

Interview and translation strategies: coping with multilingual settings and data

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Abstract. Central Eastern Europe, the research area this paper is concerned with, is a region characterized by a high diversity of languages and cultures. It is, at the same time, an area where political, cultural and social conflicts have emerged over time, nowadays especially in border zones, where people of different ethnic, cultural or linguistic background live. In this context, it is important for us researchers to get balanced interview data, and consequently we very often have to conduct interviews in several different languages and within changing cultural contexts. In order to avoid “communication problems” or even conflictual (interview) situations, which might damage the outcome of the research, we are thus challenged to find appropriate communication strategies for any of these situations. This is especially difficult when we are confronted with language or culture-specific terminology or taboo expressions that carry political meaning(s).

Once the interview data is collected and it comes to translating and analysing it, we face further challenges and new questions arise. First of all, we have to decide what a good translation strategy would be. Many words and phrases that exist in one language do not have an exact equivalent in another. Therefore we have to find a solution for translating these expressions and concepts in a way that their meanings do not get “lost by translation”.

In this paper I discuss and provide insights to these challenges by presenting and discussing numerous examples from the region in question. Specifically, I focus on the deconstruction of the meaning of geographical names and politically loaded expressions in order to show the sensitivities of language, the difficulties of research in multilingual settings and with multilingual data as well as the strategies or “ways out” of certain dilemmas.

1 Introduction: translating language¹ – translating culture

Worldwide, scholars are facing an increasing diversity of *languages* and *cultures* when researching at the local level. Especially in order to conduct interviews or to understand local literature, scientists often need a high level of competency in several (local) languages. Furthermore, in such contexts a broad cultural and societal knowledge is required in order to understand and to later communicate the complex picture of culturally diverse localities and societies. The researcher is thus often confronted with the expectation of high linguistic flexibility and cultural competence in his field and region of research.

One could argue that linguistic (or also cultural knowledge specific) shortcomings can be overcome by working together in research teams. However, if we want to understand certain local/regional phenomena and discourses, it is sometimes not enough to “send” local research partners to conduct research “for us”. We cannot always rely on their version and on their researching skills and traditions. These sometimes differ so greatly that our own research goals cannot be achieved, because local research partners have such different approaches; our partners are in the same situation in reverse. Our and their opportunities of intervention are quite limited, especially with regard to conducting interviews and translating them.

¹Linguists deal mostly with so-called *natural languages*. *Natural language* is *phonemic language*, using the possibilities of respiration, larynx, tongue and oral and nasal cavity in order to produce articulated sequences of notes and sounds that can be received by the ear and processed by the brain (Werlen, 2002). By “natural” Werlen means the “biological” basis that has to be given in order to learn and use such language. However, phonemic language is also *cultural*, in the sense that it can be learned from oral expressions in the environment and the usage that follows cultural rules – we learn not only to speak but also who can or cannot say what, when, and where.



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When comparing local phenomena or examining the interconnectedness of events, the requirement of flexibility is even higher than with the study of a single local phenomenon. In the discipline of Geography, it is mostly Human Geographers who are confronted with situations in which language skills and cultural or societal knowledge are indispensable – when conducting interviews, as well as when translating transcribed text.

Consequently, the article is divided into two sections; the first section analyzes strategies within multilingual *interview settings*, while the second section focuses on translating multilingual *interview data*. Regarding the first situation, the multilingual interview setting, the following questions arise:

- How do we face changing interview situations (in terms of language and culture)?
- What are appropriate communication strategies to deal with this problem?
- How can we communicate and avoid “communication problems” or even conflictual (interview) situations when the use of specific terms or phrases differs from one language or cultural context to another?

Inherent in these questions is the issue of the language in which the interviews should be conducted – if the mother tongues of the interviewer and the interviewee are not the same. Should one rely on interpreters or speak in a language that may be foreign to the interviewee, or to both the interviewer and the interviewee?

With any of these strategies researchers can easily end up having interview data in several languages. Regardless of the strategy, researchers are often confronted with both the translation of data, and also with the particular difficulties that translation poses. *Translation*, defined as transcribing the text of a source language into the target language (Gau et al., 2008), is more than just “changing the words”, or as Temple (2002:4–5) points out: “communication across languages involves more than just a literal transfer of information”. Therefore, as Simon (1996:137–138, cited in Temple, 2002:5) writes:

“The solutions to many of the translator’s dilemmas are not to be found in dictionaries, but rather in an understanding of the way language is tied to local realities, to literary forms and to changing identities. Translators must constantly make decisions about the cultural meanings which language carries, and evaluate the degree to which the two different worlds they inhabit are ‘the same’.”

We have to understand language as “an important part of conceptualization, incorporating values and beliefs, (...). [Language] carries accumulated and particular cultural, social, and political meanings that cannot simply be read off through the process of translation” (Temple, 2002:5).

Or as Evans-Pritchard (1951:79, cited in Bradby, 2002) writes: “(...) in learning the language one learns the culture and the social system which are conceptualized in the language”. This coincides with social constructivists’ definition of knowledge – mediated by language – as a social artefact, as a product of historically and culturally situated exchange processes between people (Gergen, 1994, cited in Flick et al., 2003). That is to say, we have to understand the formation of knowledge as an active (social) construction. In this context, it is important to take into consideration the way a concept or meaning (*signifié*) behind the word (*signifiant*) is conceived – because a *signifier* (Saussure’s *signifiant*) without *signified* (Saussure’s *signifié*) has no meaning and the *signified* changes with the (social/cultural) context.

In addition to what Simon highlights above, language can be an important element of identity, and aspects of identity such as gender, ethnicity, and religion (or territorial attachment) are constructed and ascribed in the process of using language. Language is not a neutral medium, therefore, but can define difference and commonality, exclude and include others (Temple, 2002). In the Carpathian Basin, my area of research, ethnicity, language and territorial attachment are closely connected, constituting different, often opposing identities (see, for instance, Filep and Wastl-Walter, 2006).

