Language at Stake in International Research Collaboration—Methodological Reflections on Team-Based and Time-Intensive Ethnography

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Abstract: Based on experiences from multiple international research projects, spanning several decades and utilizing various forms of collaborative ethnographic approaches, this article aims to reflect on challenges and potentials regarding language and communication when researching across jurisdictions. Thematically, the research projects that we draw on in this paper, are concerned with aging and healthcare, while the primary focus of the paper remains on the methodological implications of conducting international, collaborative, and time-intensive ethnography. Moreover, the aim is to contribute to enhancing researchers' awareness of and preparedness to meet and address such challenges in future research endeavors. The article discusses how English often serves as a lingua franca for Western-dominated international research collaborations, having implications for researchers and study participants alike, as well as the use of interpreters and potential linguistic pitfalls. In the article, we argue that attention and reflection on language and communication in research are significant for how collaboration in research transpires, the opted methodical choices, and, ultimately, for research quality, while often being under-appreciated. International ethnographic fieldwork requires thorough preparation and reflection to properly handle linguistic and cultural competencies, nuances, and understandings incorporated in the researchers, with subsequent consequences for research processes and outcomes.

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This article focuses on methodic challenges and possibilities related to language and communication when doing research, based on experiences from Scandinavia as well as from Scandinavians participating in multiple international research collaborations about age and aging conducted in and across several countries, utilizing various forms of collaborative ethnographic approaches. Communication between researchers and between researchers and research participants is a topic scarcely dealt with in research literature, particularly within the broad field of health. Despite that, international, interdisciplinary, and interprofessional research collaborations are a current trend in continuing development in health-related research and in general. This trend is expected to add different perspectives to research and contains the possibility to solve complex problems (Pinho and Reeves 2021) while being driven by the need to address global challenges and leverage diverse perspectives and resources. Moreover, the trend is expected to enhance the overall quality and impact of research endeavors. Furthermore, international, collaborative projects often attract more funding opportunities as they are seen as addressing complex challenges that require concerted efforts, for example, addressing global policy priorities like health systems strengthening or the development of coordinated public health policies at a regional level (Kentikelenis et al. 2023). The interplay between the local and the global has been termed *glocalization* by some social science researchers exploring local sense-making of global trends and calls for "the need to pay attention both to the role of non-local globalizing discourses and to the emerging local arrangements in which the non-local discourses are interpreted for the specific contexts of the local regime" (Wrede and Näre 2013:57). That also paves the way for increased attention to research mobility and collaboration. Consequently, international research collaboration has grown in scope and size in later decades, both in terms of *what* and *how much*. That is described as moving from an "emergence" to a "fermentation" and finally to a "take-off" phase from the early 2000s (Chen, Zhang, and Fu 2018).

The current article has its starting point in different international, interprofessional research collaborations utilizing collaborative ethnography as a preferred method, including researchers with varied first and second languages. In these projects, English served as the dominant language in many cases, while the researchers also conducted qualitative research *in English* in jurisdictions where English was not the first language. A commonality in many of these international projects is the use of multiple languages and a thematic preoccupation with aging, and the relatively short timeframe of the ethnographic efforts or fieldwork. Such a condensation is contrasted to more *traditional*, individual ethnography that allows longer data collection periods with more ample opportunities to talk to and observe the explored phenomena at stake (Reeves, Kuper, and Hodges 2008; Vindrola-Padros and Vindrola-Padros 2018; Cox et al. 2022). The short timeframe implies, as we will discuss, a fundamental weakness or limitation to the approaches. A potential strength, on the other hand, is that the multidisciplinary and multinational team contributes to differences in what is observed and how when different team members are observing the same institutions and social occasions (Baines and Cunningham 2013). Some of the challenges in conducting international research are nevertheless related to linguistic barriers, as well as wider cultural differences in the research team and between researchers and study participants. In line with

Robert Gibb and Julien Danero Iglesias (2017), we argue that there is a need to break the silence about language-related issues for field researchers.

Background

The current article aims to highlight and discuss methodical challenges and potentials to language in international research collaboration, primarily addressing time-intensive ethnographic research, as regarded from a Scandinavian perspective. Moreover, the aim is to contribute to enhancing researchers' awareness of and preparedness to meet and address these in future research endeavors.

