she was being tricked into going to the butchers? However when discussing it, the word “inclined” was used as an alternative definition which does not hint that the interviewee feels that she has lost control. This word was used because it best reflected the way that the interviewee saw this process, in the eyes of the translator. It is not that this was a mistranslation or a bad translation, but it did not best reflect the full meaning or limited meaning of the word in this case. It also added another perceived meaning into the mix. In addition, this moment of hesitation and close analysis of one word became arresting and allowed a space where language, meaning and cultural understandings were perhaps scrutinised further

than they would have been if another topic was being discussed.

In this way, discussing the translations not as static text but fluid in their construction and meaning, things started to appear more interesting. For instance, as part of the semi-structured interviews we had asked to be carried out, one of the questions was: “Do you consider food as an expression of love?”. When we were going through the translation of the interviews, I asked the translator why people had focused so much on their partners and not on their children in their answers. She explained that in Hungarian there are two words for “love”. One denotes love for a lover, and the other love for a family member or an object. When she was asking the question she was only using the word that meant love for a lover. In analysing these transcripts it would have been easy to infer meaning that was not there. In addition there is the implication that the quality of the data may be compromised. This single translation limited the amount that the project could say about parent-child relationships. This highlighted the importance of an awareness of different translations, when setting questions but also when carrying out transcriptions of translated interviews. These differences can be vital in understanding what is being said, without being able to be translated. The words suggest so much, but often that is what becomes absent in another context. This pause or hesitation in the research process served to highlight the role that the translator had on the material that was generated. The translator was my way in to the participants' lives and everyday activities.

As the interviews were spoken, everyday language was used, presenting an interesting interplay between current cultural contexts in both languages. Often the translator would say to me, “but you don't have a word for this in English”. This was true. It is often difficult to keep the exact translations of each word, and compromises have to be made in order for it to be understood. We would often however find that it was more than this; it was often because the words were “slang”<sup>1</sup>. These words were culturally and contextually specific; their meaning would change over time, so what is “cool” now, tomorrow might be “phat”. We decided that we would do our best to keep to the informal way in which these words were being said, to maintain their meaning. This brought to light interesting use of language that would not have been used by English speaking people. For example the word “grubs” was used instead of “meal”. “Meal” was too formal for the context, and it set the wrong tone for what participants were trying to depict, which was somewhere in between what they saw as a meal and a snack. This identified an interesting area in which the data could then be analysed. Acknowledging and discussing slang or alternative meanings of words can play an important part in looking at intercultural

<sup>1</sup>The Oxford English Dictionary defines slang as informal language that is more common in speech than in writing and is typically restricted to a particular context or group.

settings, in the way that the meanings of language can become arresting and cause moments of contemplation for the researcher. Creating this “space” can have different consequences and often leaves the researcher perplexed about what is being said and what meaning can be inferred from it.

The translator acts as a gatekeeper to this information: if there is only a limited understanding of the language by the researcher, the role that the translator plays can be a powerful one. However, not carrying out research because the researcher is not a native speaker should not preclude them from gaining an understanding of a different cultural context; and it can actually serve to highlight previously taken for granted activities such as eating. Therefore when carrying out research in a different cultural context, it is essential for more rigorous questions to be asked about implied meanings and understandings. I would argue that this is not just the case for researchers carrying out research in different countries. Questions should continually be asked about the meanings/understandings of words; and the spaces between the interviewer and the interviewee should be examined closely even when it seems like the same language is being spoken (Best, 2003; Smith, 2004). These are things all researchers should be aware of, not just those dealing with translation of a different language.

### 3 Positionality and reflexivity in multilingual research

It seems then that certain stages in the research process, in particular analysis, give rise to increased reflection on the linguistic dilemmas which are part of intercultural research. Interestingly, despite language being a crucial aspect of almost all social science research, it is often only considered in depth when it is found to be problematic, as suggested by debates on the “Anglo-American hegemony” in human geography. However, the apparent lack of reflection by Anglophone researchers who have carried out research in other languages may also have added to this perception. My own experiences as a native English speaker doing research in a Spanish-speaking setting brought to light some of the challenges and opportunities that intercultural research presents, which I may not otherwise have considered. In particular, I found that carrying out research in a bilingual setting gave rise to increased reflexivity. Although sometimes uncomfortable, the misunderstandings and difficult situations arising from doing research in a second language were what gave me pause for thought. In particular, I found myself reflecting on my positionality, and related to this, issues of identity and representation, based on the “translation” of my identity as a researcher into different research settings.