Consequently, understanding every language as mirroring a cultural and societal background, translation requires the following pre-processing questions:

- Which is a better translation strategy, literal or non-literal translation?
- What about translating words or phrases that may exist in one language but do not have an exact equivalent in another?
- What meanings and messages do words or phrases carry in one cultural context and not in another?

In essence, both tasks of conducting interviews and translating interview data in multilingual/multicultural settings represent complex situations, in which not only the language, but also the “culture” has to be translated or “interpreted” and dealt with.

Language and culture are also manifested *geographically*; geographical spaces and places are, through human activity and representation, cultural spaces and places, while their cultural meaning is expressed through (different) language(s). Therefore, the issue of *translation* is undoubtedly a *geographical topic*, as is made evident when (names for) geographical spaces and places carry language- or culture-specific meanings and messages. Referring to Soja’s (1989) definition of “mental space[s] [or places] of cognition or representation”, geographical names, for instance, should also tell us something about the construction and representation

of territorial identities. This is highly interesting in multilingual or multicultural regions, where the (re)construction of linguistic, cultural, ethnic or national difference is manifesting itself geographically as well as geography serving as a means for (re)constructing these differences. This is especially delicate, when the linguistically-geographically (re)constructed difference is political; when the naming of a space or place has political significance and expresses power relations, for instance, between neighbouring states or between majority and minority populations. Due to the long history of multilinguality and multiculturalism on the one hand, and ever-changing power-relations on the other hand, this is a widespread phenomenon and at the same time critical issue in the Carpathian Basin region, as I will show in this paper.

2 Multilinguality and multiculturalism in the Carpathian Basin

The Carpathian Basin², located in Central Eastern Europe, is a region characterized by a high diversity of languages and cultures. Historically and politically, it was the Hungarian Kingdom that shaped the area from the year 1000 until the Treaty of Trianon in 1920. Today, as a consequence of this treaty, the Carpathian Basin is a transnational zone, which encompasses Hungary, Slovakia, Transcarpathia (Ukraine), Transylvania (Romania), Vojvodina (Serbia), Slavonia (Croatia), Prekmurje (Slovenia) and the Burgenland (Austria). Culturally, the region was dominated by Hungarians for many centuries, however (especially following Turkish and Habsburg rule), the area has become very “mixed”, giving home to Hungarians, Slovaks, Ukraini-

ans, Ruthenians, Romanians, Serbs, Croats, Germans, Roma, Jews and many more.

While many languages and cultures coexisted for centuries, the official language was Latin until 1844; with it, no one group dominated either linguistically or “ethnopolitically”. In this connection, it is crucial to mention the fact that “nation” was understood differently from today’s definition. In Transylvania, for instance, the three “nations” (defined as those disposing of noble privileges) were the Hungarian nobles; the Saxons, who were “ethnic” Germans or German-speakers; and the Szekler (Hungarian speakers). The Hungarian nobles were not defined “ethnolinguistically”, that is to say, an “ethnic” Vlach – today Romanian – or Serb could be a Hungarian noble, even though his mother tongue was Serbian, for instance. The vast majority of the rest of the population were bondsmen, regardless of their “ethnicity”; they could not be part of the Hungarian nation since they did not dispose of noble privileges. The example of Sándor Petőfi illustrates very well the difference in the understanding of the “nation”: Petőfi, one of the most famous poets of Hungarian literature and a symbol for the Hungarian resistance against the Habsburgs in 1848/49, had Slovak parents (Štefan Petrovič and Mária Hruzová) – nonetheless he gave his life for the Hungarian Kingdom.

The issue of language domination appeared only with the Habsburg rule, when Joseph II temporarily introduced German as the official language. Later, in the second half of the 19th century, within the Hungarian Kingdom, nationalizing policies were applied, official communication was shifted to Hungarian and at schools, Hungarian language classes and teaching were introduced, also for “ethnic” Slovaks, Romanians, Croats or Serbs. At the same time, there was an obvious awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity, as the promotion of Serb, Croat, Slovak or Romanian “national” authors proves. Finally, the Hungarian statesman Lajos Kossuth’s idea, to create a Danube-Confederation shows that at least some less-nationalist politicians in the region were already thinking of the Carpathian Basin as a multilingual, or multicultural or multinational space in the 19th century.

With growing nationalism in the 19th century finding its (interim) culmination at the end of the First World War, the Carpathian Basin as a clearly defined political space – the Hungarian Kingdom (as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) – disappeared and disintegrated into a variety of mostly small nation states. However, with the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the issue of multilinguality and multiculturalism did not disappear; it was simply transferred to smaller political spaces and places, from the Empire to the nation state. While post-Trianon Hungary ended up being an ethnically quite homogenous state, the newly formed Czechoslovakia included large German, Hungarian and Ruthenian minorities; Romania (enlarged by Transylvania) comprised large and historically significant Hungarian and German minorities, and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later Kingdom of Yugoslavia) presented an

²Geographical location: The Carpathian Basin is defined and surrounded by the Carpathian Mountains to the North and East, the Dinaric Alps to the South and the Alps to the West. – Ethnic composition according to the latest census data (2001): 11 705 758 Hungarians, 5 464 434 Romanians, 4 716 593 Slovaks, 2 827 796 Croats, 1 496 712 Serbs, 1 124 847 Ukrainians, 371 823 Germans/Austrians, 82 113 Slovenes and others (Kocsis et al., 2006). Politically more telling are the numbers of the majority and minority populations in the respective countries or regions: in Hungary 9 299 619 Hungarians, 62 105 Germans; in Slovakia 4 614 854 Slovaks, 520 528 Hungarians, the latter live mostly in Southern Slovakia, along the state border to Hungary where they make up the majority of the population; in Transcarpathia: 1 010 127 Ukrainians, 151 516 Hungarians; in Transylvania: 5 393 400 Romanians, 1 416 844 Hungarians, the latter live highly concentrated in the Szeklerland and along the state border to Hungary; in Vojvodina (Serbia): 1 321 807 Serbs, 290 207 Hungarians, 76 312 Croats, both minority populations live mainly in the northern part of Vojvodina, along the state borders to Hungary and Croatia; Slavonia (Croatia): 2 711 974 Croats, 149 946 Serbs, 15 017 Hungarians; Prekmurje (Slovenia): 69 990 Slovenes, 5 386 Hungarians; Burgenland (Austria): 242 458 Austrians, 16 283 Croats and 6 641 Hungarians (Kocsis et al., 2006).