Language constitutes a significant barrier in conducting multinational research, which can be amplified when both researchers and study participants speak different languages. Studies highlight that language is an often underestimated barrier in international research, in many cases only by addressing technical aspects (Lor 2019; Wöhlert 2020). In a review of 168 articles focusing on international research collaborations, Romy Wöhlert (2020) shows that the studies largely focus on the structural dimension of communication while focus on the actual communication processes among researchers, including language, is sparse. In general, language can both unite and divide people (Kinzler 2020). Language is per se intrinsically connected to power and, as such, also connected to discourses and social reproduction (Fairclough 2013; Odrowąż-Coates 2019) both in the sense of the power *of* (language can change) and power *over* (the powerful are able to speak). While people's speech largely reflects the voices heard as children (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Kinzler 2020), people can, to some extent, change how they speak, for instance, by learning new languages, whether foreign or task-specific, or by switching between dialects. Language can thereby become a vessel for social- or self-positioning when communicating where one is positioned in a given context (Odrowąż-Coates 2019). In most cases, what is considered a *native tongue* holds significant influence in such processes and, on a fundamental level, for communicating with and understanding other people. That further implies that people's language(s) filters not only what they perceive in a concrete interaction but also how they perceive and process situations and relations more broadly, including how they understand, evaluate, and construct experiences (Werner and Campbell 1970; Bourdieu 1996; Bourdieu et al. 1999; Ingvarsdotter, Johnsdotter, and Östman 2012). Language, therefore, is significant not only for communication but also for how people *make sense* of social life, also as a basis for the complex processes of social categorization and stratification within a given social context (Bourdieu 1996; Bourdieu et al. 1999). Consequently, language is also significant when traversing between cultures and countries. Being exposed to multiple languages can, for instance, contribute to an enhanced understanding of the diversity and nuances of languages and embedded cultural understandings, whereby the world opens up and complexities are seen and perhaps even better understood (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Kinzler 2020).

In an academic context, researchers often comprehend, speak, and possibly master several languages. Academic education can also be a marker in terms of social position in society, with academics from different regions of the world sharing some kind of common language platform. For example, researchers have language competencies related to their respective mother tongue and oftentimes have the ability to speak and understand foreign languages, but also a competency with regard to their academic discipline (Berger and Luckmann 1966). While

language differences may present challenges, also in research, they can facilitate relationships, mutual understanding, and international collaboration. Moreover, being a newcomer to a society or community (or an academic field) and not mastering the language can potentially be a means to create social contact and collaboration. As many anthropologists and other researchers have experienced, *locals* may act particularly friendly and helpful toward visitors who are obviously not familiar with their language (Manderson and Aaby 1992). However, the lack of familiarity with the language and cultural setting comes with inherent risks of (un)conscious misunderstandings.

Even though a lack of native language competence may be turned into an advantage and opportunity for learning, including when working with interpreters, there is a need to deal explicitly and seriously with language challenges and barriers in research. Challenges connected to language are salient to consider and reflect on to achieve successful collaboration (Serrano and Linares 1990), especially, as we will return to, when collaborating across jurisdictions. International, collaborative ethnographic fieldwork often has a short timeline for fieldwork activities and is conducted in settings with limited time and resources to conduct the research, for example, in healthcare settings (Vindrola-Padros and Vindrola-Padros 2018; Cox et al. 2022). As ways to compensate for the time-limited fieldwork, also multiple, parallel data collection methods and conducting fieldwork as a team, including local and external researchers, can be used as time-deepening strategies (Ranabahu 2017). To simplify, the number of eyes and the differences in how the gazes are directed can, to some extent, compensate for the limited time of observation. Still, when conducting more time-intensive forms of ethnography, challenges connected to language can be particularly significant. As this paper discusses, such challenges relate both to internal (within the research team) and external (between the research team and participants) communication.

The article assumes the perspectives of Scandinavian researchers. First, we discuss the theme of *World languages as lingua franca in research, with a main focus on English*, with the sub-themes *Challenges related to native and non-native English-speaking researchers*, *Language at stake in the encounters with participants*, *Lost in interactions*, and *Lost in translations*. Subsequently, *Required attention to linguistic competencies* is discussed as a second theme, including *False friends*, *Missing words*, and *Challenging and challenged definitions of concepts*. Finally, the article ends with a conclusion.