Carrying out research into place-making in urban informal neighbourhoods in a Mexican city, I interviewed local people in Spanish without an interpreter. My aim in this was to try and get as close to the language and its meaning as possible (Müller, 2007). The sensation of missing nuances and sub-

tleties in interviews was sometimes present, but the excitement of doing research in a foreign language overtook this. However, as in the previous section, it was during the analysis and writing stage (back home in the UK) that certain issues relating to language stood out. For example, re-listening to interviews where my understanding was constrained by my linguistic ability led me to reflect on “what a dolt one is” (Watson, 2004). This related to occasions where I had to ask the same question several times, or I wasn’t quick enough to ask a follow-up question. On the other hand, these misunderstandings also sometimes proved fruitful, as they led respondents to explain things in different terms than they might normally have used.

Doing research in a linguistic setting where I was a non-native speaker also emphasised certain facets of my own identity as a researcher, and as an “outsider”. There were occasions when respondents made certain assumptions about my identity, which were perhaps quite different from my own view of my positionality (Herod, 1999:324). For example, as a 30-year-old woman interviewing state officials who were around my age, it was hard to know whether to use the polite or informal version of “you” (“usted” or “tu”). This was brought to the fore when one interviewee, the head of a state department who had studied in Europe, insisted I used “tu”. His aim seemed to be to put me at ease, based on his knowledge of English which has only one form of “you”. However, my experience of Mexico’s quite formal etiquette (where people use “usted” even with their parents) made me extremely uncomfortable with this arrangement, which created some friction between interviewer and interviewee. Many researchers have reflected on the process of interviewing elites, both in a multilingual research setting (e.g. Herod, 1999) and a monolingual one (e.g. McDowell, 1998), particularly relating to the unsettling of assumed or expected power relations between researcher and research respondent. On reflection, my discomfort may have arisen from the gap between the interviewee’s expectations based on his understanding of my cultural identity, and my own understanding of what was expected in the cultural environment where the research took place. Perhaps it also related to my inability to “perform” the identity which the respondent had assigned to me, which appeared to diminish the professional distance between us.

On the other hand, it has been suggested that positionality, and the categories of insider/outsider, are more fluid than is sometimes imagined (Herod, 1999). Indeed, my own positionality shifted depending on the situation, meaning at different times I emphasised some elements of my identity more than others. As a white, middle-class English woman, I sometimes felt that culture and language were not the most important aspects of my identity. For example, economic status separated me more markedly than language from some respondents; while conversely, being a woman afforded me unexpected identification with others. Often, I found conversations with housewives of around my age centred on the disparities and similarities between our life experiences, thus

making a connection through difference. It seems that intercultural research forces the researcher to reflect on issues around positionality and reflexivity that might otherwise be less thoroughly considered (Helms et al., 2005), perhaps in terms of exploring the common ground (as well as the differences) between researcher and research respondents.

In my own research, the issue of language seemed particularly problematic in terms of representing respondents' words and meanings. Even if the researcher only translates excerpts from transcripts (as opposed to simultaneously translating while transcribing, or translating the whole transcript), how does she make respondents' voices as authentic as possible when she has changed every word? Literal translation into English is sometimes inadequate to express the subtleties of the concept at hand; or worse, may lead to "translating the untranslatable" (Hassink, 2007:1286) and the "Anglicisation" of the text. There may be no easy solution to this, although strategies such as multilingual texts help to deepen understanding of the issues at stake. Translating may involve mapping ideas and meanings between and across cultures, and the politics of language use may require attention (Smith, 2003).

But this also relates to the wider problem of representation in research, which occurs at all levels to some degree, as "[r]epresentation is fundamentally problematic" (Smith, 2003:190). The issue is that "we can never not work with "others" who are separate and different from ourselves; difference is an essential aspect of all social interactions that requires that we are always everywhere in between or negotiating the worlds of me and not-me" (Nast, 1994, quoted in Smith, 2003:188–9). In this sense, translation may be seen as a task that every researcher needs to reflect on, at least within the social sciences, in "translating" the words and meanings of respondents into academic text. Even in research where interviews are carried out in the "same" language, there is the potential for the arresting moments described here in a multilingual research setting. Different "dialects" within a monolingual setting, such as the "slang" discussed in the previous section, offer the potential for misunderstanding even when the researcher apparently speaks the same language as her respondents. Furthermore, concepts that are taken for granted in everyday use may be highlighted as far from essential. Best's (2003:898) exploration of research as "a space wherein racial categories and hierarchies are recreated" shows how everyday phenomena such as (race) categories are created by ongoing interactional routines, including the research encounter.

#### 4 Translating academic terms from one language into another

It was the process of undertaking research in a multilingual setting that led me to interrogate the contingent, interactional nature of taken-for-granted concepts in my own language.