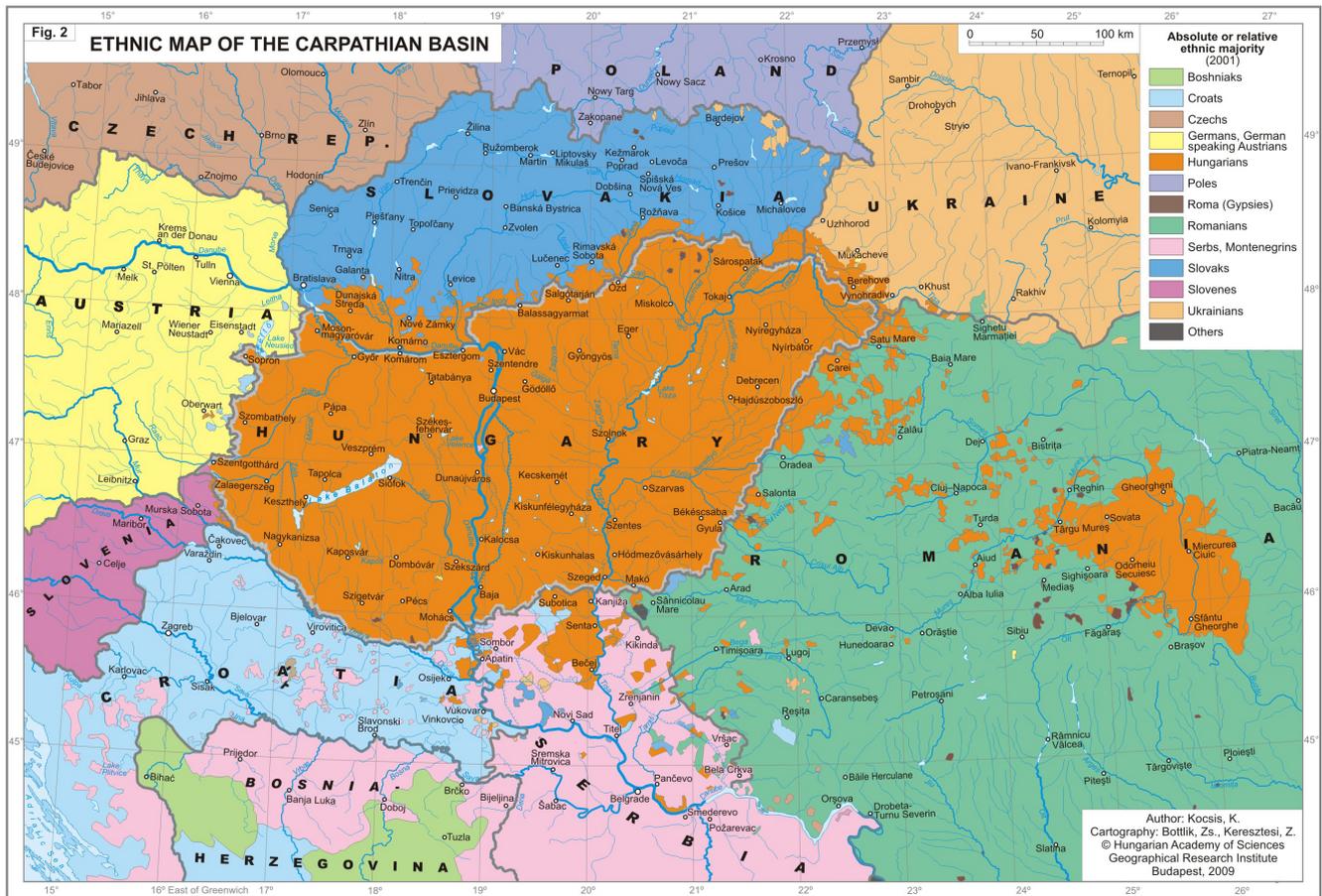


Fig. 1. Ethnic map of the Carpathian Basin in 2001 (Kocsis et al., 2009).

ethnically very mixed picture; especially in Vojvodina, where even in 2002 (as part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) more than 20 ethnic communities were counted³.

Political conflicts between majority and minority populations have very often emerged not only around territorial claims and political power, but also around the issue of language. In the Carpathian Basin, the teaching of minority languages is not guaranteed everywhere it is required, and in most countries the majority language is taught to minority students as if it was their mother tongue (and not as a foreign language). This leads to the problem that many of the minority population do not learn that language properly. As a consequence, they have, for instance, poorer opportunities on the job market. It also harms the inter-ethnic/linguistic relations because minority students are perceived as second-class citizens who do not speak the language of the country well (in most of these countries, there is only one official language, the language of the majority). The lack of minority language competence among the majority population holds further conflict potential in everyday life: not even in regions

³According to the 2002 census data (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2008).

where the minority is the majority is the learning of minority languages compulsory for majority students.

Finally, nationalist policies have closely touched the very geographical issue of this paper, when, for instance, in 2008 the Slovak ministry of education gave the order to exchange all Hungarian geographical names in school books (in Hungarian language) for Slovak geographical names. In June 2009, the Slovak parliament went even further when adopting a controversial Language Law that obliges public officials (public administration, post, police, public health services etc.) to use the Slovak language in official contacts as of September. The law also includes fines of up to €5000 (for legal personalities). However, it seems not yet fully clear how this law will be applied. For instance, there is a requirement for the Slovak language to be used first at cultural events, even if only minorities are present. Memorials and plaques featuring texts in both Slovak and a different (for instance minority) language must not carry an inscription in a different language that is larger than the Slovak inscription. Similarly, the Education Law in Romania has for many years stated that minority (grammar school) students have to attend history and geography classes in Romanian (and according to

Romanian conceptions), even if they go to a school teaching in the minority language (Filep, 2006).