World Languages as Lingua Franca in Research, with a Main Focus on English

Challenges Related to Native and Non-Native English-Speaking Researchers

Our experiences in international collaborative research are that English serves as a lingua franca. This is typical for many Anglo-phone international research collaborations, where English-speaking researchers are privileged in international research collaboration (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2014; Kamadjeu 2019), following general societal trends in which English is the dominant language, perhaps particularly in Europe (Odrowąż-Coates 2019). Giampietro Gobo (2011) shows how the English language, from the 1950s and onwards, significantly contributed to the globalization of Western academic culture and Anglo-phone research methods. Through a slow and

tacit juxtaposition between the international context and a single national language (English), the local Anglo-American culture's approach to methodology and research methods became the general framework for addressing research problems, as also seen in journals, textbooks, and other academic resources (Gobo 2011). Robert Phillipson (2016) shows how such linguistic imperialism activities serve to bolster Western interests, and especially the interests of countries where English is an official language, at the expense of others. Gobo (2011) demonstrates that meanings can disrupt shared understandings on at least three different levels: across countries, within countries due to plural and multilingual societies and dialects, and across social categories such as social class or age. All three levels must be reflected in all phases of international research, also when it comes to ethnographic studies. That leads to challenges that, in principle, are the same when another language, like French (Wright 2006), Spanish (Godenzzi 2006), or Arabic (Jacobsen 1998), functions as a lingua franca in international research and where that language might not be the mother tongue of the local population nor the majority of researchers involved.

In a collaborative research context, collaboration processes occur on multiple levels, such as on the team level, task level (e.g., to define goals, procedures, and manage collaboration), and structural context level, which can encompass different institutional contexts (Wöhlert 2020). All these levels can be affected by language comprehension and the inherent power relations stemming from them. A basic element, for instance, such as the speed at which conversations are held, can serve as an inclusion and exclusion mechanism in collaborations (Berger and Luckmann 1966), simultaneously making visible power relations and implicitly designating the right to speak (Bourdieu 1995). From the perspective of Scandinavian researchers, the speed of conversations, when a majority of researchers talk in a shared common tongue, can be a real challenge. Ultimately, when not addressed, that can influence the internal communication within a team on a profound level and create not only challenges in communication but also asymmetry between researchers who are native speakers of the dominant language and those who are not. That is, for quite obvious reasons, problematic when working in multi-disciplinary and international research teams.

Language at Stake in the Encounters with Participants

The external communication with participants during field studies where English is not the native language demanded increased attention toward similar and other language-related challenges. Language barriers take a different form during Scandinavian field visits, for instance, regarding the researchers' encounters with study participants. In our experiences, native English-speaking researchers often expect people to be able to understand and speak their language while accepting imperfect versions of their language related to faulty pronunciation and grammar, a mix of words from other languages, et cetera. On a more concrete note, when doing international ethnography in a Scandinavian context, some study participants may agree to do the interviews in English, while others may decline. Some participants tend to be relatively proficient in English, while others express that they can only speak *tourist* English. Such situations contribute to unequal opportunities for study participants to convey their perspectives and narrate their stories.