Having moved from Germany to the UK to carry out a PhD-research project in English (my second language), I was eager to grab the opportunity to engage with and make connections between academic debates held in both German and English. This strategy, I thought, would be the most appropriate method of addressing my research questions (related to urban policy-making in Eastern Germany) and allowing me to interpret my findings in a more compelling way. By doing so, I also hoped to be better equipped to communicate my research to the English-speaking community I had become part of. I found the ambition to use materials published in different languages to be common among bilingual academics. However, I realised the translation of academic concepts originating from different language contexts and the negotiation of the (partly) different meanings in the research process represented a difficult and challenging "balancing act" (Casanave, 1998).

Moving into a second language environment obviously meant I would have to acquire appropriate English language skills. I soon realised, however, that the main challenge related to the intercultural nature of the research setting: the crucial task was to translate meaning, not words. Given that language represents a "socially situated cultural form" (Saville-Troike, 2003:3, quoted in Werlen, 2007:16) rather than a neutral means of communication, I came to understand that any act of translation of academic terms required a healthy dose of sensitivity for the specific social, political and cultural meanings embedded in both the language(s) used (Booth, 1993). The reciprocal nature of this process included, among other things, abandoning "ethnocentric" (Pierre, 2005:448) or *natiozentrisch* (nation state-centric) perspectives (Elias, 1997:398) when translating. Also, it demanded acknowledging that culture and language are not monolithic entities. Accordingly, concepts are of dynamic nature with fluid rather than fixed meanings, rendering translation a subjective, open and, inevitably, an imperfect process.

Regarding my own research, I came to understand that I would have to accept the idea of subjectivity myself and to develop a sufficiently robust opinion on the different materials I used in order to communicate across cultural borders. From a more practical perspective, moving between German- and English-language material demanded a critical and intensive engagement with concepts relevant for my research, including those I already felt familiar with. In order to make connections between academic debates in different languages and to position myself within these, I felt I would have to unpack the various political, social, and cultural dimensions behind these concepts and to explore a range of different interpretations. This methodological approach may sound trivial given that a careful consideration of academic terms is always required when doing research. However, the point to make here is that the challenging act of translation caused a moment of friction and hesitation that eventually forced me to compare, challenge previous conceptualisations

and search for a better understanding.

Taking *behutsame Stadterneuerung* as an example, re-engagement with this concept of “careful urban renewal” involved reconsidering its origins, including the specific West German urban and political context in the 1970s in which it evolved. It made me rethink the political struggles that led to the radical policy shift away from mass clearance of housing and social displacement towards a careful rehabilitation of the stock, and the introduction of various new legal and other mechanisms securing social protection of communities in urban renewal areas (Hämer, 1990; Becker, 1991). It made me explore once again, among other things, the specific ideologies around the German welfare state, power relationships within German federalism, and normative ideas of the urban built environment that informed *behutsame Stadterneuerung*. Also, this critical reconsideration helped me in assessing recent changes in the way the concept translated into public policy (Bernt, 2003). It was only this reflection that eventually allowed me to position myself with respect to the concept and to study similarities and differences between *behutsame Stadterneuerung* and related English-language debates around urban renewal and urban regeneration.

Looking beyond multilingual research contexts, it is tempting to transfer this experience into seemingly monolingual (or intralingual) settings. Given that translation is a specific act of communication (i.e. the process of exchanging information between human beings through a medium with the intention to make oneself understood, Werlen, 2007), the arguments made above may well apply for any act of communication – even in monolingual settings. Given the many nuances that exist in the meaning of words and the many different ways one and the same language can be used, even intralingual (research) settings contain much potential for miscommunication. Here, an increased reflexivity regarding the communication of concepts may also be rewarding.

To summarise, I found that the challenge of translating of academic terms to be related to the transferral of meaning, not words. When communicating terms in a second language, and making connections between debates held in different languages, a careful unpacking of the political, social, and cultural dimensions embedded in the terms is necessary. This is a reciprocal process that extends to both the original and the target languages. The act of translation has the potential to develop a more reflective position for individuals doing the research, to facilitate learning, and to create new, hybrid spaces of understanding.

## 5 Concluding thoughts

The aim of this paper has been to highlight a number of issues related to doing research in multilingual research contexts. Drawing on our own experiences, we have touched upon a small number of aspects we found to be particularly relevant in each setting. Rather than making use of a single concept

such as translation, our aim has been to open up debates we think need further exploration. We approached this article in a discursive way that enabled us to reflect on our personal research experiences. Consequently, our conclusions to a certain extent reflect these different approaches and individual experiences, rather than a single viewpoint. There is much common ground in our thinking, although on a small number of issues we have maintained different positions as well. As the intention of this paper has not been to give definitive answers, but to increase awareness about a number of particular aspects, we do not regard this as problematic.