3 Interview strategies: coping with multilingual settings

3.1 Facing changing interview situations – finding appropriate communication strategies

Conducting interviews⁴ in multilingual/multicultural settings requires high flexibility of the researcher and solid preparation within the (linguistic-cultural) field. The “preparatory truth” most probably lies between “grand” and “grounded” (theory) methodology. The preparatory work should not produce inflexible, preconceived ideas or theories, nor should it rely simply on the development of inductive knowledge in the field. I am convinced that before getting in touch as a researcher with multilingual/multicultural settings one needs to have some awareness of the “cultures” one deals with. This presents a significant advantage in the Carpathian Basin, an area of subliminal nationalism and unsolved conflicts. Furthermore, daily experience and reflection on habits and communication makes one more flexible when switching from one interview (language or culture) to another. It is crucial to have at least basic pre-knowledge about different concepts, perceptions or ideas that people of different ethnic, linguistic or cultural affiliation have, especially in order to understand

⁴My research is mainly based on problem-centred interviews. On the one hand, I apply partly standardized guideline interviews with a high level of flexibility, in which my interviewees are interesting as persons with certain experiences and perceptions (1); on the other hand, I do expert interviews with focused questions, in which my interviewees are interesting as experts of a specific field (2) – (Witzel, 1985; Flick, 2002; Hopf, 2003). Since my research focuses on cross-border and inter-ethnic relations in Central Eastern Europe, it means that regarding (1) I am mostly looking at personal experiences and everyday strategies (“living with the state/ethnic border”), questions of coexistence and identity etc. Regarding (2) I am more interested in structures, processes and policies (politics, culture, religion, economical and social issues, institutional cooperation, inter-ethnic dialogue etc.) and try to find out on which basis they work. The spectrum of interviewees is thus very broad, from the farmer to the high-rank politician, from the high school student to the pensioner. In the framework of different research, I have conducted over 150 interviews in Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine, most of them recorded. The interviews with Hungarians (in Hungary and in the neighbouring states) were conducted in Hungarian (this is my second mother tongue besides German). With regard to non-Hungarians, I could mostly rely on the Hungarian skills of the interviewees in the border regions of Slovakia and Ukraine (along the state border to Hungary), in Romania I could speak with my interviewees in French or Italian (also German and English), in Serbia the key to communication with non-Hungarians (Serbs and Croats) was English, some spoke Hungarian. In very few cases, I had an interpreter (three times in Slovakia, once in Romania).

what, and in which contexts interviewees are speaking. Apart from knowing the concepts, an “understanding” of and feeling for the sensitivities in/of different contexts is necessary. It is also possible to challenge “facts” and prejudices, and it is possible to consciously “provoke” the interviewee in order to see what certain words and ideas can evoke (or not evoke). However, the “conscious” aspect is very important here, because one word can change the atmosphere of an interview completely. This does not mean, as my experience shows, that a certain naivety in the field cannot be helpful as well. The combination of ignorance (rather expressed as curiosity) and proof of knowledge about one or the other culture(s) seems to be a good communication and interview strategy.

Regarding the positioning of the researcher in a multilingual and multicultural setting, the background of the researcher can be sometimes very important as well. As Temple (2002:15) writes about her experience as a Polish speaker: “Research participants often assume a shared knowledge of history and cultural traditions and a certain sympathy with Polish perspectives on these”. Conducting research in the Carpathian Basin with a local name can evoke similar expectations among “co-ethnics”/“co-nationals”, which is not necessarily a disadvantage, and may in fact be an advantage. When the researcher is perceived as a “community insider”, it is, according to my experience, more likely that people would readily reveal information that they would not have disclosed to outsiders. It can, however, have a negative effect on interviews with people not belonging to the same, but to an opposing *imagined community* (Anderson, 1991), sharing conflictual knowledge of history and cultural traditions.

One of the biggest dilemmas of conducting interviews in a multilingual setting is whether the researcher should rely on an interpreter (if he/she does not speak the local language), or if he or she should talk to the interviewee in a foreign language, if possible, which may be foreign to the interviewee, or to both the interviewer and the interviewee. Relying on interpreters holds the risk of an *interpreter version*, because translators “bring their own assumptions and concerns to the interview and the research process” (Temple, 2002:11). Interpreter versions can sometimes be extreme, as the following example from my fieldwork shows:

The Director of a secondary school in Transylvania said the following about the relations between Hungarians and Romanians:

“Da, (...) *relațiilor actual sunt foarte bune*”

Literally: “Yes, (...) *the current relations are very good*”

While the interpreter said:

“So, *the relations between the Hungarians and the Romanians are very good and we lived along for centuries in peace and harmony, we didn’t have major problems, there were clashes, but small clashes, small conflicts.*”

There is a general feeling of understanding and friendship among these nations.”

From this example, one cannot only read the stark distortion of the original text by the interpreter, but also a socio-cultural, generational aspect (this is not obvious from the text without introducing the individuals). The director represents an image of the good old socialist bureaucrat, very short and dry, actually not caring about the researcher's investigations, whereas the young English teacher, with experience abroad, has grown up in the post-socialist chaos, knows how to “sell” something and is more flowery in his description of the relations between Hungarians and Romanians.

In this case, the interpreter and the interviewee knew each other. However, in situations where the interpreter is a stranger, how the interpreter positions himself or herself in the interview plays an even more important role. With the inclusion of a translator, the research becomes, according to Temple (2002:11) “subject to *triple subjectivity* – the interactions between interviewee, researcher and interpreter – and this needs to be made explicit”. Kluckhohn (1945, cited in Birbili, 2000) sees three basic problems in this regard: a) The interpreter's effect on the informant; b) the interpreter's effect on the communicative process; and c) the interpreter's effect on the translation.