In contrast, and as Scandinavian researchers, we have often experienced how many details in local people's narratives unfold when the mother tongue is spoken. However, speaking the non-English mother tongue can influence the English-produced narratives when translated, often taking a less nuanced and more condensed form. When attempting to speak in English, on the other hand, informants often search for words and concepts never to be found, for instance, also influencing the ebb and flow of a conversation. Additionally, not speaking in one's mother tongue may be a potential risk, resulting in miscommunication and misunderstandings (see also Pinho and Reeves 2021; Matusiak, Bright, and Schachter 2022). From our research, we have experienced that it is a challenge in particular when interviewing or having field conversations with people in a vulnerable position or situation, like frail elderly people or people marginalized due to, for example, a low socioeconomic position or suffering from homelessness and/or drug addiction. Not being able to frame their experiences in their language or being dependent on an interpreter with a different social position from their own, easily makes them feel further marginalized in their encounters with researchers. Similarly, Katharina Resch and Edith Enzenhofer (2018) call for attention to participants struggling with expressing their thoughts when they must talk in a foreign language. Such problems often become more obvious when speaking a foreign language, although people can have similar difficulties expressing themselves and finding words or expressions in their mother tongue, related to language skills, education, illnesses, et cetera (Lee, Sulaiman-Hill, and Thompson 2014; Toki et al. 2018). The problems may especially pertain to tacit knowledge and untold stories, which the researchers may not notice at first glance but that may, either through conversations or the researchers' analysis of it, reveal otherwise hidden phenomena or viewpoints (Bourdieu et al. 1999; Glasdam and Øye 2014). On the other hand, participants struggling with expressing their thoughts might result not only in the researchers' inadequate interpretation of local understandings, for instance, related to health and sickness, but even in misunderstandings as to what is important for people in their daily lives in general (Jacobsen 2006). The ability to express oneself verbally in a preferred language can be important in part for the participant's sense of well-being and in part for the quality and trustworthiness of the empirical material. Language and related challenges are thus concerned both with research quality and research ethics. Those are dimensions that should be reflected upon before, on the spot, and after the conduct of a study. Similarly, Danau Tanu and Laura Dales (2016) show that language use and fluency, moderated by contexts, impact ethnographic research in profound ways. Working in a non-native language may call for awareness of the difference between one's fluency and that of the participants. A certain level of (non-native speaker) fluency may be understood as full fluency by participants who are pleased to engage in their language and vice versa. Perceived fluency shared between researchers and participants can, as such, create a perception of sameness and proximity in the research process, where the researchers or the participants fail to realize that this may still encompass risks of misinterpretations.

Furthermore, it is important to reflect on the fact that language barriers can result in biases when recruiting informants and study participants, which also can have implications for the study's results. From our experiences of collaborative, international ethnographic studies, we notice that informants proficient in English tend to be prioritized, although

there are exceptions, as we will return to. That tendency can imply a selection bias, primarily because language competency is connected to social and cultural resources more broadly, thus potentially excluding important voices. As such, language barriers can contribute to further silencing the voiceless in society, whether in matters of health and well-being (or else), as in the current international project collaborations. Caroline Fryer (2019) recommends researchers remove the (often non-articulated) *English-speaking participants* criteria from research studies and pay attention to how it can, in unintended ways, function as hidden criteria to conduct inclusive research with culturally diverse communities. That argument can be equally valid for any dominating language in other countries where people from *minority* languages risk being underrepresented in research. That goes in line with the idea of linguistic imperialism, which implies that the dominant language is favored and transferred to other people (Phillipson 2012; 2016; Rose and Conama 2018), risking discrimination in the form of linguicism (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 1996). That is where Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Robert Phillipson (1998) argue for the necessity of linguistic human rights that aim to maintain and protect linguistic diversity, thereby reducing the risk of their dissipation. As we have alluded to and will further argue for, that can also occur in research contexts, particularly when conducting ethnographic field studies.

A different observation from our international research collaboration is that a mix of languages in meetings between researchers and participants with varied mother tongues can also be regarded as a language-learning process. In addition, local researchers are often more familiar with their *home-based* study site and national context compared to international researchers. Language learning takes time, which is challenged by more time-intensive ethnography because of the limited time spent together at the field site. Pierre Bourdieu (1995) points out that people never learn a language without simultaneously learning the language's conditions of acceptability, which also means learning the potential of a language in different situations, such as choosing well-suited phrases or expressions. In this light, native-speaking field researchers have an obviously better opportunity to understand the contextual relevance of informants' words, or even that of a concrete phase or concept. However, Phillipson (2016) demonstrates that being a native English speaker is seldom a crucial qualification for grasping the language nuances of other cultures where English serves as the lingua franca in collaborative contexts, even when English is a teaching subject. Yet, with Bourdieu in mind, researchers who are not, to some extent, proficient in the language spoken in the culture they are studying have a harder time grasping the contexts of what informants express and understanding what is at stake for the informants. At the same time, languages are dynamic and keep growing and changing, including language *subcultures* and dialectical variations. Also here, international ethnographic research collaboration is challenged by its time-limited period. It calls for intensive preparation of the research team to cope with cultural peculiarities, including language-related challenges, as ways to minimize misunderstandings and misinterpretations. However, as seen, there is also a great research value in being a tourist or foreigner in a new country, as newcomers can challenge all common-sense understandings in the studied setting and among the national researchers (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Bourdieu 1990). As such, language barriers, in the sense of researchers using their second language in meetings with first-language-speaking informants, can also