This consideration notwithstanding, there are a number of points of congruence across the three authors’ reflections, where we find our common ground. Recent debates around language in human geography have tended to focus on relatively negative issues of power and marginalisation. But we have found that intercultural research gives rise to as many opportunities as it does challenges, the crucial point perhaps being how these are then capitalised on. Firstly, we find that doing research in multilingual settings is a challenging, but intellectually highly rewarding task. It opens up new ways of thinking, and it challenges ideas that are normally taken for granted. It forces the researcher to become more explicit in his or her thinking and communication, and it requires the academic to position himself or herself much more clearly than may be the case in other research settings, for instance where all parties (apparently) share a language. It requires making values and norms explicit, and unpacking the implicit “ethno-centrism” of theories and concepts, as well as developing an understanding of more than one research context. This applies not only to the research process itself, but also to the dissemination of the research, including explanations, presentations, discussions and conversations that may take place around it. Furthermore, making the effort to understand a subject area in a different language affords a different perspective on it, which may lead to a deeper understanding of the issues at hand. While this point may seem almost banal, it can also come as a surprise to researchers who are not used to experiencing this first hand. It opens a world of possibilities that may be closed to researchers working in monolingual (which does not necessarily equate to monocultural) contexts.

Secondly, we argue that such intercultural and multilingual settings require much more intensive, reflective and careful thinking about the researcher’s identity and positionality in the research process. This means that while the role of language in perpetuating academic hegemonies should be acknowledged, researchers in privileged positions, whether on the basis of language, culture, or resources and other types of power, should also be encouraged to constantly examine their position in the wider research world, and the implications this has for others. On the other hand, Anglophone dominance in publications may reflect a power imbalance within the academic world; but this may go beyond, and cut across, language divisions. Alongside linguistic hegemony, there

are other issues relating to resources and genuine marginalisation from debates, which require “scholars in privileged western environments ... to find responsible and ethical ways to engage with, learn from and promote the ideas of intellectuals in less privileged places” (Robinson, 1994:549–550). In this sense, culture may be as important, if not more so, than language. Discussions about language may therefore have potential to provide space for reflexivity for human geography as a discipline, as well as for individual researchers. Of course, there is the ever-present danger of academic navel gazing; but maintaining a vigilant position on this should not necessarily detract from the often richly rewarding process of reflexivity.

The third aspect we would like to highlight is that intercultural research and working with a translator marks out and draws together places, through the mediation of language via a third party. This creates not just an opportunity to share different ideas, but also spaces where nuances in meaning can be explored, emphasising the positive opportunities that this offers. Whether we are fluent in one or more languages, practitioners of geography should be reaching out and embracing the challenges that people face on a daily basis in communicating with one another. Specifically, using a translator means that often the act of translation is seen as something that is complete; but here it has been suggested to be continually evolving and adapting, which can have both positive and negative outcomes in the research process.

The fourth aspect we would like to touch upon is that we find that intercultural and multilingual research is about more than translation, and it can happen in a variety of contexts. To us, it always involves moments of friction and hesitation, and we argue that it is this particular moment where our thinking is challenged by new ideas and thoughts. It is this little break – be it while speaking with an interpreter, while reflecting on our positionality or while striving to transfer meaning from one language into another – that moves things forward in constructive ways and creates the “hybrid spaces” Smith (1996) refers to. Intercultural research in multilingual settings, as well as research as a whole, is about critical reflexivity. This means that these ruptures in knowledge have the potential to open up new horizons, and one must allow for these and explore them further in order to create greater understanding. To this end, we suggest a translingual methodological approach. This implies looking across or beyond different languages to capture the meanings produced by the research process, rather than seeing meaning as static and attached to language. It also means understanding that even in monolingual research contexts, the production of meaning is a contingent and continual process of refinement and reflection. It is an imperfect process, but this in itself has the potential for positive outcomes. In other words, a translingual methodological approach is one that emphasises openness and reflexivity to different meanings and interpretations; which has its grounding in intercultural research, but which can ultimately be applied in all social research contexts.

To conclude, one of the key points that the preceding discussions have highlighted is the contingency of meaning across a variety of linguistic and cultural settings. However, rather than seeing this as problematic, we have argued that this exposes the fragility of meaning in monolingual contexts, as well as across different linguistic settings. As Best (2003:903) has pointed out, “Language, rather than being a transparent carrier of ideas, is itself the site of reality construction”. This also has implications for intracultural and intralingual research, particularly with regard to what is glossed over or not reflected on in these settings. It may be the more everyday concepts that are taken for granted that present particular “blind spots”. For this reason, the reflexivity generated within a multilingual research setting, extended across intracultural contexts, seems to offer a productive interpretation of the communicative dimension of social research. It is beyond the scope of this paper, but further work comparing “inter”- with “intra”-cultural research experiences could explore this in a more systematic way, in the spirit of a translingual methodological approach.

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