Personally, I prefer conducting interviews without an interpreter, mainly due to the problems Kluckhohn raises. I support the idea of finding an alternative common language with the interviewee, and, whenever possible, a language that can even be foreign to both. This approach also holds difficulties and risks, for example, the risk of using “wrong” or “inappropriate” expressions in a foreign language. However, if both interviewer and interviewee are more or less fluent, things can be more easily clarified than in an interview with an interpreter. Both have to be conscious of potential “misunderstandings” and therefore of the need for clarification and specification. Here, one should also be open to the “mixing” of languages. In one of my interviews the respondent and I switched from French to Italian and back several times, since he could explain certain issues better in one or the other language. The use of single words in one, but not the other language illustrates the same “problem”. However, this should not be regarded as a problem, but rather as a method that supports the communicative process. It is a conscious joint “struggle” for the clarification of words or meaning and in the end a joint production of meaning and knowledge. This is sometimes easier than one might expect, as there are many “international” words as well as similar words in geographically “neighbouring” languages. Lastly, it is also easier for both to accept personal linguistic difficulties if the common language is an international one.

3.2 Knowing different specific terms for “one”

A very geographical issue in multilingual and multicultural regions such as the Carpathian Basin is the existence of dif-

ferent local names for the same locality. In certain areas a region, town or village can have two or more local names, in different (local) languages. In Transylvania (Romania), for instance, towns have very often three names: a Romanian, a Hungarian and a German name. The city of Cluj (in Romanian) is Kolozsvár in Hungarian and Klausenburg in German; or today's Sibiu (in Romanian), a former Transylvanian Saxon town is Hermannstadt in German and Nagyszeben in Hungarian.

The divided town of Komárom-Komárno, located at the Hungarian-Slovakian state border, is known by at least nine names (see Table 1), while before the division in 1920, Komárom-Komárno was a Hungarian town, and its only names were *Komárom* or *Révkomárom* and the German *Komorn*. Since its division by the state border, the Hungarian language has especially known different names for both parts of the historical town of Komárom.

In addition, most countries and regions have an equivalent in international languages. Consequently, when the use of specific terms and names differs from one language or cultural context to another, one should know these terms or local names in different languages, and be able to use them in the right context – in doing so, not only can “communication problems” or even conflictual (interview) situations be avoided, but also the positioning of the interviewer can sometimes be “neutralized”.

Such a politically loaded name is the Hungarian *Felvidék* for today's Slovakia. In Slovakian, its name is *Slovensko*, and in most languages it only has one name. However, in Hungarian, mainly two names are used: the official *Szlovákia* and *Felvidék* (historically named *Oberungarn* in German, which literally means “Upper Hungary”). *Felvidék* was the official Hungarian name for the same territory until the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, but is still used by many Hungarians for today's Slovakia. It is very crucial to take into account by whom, and in which contexts the expression is used. On the one hand, it can be marked as a revisionists' expression, while on the other hand, it can be simply the unreflected “historical-linguistic acquirement” for a geographic area. *Felvidék* also expresses the territorial identity of Hungarians in Slovakia. This is exemplified in the Hip-Hop Crew called *Felvidék Hip-Hop* (they say *Felvidék* is part of their identity) or the common expression *felvidéki magyarok*, which literally means “Hungarians of/in the Upland”, and refers to Hungarians in Slovakia. Using the word *Felvidék* in interviews with Slovaks would, in most cases, “irritate” the interviewee and question the interviewer's “objectivity”; and the meaning of the name might also not be understood by everyone. In interviews with Hungarians, however, the use of *Felvidék* shows familiarity with the history of the region and can be regarded as an “insider expression”, while *Szlovákia* is rather neutral. The fact that the independent state of Slovakia was established only in 1993 makes it even more problematic to refer to that territory in a historical perspective, especially in interviews with Slovaks. Which term should

Table 1. Names for the divided town of Komárom – Komárno.

Local name	Country	Language	Translation / Meaning
Komárom	Hungary	Hungarian	Official Hungarian name, also used by Slovaks
Dél-Komárom		Hungarian	“South”-Komárom, the geographically southern part of the historical, undivided town of Komárom, also south of the Danube
Túl-Komárom		Hungarian	“Beyond”-Komárom, used by Hungarians in Slovakia, meaning, beyond the border or beyond the river Danube
Komorn		German	Historical name of the undivided town in the Austro-Hungarian Empire
Komárno	Slovakia	Slovakian	Official Slovak name
Komárom		Hungarian	Official Hungarian name in Slovakia
Észak-Komárom		Hungarian	“North”-Komárom, the geographically northern part of the historical, undivided town of Komárom, also north of the Danube
Révkomárom		Hungarian	“Harbour”-Komárom. Historical Komárom had a harbour for many centuries on the northern bank of the Danube. Even today the harbour and the shipyard are in operation. Therefore it got the name Révkomárom. Révkomárom is mostly used in Hungarian language to differentiate between Komárom in Slovakia and Komárom in Hungary.
Komorn		German	Historical name of the undivided town in the Austro-Hungarian Empire

we use when talking about the pre-1918/20 or pre-1993 territory? The pre-1918 territory was officially not Slovakia, but *Felvidék* or *Oberungarn*, just as Bratislava was *Bratislava* only after 1919, before the Hungarian *Pozsony* and the German *Pressburg* were in use. The pre-1993 territory was officially not Slovakia, but Czechoslovakia – with the exception of the First Slovak Republic (1939–1945) led by a puppet regime of Nazi Germany, not including the territories in Southern Slovakia with Hungarian majority⁵. A Slovak interviewee was obviously struggling with referring to the territory of today’s Slovakia when he shared with me that he was born “*in Czechoslovakia, in Slovakia*” and by pointing to Hungarian revisionist voices he makes clear that “*this is Slovakia, Czechoslovakia and Czechoslovakia dissolved, so Slovakia, and for 90 years*”.