be advantageous at times, opening doors otherwise shut or perhaps not even noticed by native researchers. It may, in such instances, be accepted by native informants that researchers lacking competence in native language and culture ask questions that would be considered unnecessary or even impolite if asked by a researcher being familiar with the culture and in full command of the native language. By way of trial and error, by investing the necessary time and effort for understanding local concepts, ideas, and traditions, and by well-planned use of interpreters, researchers lacking native competence may, therefore, arrive at valuable information not easily accessed by any researcher (Jacobsen 1998).

Lost in Interactions

Challenges connected to the speed of the spoken language can be further enhanced by other factors concerning interaction and communication. The examples we allude to below concern cases where additional or confounding aspects distort communication between researchers and participants, and they are, we believe, illustrative of a more general mechanism. Here, difficulties of translating and/or interpreting for non-native-speaking researchers are *put to the test*. One example of such a mechanism was experienced in different contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic, with concerns about communicating while having facemasks in face-to-face meetings. In our experience, wearing facemasks reinforced language barriers both in the internal communication with researchers and external communication with participants, as it was difficult to *see* what people said and to read their facial expressions. Words faded into a murmur, which made the on-the-spot audio decoding difficult. As such, the use of facemasks is illustrative of how existing challenges—interpreting both verbal and physical communication—can be made visible and further reinforced under more extreme conditions. In line with previous research, we experienced that the wearing of facemasks impairs speech understanding (Francis et al. 2023), verbal and nonverbal communication, and it blocks emotional signaling (Yosef, Mokhtar, and Hussein 2022), thereby obstructing communication and learning opportunities for, especially, the non-native speaking researchers. The wearing of masks was a new phenomenon for many people during the pandemic. Even if rare, such events may reoccur, and wearing masks can affect research processes in contexts where this is more common, such as healthcare contexts, where decoding and interpreting body language, including sensations and emotions, may be key. Another example that illustrates but also enhances challenges connected to the speed of oral (first) language is fieldwork through digital platforms. Because of COVID-19, research team meetings were, in many cases, altered to digital platforms. While the technical aspects of that worked out well in our experiences, largely thanks to available technical solutions as well as adaptive collaborators, in some cases, it presented a similar challenge for non-English native-speaking researchers. Here, as for listening to people wearing protective masks, facial expressions and mannerisms become less visible, less *live*, and, likewise, make it more difficult to *hear* or *sense*. Also here, in other words, the Scandinavian researchers are made aware of the importance of facial and bodily mannerisms, this time contorted through a digital medium, to understand what was being communicated. The use of facemasks and/or digital meetings reinforced the language-related challenges within the research team but also between researchers and participants. Such challenges are not only related to the method in use but also call for general awareness and attention in all kinds of research projects where communication is at stake, regardless of whether the

dominant language is English or not (see, e.g., Godenzzi 2006).