Not only historically changing or newly appearing names, but even the simple existence of different names can be confusing to locals, as the example of a Romanian interviewee shows, who tried to tell me the name of the region with the English name *Wallachia*, originating from the Latin word *Valachia*. This territory of Romania was part of the Romanian Kingdom (Wallachia and Moldavia) established in 1881, which did not yet include Transylvania. Its name in Romanian is *Țara Românească* and literally

⁵These territories were returned (after the Treaty of Trianon in 1920) to Hungary by Germany and Italy on the 2 November 1938 (First Vienna Award).

means “*Romanian country/land*”. This was also the expression that the interviewee used – “*Romanian country*”, which might sound funny and confusing to someone who does not know about the *Țara Românească*, because today we understand “*Romanian country*” to be today’s Romania. The *Țara Românească* becomes politically significant when comparing it with *Ținutul Secuiesc* (literally “*Szekler Area/Region*”), the Romanian name for the Hungarian *Székelyföld* translated into English literally and officially as *Szeklerland* or “*Land of the Szekler*”. The comparison shows that the Romanian language differentiates between two political spaces regarding their status and with that it exemplifies how space is (politically) constructed through language. While the “*Romanian country*” refers to a presumably administrative anchoring, the “*Szekler Area/Region*” refers only to “*an area, where Szekler live*”. Thus, the Romanian language actually neglects the history of these regions. While the *Szeklerland* was an autonomous “*land*” for centuries, the “*Romanian country*”, under such name, did not exist until the 19th century, when the term *Romanian* first appears (today’s Romanians were previously called *Vlachs* (Roth, 1999)). When translating a Romanian’s quotation using the term *Ținutul Secuiesc*, should we now write *Szeklerland* or “*Szekler Area/Region*”, or even leave *Ținutul Secuiesc*? Politically, the differentiation of the former two is especially important, however, we cannot be sure that this person is really aware of this linguistic differentiation; it can simply

be his or her unreflected “cultural-linguistic acquisition”.

Highly-codified (local) expressions are the most reflected. When a Romanian politician, complaining about the centralism in the country, explained to me in French where he wanted to build his house, he used the term *forêt* (English *forest*). Why would a politician want to build a house in the forest? Well, it turned out that *forest* is the name for a district in Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg, where “the rich” live. The special feature of the *forêt* example is that it is a local expression that is not just codified in its original language, but becomes “double-codified” by the spontaneous translation of the interviewee. In such situations it might not even be enough to know the original local term, if we do not or cannot follow the meaning behind the translation of the interviewee.

Geographically interesting are local names that express different spatial perspectives. The Ukrainian name for *Transcarpathia*, for instance, is Закарпаття and means “beyond the Carpathian mountains”, while the Hungarian name for this region that was part of the Hungarian Kingdom for centuries is *Kárpátalja* and means “at the foot of the Carpathian mountains”. The simple explanation for this differentiation is that Ukrainians and Hungarians have a different perspective on Transcarpathia: While for Ukrainians (looking from Kiev) it lies “beyond the Carpaths – assumingly excluding a territory or population, for Hungarians (looking from Budapest) it lies “at the foot of the Carpaths” – assumingly inclusive. Schlottmann (2005) interestingly illustrates spatiality in language with the example of East and West Germany. While “East” and “West” are actually directions, and it seems clear that East Germany lies geographically East of West Germany (which is not true for all “Western” parts), we primarily perceive East and West Germany as clearly defined territories representing different political systems and societies.

Furthermore the use of certain local or regional *key terms* or key “non-terms” is a crucial issue especially in political discussions. One has to be very well aware of such terms and of their effect. In Romania, for instance, the term *autonomy* can evoke tense reactions from Romanians. The challenging thing here is to understand when and how to use (or not to use) this term. Should certain words be a *taboo*, or should the researcher intentionally use them and not be afraid to enquire in order to clarify its meaning, and the perceptions and reactions to it? From my experience I can say that such taboo terms should be used and brought into the discussion in an interview, and the interviewee should be challenged whether his or her stance is for or against the issue at hand. In the case of *autonomy*, it shows the interviewee that the interviewer is well aware of the current political issues, and by asking critical questions one can avoid standard answers.

4 Translation strategies: coping with multilingual data

4.1 Facing coded answers – finding appropriate translations

When translating interview data, we often face the question of whether or not one should translate the text literally. If one receives clear answers with coherent sentences, it might be easier to translate word for word, although single words might cause problems. However, if the construction of the sentences of the interviewee is complicated and the answers highly coded, the translation tends to be overly summarizing in nature, as the following example shows. Csaba Takács, the former managing president of the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (RMDSZ) stated the following regarding the political strategy of his party in the environment of Romanian politics:

“Markó Bélának keményen és nagyon határozottan kellett itt újra és újra fellépni és tapasztalni azt, hogy nincs új a nap alatt, ami a román politikai elit szemléletváltását, nem a kényszer vagy nem egy nemzetközi helyzetből is, vagy a helyi politika egyensúly megmaradás, megtartása szempontjából lehetővé tevő eszközök sorából lehet felhasználni, hogy elérjük céljainkat.”

The word-for-word translation of this paragraph would sound like this:

“Markó Béla had to act again and again hard and very decisively, and experience that there is nothing new under the sun, what... the change of perspective of the Romanian political elite, there are no tools, no pressure, not an international situation, or concerning the maintenance of the local political equilibrium...that can be used in order to achieve our goals.”

Here, the sentences in the language of data collection involve grammatical and syntactical structures that do not exist in English. The question here is whether the sense of the sentences can be adequately translated into English once the rules of English structure are applied, or if the risk of the introduction of pseudo-information or the loss of information is too high (Birbili, 2000). The fragment “*ami a román politikai elit szemléletváltását*” (“*what... the change of perspective of the Romanian political elite*”) is missing the word “*illeti*”, which is part of the construct “*ami... illeti*” meaning “*what concerns*”. The interviewee does not finish the sentence properly. However, since the syntax in Hungarian and English are different (“*concerns*” is not in the beginning but in the end of the subordinate clause), the translation seems strange, while in Hungarian it is actually clear what is missing due to the possessive-suffix “*-át*” of the word “*szemléletváltás*” (“*perspective*”). Well, according to my interpretation, taking into consideration the whole conversation and the political context, what he wanted to say is

Table 2. The Hungarian word *magyarság* in different languages.