Lost in Translations

The use of interpreters when conducting qualitative data collection, even though providing opportunities for access to and interpretation of research data, has the immediate advantage that real-time interpreting gives participants the opportunity to use a language that they master, at the same time as it gives the researchers the opportunity to have a dialogue in the situation itself and clarify answers or reformulate questions on the spot (Fryer 2019). The use of interpreters also comes with multiple challenges (Werner and Campbell 1970; Ingvarsdotter et al. 2012). Challenges connected to alternating between languages, between researchers, and between researchers and study participants are, as alluded to previously, an additional challenge when conducting collaborative, time-limited ethnography using English in Scandinavian countries. When left to the preference of study participants, most interviews will be conducted in a Scandinavian language, not the least if interviewing older adults. In our experience, when using team-based ethnography where English is the dominant language, interpreters in the form of a Scandinavian student or researcher are used on the spot as a conduit between the native speaker and the English-speaking researcher. That is a cumbersome process as the conversations have to be translated both ways, from English (from the international researchers) to Norwegian/Danish/Swedish (to the participants) and vice versa. The ebb and flow of the interviews can suffer accordingly. That has, at least in the experience of the authors of this article, two unintended consequences. First, the answers from the participants tend to be relatively short and to the point and, one would assume, not as in-depth as if the interviews were conducted without interpretation. The participants often must wait for longer periods of time before, for example, returning or elaborating on a theme. Second, and in part as a reaction to this, the interpretations tend to be short and efficient, more summaries than verbatim interpretations, again because of the sheer volume of the *work*. Particularly for focus group interviews, this is noticeable, as the interpretation part makes conversations virtually impossible. Hence, both depth and nuances in meanings are easily lost in translation.

This discussion goes beyond the use of English as a lingua franca in research, as the dominant language may be any of the world languages. Regardless of the dominant language employed, major challenges relate to the use of interpreters, of which some of the challenges are dealt with above. A study on the use of interpreters in research shows that *technical fixes* are not enough, as there are many layers that can complicate the communication and translations between the involved parties, including cultural differences, sociodemographic factors, language, and disciplinary proficiency, and more (Bourdieu 1995; Ingvarsdotter et al. 2012). Those factors can represent barriers that lead to biases, miscommunication, and different *levels of freedom* in how interpreters handle their tasks (Ingvarsdotter et al. 2012). Karin Ingvarsdotter and colleagues (2012), for instance, showed that interpreters at times chose to translate or not an interview question and/or response from the participant based on what the authors interpreted as potential cultural discrepancies/prejudice, insufficient language skills, with more. Such scenarios ought to be taken into consideration in international ethnographic research projects, in which interpreters often are non-professionals with varied language, cross-cultural, and disciplinary skills and

knowledge. As mentioned previously, it takes time to prepare and conduct a good research interview (Bourdieu et al. 1999), and it takes even longer to integrate a *natural*—or rather *cultural*—interpreter function along the way in such interviews. Doing ethnographic field studies across languages thus calls for reflection on such language challenges.

Required Attention to Linguistic Competencies

As mentioned earlier, language competence relates to power. Increased language competence, including speaking more than one's native language, improves the position of the language users and their understanding of what is happening in a given context. However, there are several obstacles to acquiring increased linguistic competence. Some of those, relating to more general challenges when traversing between countries and languages, have been addressed, while others, related more concretely to *linguistic pitfalls*, will be discussed below.

False Friends

Our experiences are that language comprehension can be hampered by so-called *false friends*. In linguistics, a *false friend* means a word in a different language that seemingly directly translates into a concept in the other language or looks or sounds similar to a word in a given language but differs significantly in meaning (Carrol, Littlemore, and Dowens 2018). There are several examples of false friends, which have been actualized in our research. A nurse, in the Scandinavian context, for example, refers to a registered nurse, while in other jurisdictions, the concept of a nurse covers a range of different care staff with a varying degree of formal health education (American Nursing Association n.d.; National University 2023). Even when research is carried out exclusively in the Scandinavian countries where the three different languages are based on a historical language community (Lund 2006), there are many false friends to be aware of. For example, *frokost* means "lunch" in Danish, whereas in Swedish and Norwegian, it means "breakfast." The use and translation of words and concepts that have one meaning in one country and a different meaning in another come with an inherent risk of not being understood correctly.

Another example pertains to Denmark, where there is a municipal job position called a *visitator*. A Dane can easily associate this word with an English origin, and research participants with English as their mother tongue may be included to translate this job title to "visitator," easily associated with the English word "visitor" or "visitation." A Danish *visitator*, however, is an administrative homecare allocator responsible for assigning municipality assistance according to existing laws and local standards. That could be, for example, allocating personal and practical help, meal arrangements, dental care, and emergency help to people who need it. It can also consist of allocating housing, nursing homes, and short-term/respite stays for the elderly (Skanderborg Kommune 2020). Such examples point to inherent translation difficulties, as also experienced by Stinne Glasdam and colleagues (2013). Marianne van Remoortel (2022) calls for reflections on how researchers make sure that they truly understand each other, from the basic comprehension that is needed to operate as a team to a more in-depth level of understanding of cultural contexts that are not their own. That must be reflected upon in all kinds of research.

The example of the *visitator* moreover points to another general fact about languages, namely, index-

icality. Language in daily use frequently points to contexts, both more distant, like the concept of nurse relating to a jurisdictional context, and more immediate, like when the Danish word *visitor* is used when speaking about homecare services. The concept then functions like an index finger pointing in a certain direction (Duranti and Goodwin 1992). As another example, in a healthcare setting, when an older patient suffering from pulmonary disease is described as *sour*, it likely points toward the blood pH value being low and, hence, the patient being in need of oxygen. Further, being described as a *heavy* patient in a mental health ward may not necessarily refer to their weight but to being in a low mood or even depressed. Hence, the inherent indexicality in language illustrates, in another way than discussed earlier in the article, that language and cultural competence are intertwined.

Missing Words

Researchers from non-English-speaking countries often become accustomed to *thinking* in a language that is foreign to their own (Andersen and Hellman 2021), alleviating to a certain extent the aforementioned pitfalls, for instance, connected to misunderstandings. However, it can be difficult to spot such situations and realize that there may be miscommunication, misinterpretation, or misunderstanding. Sometimes, words appear in one language, which are so embedded in a web of multiple cultural meanings that they do not directly correspond to words in English or another world language employed in international research. Sometimes, such words may seemingly be similar across languages (and, hence, also can be seen as false friends), but frequently not. As an example, frequent concepts in the Scandinavian languages like *hygge* in Danish or *kos* in Norwegian, both words relating to ways of organizing homes, family life, and space-time, and referring to a quality of cosines and comfortable conviviality that engender a feeling of contentment or well-being (Cambridge Dictionary 2023). In a complex way, such words communicate core cultural values with connotations to material as well as social aspects of intimacy in social situations and social relationships. *Hygge* and *kos* are concepts that signal, to competent native language users, a situation of relaxation, trust, intimacy, and enjoyment (of people, activities, the place, the natural or manmade environment). Missing words in researchers' mother tongue may often relate to such core symbols. Core symbols, expressed by such complex concepts as *hygge* or *kos*, are particularly important to understanding local culture and society and require much work and careful observations over time to be grasped (Geertz 1973). Another example is the term/concept *dannelse* in Norwegian and Danish and *bildning* in Swedish, where an equivalent English term/concept does not exist. *Dannelse/bildning* means the process through which a person grows up, matures, and acquires knowledge about themselves and the world around them and grows to understand the fabric of the society and the culture that they are exposed to, both autonomously and through other people. It designates a social norm pointing to a certain behavior, manner of being, and knowledge. When researchers explore people's understandings in matters of lived lives, health, and well-being, it is important to consider how those understandings are closely linked to the understanding of complex cultural core symbols and the specific social contexts at stake (Jacobsen 1998; 2009). In our experiences, considerable time is spent on clarifying linguistic technicalities, being perhaps necessary for the foreign researchers to understand the contextual features but also

somewhat disturbing the main issues intended to be discussed. That calls for the importance of careful preparation by all involved researchers, including language and context-specific concepts. It is not a new method-related issue (Ranabahu 2017) but obviously challenging, considering active field study days that require *handling on the spot*, perhaps particularly relevant for time-intensive ethnographic fieldwork.

Challenging and Challenged Definitions of Concepts

Another arising issue relates to the complexity involved in the definition and understanding of words/concepts and divergences within and across borders relating to what can be understood as the word's/concept's correct meaning. That challenge may occur both for concepts in everyday speech, like discussed in the section about false friends, and for technical terms connected to a professional or academic field. Regarding the latter, when doing research, the translation of technical terms may pose a challenge. Some specific words, for example, related to staff categories, like the English word *healthcare assistant*, frequently employed in the United States and Canada, seemingly means the same as *helsefagsarbeider* in Norwegian, *undersköterska* in Swedish, and *social- og sundhedsassistent* in Danish, but are, upon further investigation, not equivalents. As used in North America, the concept may encompass workers with no or less than one year of formal health education. In the Scandinavian context, it designates healthcare workers with at least two years of health education. In this, and several similar examples, translating between jurisdictions is not too hard. However, such translation work needs a preparedness not to take any concept in other contexts for granted. Some other concepts, such as senior co-housing, are more challenging, as they tend to inform contexts at a higher level of abstraction. Senior co-housing exemplifies a way of organizing housing for older adults and relates, at the same time, to the overall organization of services for this category of people. Senior co-housing may, in other words, be additional to and outside public services or part and parcel of public services, depending on specific jurisdiction.