Language	Literal translation	Lexical translation	Meaning of the lexical translation
German	Ungarheit	Ungarntum	equal
English	Hungarianity	Hungarianness	Hungarian identity
French	Hongaritude	Culture Hongroise	Hungarian culture
Russian	венгерскость	венгерская национальность <i>or</i> характерные черты венгерской нации	Hungarian nation <i>or</i> Characteristics of Hungarian nation

that the RMDSZ (with its leader Béla Markó) can achieve its goals only depending upon a stable local political equilibrium or due to international pressure.

In such cases, the question of whether to use literal or “free” translation of the interviewee’s text is reasonable. In this regard, Honig (1997:17, cited in Birbili, 2000) writes that “a literal translation (word-by-word) could perhaps be seen as doing more justice to what participants have said and make one’s readers understand the foreign mentality better”. At the same time, however, such practice can reduce the readability of the text, which in turn can test readers’ patience and even their ability to understand “what is going on” (Birbili, 2000). However, when creating quotations that “read well” (ibid.) one has to be aware of the implications. When creating such quotations, it is interpreting the thoughts of the interviewee, and misinterpretations are probable, while when doing a literal translation the reader can interpret the literal text on his or her own. On the other hand, a “readable” quotation, by changing the structure and by adding missing fragments, would (as in the case above), at least make the quote more easily understood by those who are not familiar with the context. Therefore, in my opinion, a “free” translation seems more appropriate here.

Furthermore, one should consider applying the following methods that might help to find a good translation solution. Firstly, *back translation*, which involves, according to Birbili (2000), looking for equivalents through a) the translation of items from the source language to the target language, b) independent translation of these back into the source language, and c) the comparison of the two versions of items in the source language until ambiguities or discrepancies in meaning are clarified or removed (Birbili, 2000). Secondly, *consultation*: discussion about the use and meaning of words and phrases identified as problematic with people who are bilingual, or having a number of people sitting around a table jointly making decisions about the best terms to use. Thirdly, *collaboration* between researchers involved in the study, jointly producing the research design and instrument. Finally, *pre-testing or piloting* the research instrument in the local culture: to ask respondents not only for their answer, but also for their interpretation of the item’s meaning (ibid.).

4.2 Translating words with specific meaning(s) in a single language

Consultation might be a helpful strategy, when it comes to translating words that may exist in one language but not in another. There are basically two ways of dealing with this: a different language can either borrow/integrate, or alternately adapt/paraphrase them. By *integrating* or *borrowing* a word, one does not modify it formally and semantically (Suh, 2008). The word *orange*, for instance, or an expression in the German language for what we understand to represent the colour *orange*, did not exist. This (originally French) word was integrated into the German language. By *paraphrasing* or *adapting*, one tries to express a word or sentence in a different linguistic form, while keeping its actual content (Rothkegel, 2006). Adaptation “is forced on the translator where no corresponding cultural or institutional custom or object, idiom or expression exists in the target culture or language” (Newmark, 2001:62).

When it comes to translating words that represent complex concepts, integration or paraphrasing might not be the only ways of dealing with it. The Hungarian word *magyarság*, for instance, has two meanings. Firstly, it refers to “*the totality of all Hungarians*”; secondly, it carries some kind of cultural or identity meaning, which would mostly refer to the lexical translation *Hungarianness*. That is to say, referring to the actual two possibilities above, we would get (for English) the following results: a) *magyarság* – integrating the word and b) *Hungarianness* – paraphrasing it. However, while the integration of words into a foreign language is often at least a medium-term process and because *Hungarianness* is not precise enough, an additional, third possibility would be to use a new word, with the literal translation “*hungarianity*” – thereby emphasizing the totality of all (ethnic) Hungarians.

The term *magyarság* not only poses problems to the English language. As the Table 2 shows, several other languages do not have an equivalent expression, since (the) different languages carry different concepts. While the German language has a similar concept, using *Deutschtum* equally to *magyarság*, the French language understands *magyarság* as “cultural”, and in contrast to both, the Russian language

understands it as “national”. It is interesting that the French language understands *magyarság* as “cultural”, while having the expression *Francophonie* for the French-speaking “community” and “territories”, but no equivalent term to *magyarság* for the French “culture”. The problem here is that some languages such as German and Hungarian do not differentiate between the extensional (all Hungarians) and the intensional meaning (what makes a Hungarian?), while other languages do.

A special case for this issue can be found in the Slovak language. While generally the language groups surrounding Hungary use only one expression for that country, the Slovak language knows two: *Uhorsko* and *Mad’arsko*. The difference is not translatable in a single word, and therefore requires explanation. The name *Uhorsko* is used for the Hungarian Kingdom as a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, existing until 1918, when the territory of today’s Slovakia belonged to the Hungarian Kingdom. *Mad’arsko* is used for Hungary within its boundaries after 1918, when Czechoslovakia proclaimed its independence. However, the new state borders were only confirmed by the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, when Hungary definitely lost two-thirds of its former territories, including today’s Slovakia. At the same time, *Rakúsko*, the name for Austria, was left unchanged. This example shows a politically loaded, historical-geographical differentiation for the name of a specific national-political entity. It emphasizes the difference between the “*Historic Hungary*”, as referenced by Hungarians, and today’s Hungary. The Slovak language thus neglects a certain continuity of Hungary before and after 1918. The question here is if we should or how we can do justice to this differentiation. A Slovak interviewee in Komárno/Révkomárom (Slovakia) was well aware of this difference when he drew (in Hungarian) my attention to the fact that his hometown was once part of “*Nagy-Magyarország*”⁶ (lit. “*Greater Hungary*”), what Hungarians call Hungary, but in Slovak this is *Uhorsko*, not Hungary”. In “his” case it would be a “loss by translation” not to emphasize the use of the informal “*Nagy-Magyarország*” (instead of “Hungarian Kingdom”) and the official Slovak “*Uhorsko*”.

Single words can carry certain meanings and messages in one cultural context and not in another. The term *ethnic*, a contested one anyway, is not used in the Hungarian language, at least not in the way it is used in English or in German language. While an English-speaker would use the expression *ethnic Hungarian*, the Hungarian speaks about a *magyar nemzetiségű* person. Literally, *nemzetiségű* means “national”, that is to say, “*Hungarian national*”. However,

⁶“*Nagy-Magyarország*” is an informal name in Hungarian for the (territory of the) Kingdom of Hungary and mainly refers to the political aspirations (revisionism) of the interwar period, but also to marginal revisionist voices in present-day Hungary, which they call “*Csonka-Magyarország*” (lit. “*Mutilated Hungary*”) or “*Kis-Magyarország*” (lit. “*Small Hungary*”).

it is usually translated as “*ethnic Hungarian*”. When translating *nemzetiségű* as *ethnic* and not “*national*”, the translator would automatically impose a different concept on the reader of the translation, namely the concept of ethnicity in contrast to the concept of nationality. As a researcher I have to ask myself in such cases whether my translation is saying something different than what was originally meant by the author or speaker. In the case above, if ethnicity is defined as “belonging to a particular race” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary), the translation “*ethnic*” would be the most adequate, because the Hungarian word *nemzetiségű* expresses the descent instead of the political-national belonging. The paraphrased translation is thus more precise than the literal translation.

4.3 Translating jokes and proverbs – translating (geo)political concepts

Further difficulties occur with the use of *proverbs*, *jokes*, *ironic* or *sarcastic statements* and *idiomatic expressions*. These do sometimes have equivalents in other languages, but literally they say something different. When we want to tell a joke in a foreign language (and we have to explain it), we are often confronted with such situations. Suh (2008) suggests that we apply a so-called *communicative translation*, meaning that while “in a given situation, the source text uses a standard expression in the source language for that situation, the translator in the target text chooses a target language expression for an equivalent target culture situation”. In particular, political or socio-critical jokes very often cause problems and require explanations to people who are not familiar with the context of the joke. Schiewe (2008) very interestingly analyzes this in his comparison of political jokes in the GDR and the GFR. He highlights the political joke as a part of the inter-discourse and as a means of creating opposition to the official discourse.

As in the GDR, political jokes existed in other communist countries as well, where jokes expressed opposition to the communist system or regime. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, regime or system criticism in the Carpathian Basin gained a rather nostalgic character, while “ethnic jokes” have gained more significance, especially among minority populations. These jokes express opposition to the majority discrimination on the one hand, while manifesting patriotism or chauvinism on the other hand. The following two jokes show facets of “ethnic jokes” in the Carpathian Basin these days:

The Romanian proverb “*mămăliga nu explodează*” (literally: “*the dumpling does not explode*”) means, according to Romanians, that Romanians are a peaceful nation, which is why the “*dumpling does not explode*”. The Hungarian version of this proverb: “*a puliszka nem robban*” means “*to be as patient as a packhorse*”. The proverb was applied in a (Hungarian) joke related to the 1989 revolution in Romania: A Romanian comes to a Transylvanian Hungarian proudly telling him that the dumpling nonetheless exploded.

The Hungarian answered: “*but we stirred that dumpling*” – meaning that the revolution was actually initiated by Hungarians in Romania around the reformed bishop László Tőkés, and not by Romanians themselves. In the same words he confirms the existing proverb: “*the dumpling does not explode*”. This is a great example of how proverbs can have different interpretations, even if not posing language-specific translation problems, and how they can also be played with.

The second “joke” is actually an anecdote: After the Second World War, Gyula László, the well-known Hungarian archaeologist-historian visits his home village of Kőhalom in Transylvania, when an old man tells him:

“Hát Gyulám, már megint hozzánk csatolták Romániát”

Literally: “*Look, my dear Gyula, again they annexed Romania to us*”

Ironically (and politically), for the second time after the First World War, Transylvania was annexed to Romania, and not vice versa. The old man’s joke carries a certain pride of his own, having experienced the time of the Hungarian Kingdom and – twice – having been put into the situation of a minority member of the population, in a state wherein he did not choose to be a citizen. Moreover, knowing the historical circumstances, and the trauma that the separation of Transylvania from Hungary caused in Hungarians’ minds and lives, the joke not only shows pride, but also one way ordinary people dealt with the new situation(s): When Transylvania was annexed to Romania in 1920, it was one thing, but after Hungary had regained the northern part during the Second World War and had to give it back again after the war, the briefly-liberated Hungarians once again found themselves in the situation of 1920. The joke expresses powerlessness, but handles the latter with a certain humour, expressing the situation tragically – picturing the partition, unification and/or division of states as an act of “daily routine”. The significance here is that without knowing the historical context, and without being aware of the psychological effects of Hungary’s partition, the joke has no deeper meaning. This example once again proves that translation is always a matter of translating culture and national/ethnic concepts, history and memories. Therefore, political jokes, as Röhrich (1977, cited in Schiewe, 2008) points out, are of high historico-cultural interest because they illustrate, in a short story, the problems of a particular period.

5 Conclusions

Translation is the transcribing of text from a source language into a target language, but more importantly, it is the interpretation of cultural meaning and/or of the cultural or national concepts a specific language carries. The words and phrases, jokes and proverbs that carry these meanings and

concepts often do not have an exact equivalent in another language. Their translation is thus difficult and sometimes highly problematic. Specific terms (such as geographical names) and phrases are politically loaded and can express (spatial) perspectives and power relations, especially in multilingual and multicultural regions. On the one hand, this is an interesting fact and it can be seen as the task of research to deconstruct such words and phrases that are constructed by the means of language and that instrumentalize geography to emphasize difference and power relations between “ethnolinguistic” or national communities. On the other hand, such expressions require a well-considered use in fieldwork and a careful translation. One has to consider their effect and the political meaning they carry when both conducting and translating interviews. Therefore, one has to be well aware of how to use and translate a word or phrase to ensure that the meaning does not get “lost – not in, but by – translation”.

Finally, research is not just about being “lost in translation” but about actively finding solutions and applying communication and translation strategies to cope with the problems mentioned. Not only language competence, but also historical, cultural and societal knowledge about the context in focus can prevent “communication problems” or even conflictual (interview) situations and the loss of information when translating (and explaining!) specific terms and phrases. Only if we know these terms and concepts, can we use them in the right context and translate them accordingly.

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