According to Ditte Andersen and Matilda Hellman (2021), Scandinavian researchers often use English concepts that quickly spread across the world, leaving the grassroots level with the predicament of figuring out what the concepts mean in new contexts. Signe Ravn and Tea Bengtsson (2015) show that concepts' meaning changes when they cross borders, and researchers must, therefore, be careful to reflect on how they adapt concepts (Andersen and Hellman 2021). Pre-defined propositions of a concept can make researchers blind to the complexities of the culture at stake and, thus, also to the embedded possibilities. It seems necessary to continually discuss and reflect on pre-defined concepts, as they can be challenged and developed throughout the research process, not least in meetings and intersections across nationalities and research disciplines. Contemporary social research methods originate from local cultures. However, throughout the twentieth century, the cultural contexts embedded in those methods became obscured, transforming methodology from a locally rooted practice into a body of knowledge guided by universal principles detached from context (Gobo 2011). That transition positioned methodology as one of the most globally disseminated forms of knowledge. Yet, the constraints of globalization are discernible across various domains, spanning economy, politics, marketing, culture, and social

spheres. The methodology is not exempt from these constraints. Gobo (2011) contends that it is conceivable to adopt a mindset of global thinking in methodology while maintaining local action.

Conclusion

In general, the article argues for the importance of being sensitive to language issues in international ethnographic research. That, among others, pertains to tacit knowledge and untold stories, which may reveal otherwise hidden phenomena or viewpoints. As seen, language-related challenges can occur on multiple levels and affect the interaction and dynamics within the research team and between researchers and participants in several ways, including the threshold for research participation, language comprehension, the interpretation of what is being communicated, and more. That may ultimately affect the research process and, thereby, the outcomes of research projects, including their quality and trustworthiness.

Language-related challenges can occur in all types of research projects and methods, whether carried out over a prolonged time or limited time span. Working collaboratively in international research teams can represent an additional challenge as the time slot for researchers to collaborate and collect data in the field is narrow. That has consequences for the researchers' time for immersion in the studied sites and their opportunities to *get to know* the culture, including local language idiosyncrasies, before collecting and analyzing data. Although researchers' *naïveté* may be an advantage at times, unawareness of such challenges can, nonetheless, affect the collection, analysis, and interpretation of empirical material, which ought to be problematized as a potential limitation in such types of studies. The currently described challenges can serve as *food for thought* and be capitalized into experiential knowledge and an enhanced preparedness in similar future research endeavors and may be relevant for collaborative ethnographic research and other kinds of research collaboration. Furthermore, the article calls for attention to both visible and invisible language-related challenges. Such attention is significant for international research collaboration, methodical choices, research ethics, research quality, and trustworthiness. International ethnographic fieldwork requires thorough preparation and reflection to embrace and think through linguistic and cultural competencies, nuances, and understandings incorporated in the researchers, and their potential consequences for research processes and outcomes. Such research requires an open climate and reflexive, democratic processes among researchers, taking into consideration blind spots, pronounced and unspoken knowledge and assumptions, and the ability to question and challenge preconceived ideas in both previously known and unknown contexts. An inquisitive, patient, and open-minded attitude can result in valuable learning, benefitting the overall research process and outcomes.

Discussions and reflections on cultural differences, linguistic codes, and common-sense understandings can be advantageously developed with the ambition to promote mutual learning and understanding. That is valid both internally in the research team and externally toward participants to strengthen the research itself, the empirical material that is generated, and the related ethical considerations. It could also be a way to balance power asymmetries within research collaborators and to recognize that different competencies are equally important to facilitate a well-conducted study.

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