

Language at Stake in International Research Collaboration—Methodical Reflections on a Multi-Sited, Rapid Ethnographic Study

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.19.3.01>

Keywords:

Ethics; International
Research
Collaboration;
Language; Methodical
Challenges; Rapid
Ethnography

Abstract: Based on experiences from multi-sited, rapid ethnographic fieldwork about age-friendly communities, the article aims at shedding light and reflecting on the encountered challenges and potentials regarding language and communication. Moreover, the aim is to contribute to enhancing researchers' awareness of and preparedness to meet and address such challenges in future research endeavors. As English often serves as a lingua franca for Western-dominated international research collaborations, the implications thereof for researchers/participants, the use of interpreters, and linguistic pitfalls are discussed. Such attention is significant for international collaboration, methodical choices, and research quality. International rapid 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/outcomes.

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Based on experiences from an international collaborative study conducted in several countries, this article focuses on methodical challenges and potentials related to language. The United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organization (WHO) jointly launched the initiative “Decade of Healthy Ageing” (2021-2030) with the overarching aim to foster healthy aging and improve the lives of older adults, their families, and the communities in which they live, including changing negative narratives of aging in societies (United Nations 2020; World Health Organization 2021). That also invites (inter)national and (inter)professional research about the lives of older adults, their families, and the communities. International, interprofessional research collaborations are a current trend in continuing development (Pinho and Reeves 2021). In fact, this article has its starting point in such an international, interprofessional research collaboration about older adults where rapid, team-based ethnography was applied. Rapid ethnography can, in short, be defined as a collection of field methods to provide researchers with a reasonable understanding of the studied areas given a limited amount of time spent in the field gathering data (Paay 2008). In some projects, such as the one presented in this article, albeit a short timeframe limits, a potential strength is in the multidisciplinary and multinational team contributing to illuminating differences in what is observed and how when different team members are observing the same institutions and social phenomena.

Some of the challenges in conducting international research are related to linguistic barriers, as well as wider cultural differences in the research team and between researchers and study participants. Language constitutes a significant barrier in con-

ducting multinational research, a barrier that can be amplified when both researchers and study participants speak different languages. Studies highlight that language is an often underestimated barrier in international research (Lor 2019; Matusiak, Bright, and Schachter 2022). How people talk can both unite and divide them and can reveal social positions and roles (Kinzler 2020). Language is also intrinsically connected to power—and as such to discourses and to social reproduction (Fairclough 2013; Odrowąż-Coates 2019)—both in the sense of the power *of* (language can change) and power *over* (the powerful can speak). While people’s speech largely reflects the voices heard as children (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Kinzler 2020), to some extent, people can change how they speak. For instance, by learning new languages, whether foreign or task-specific or by switching between dialects. Language, thereby, can become a vessel for social- or self-positioning of communicating where one is positioned in a given context (Odrowąż-Coates 2019). Most people are influenced by their native tongue, which also has significance when it comes to communicating with and understanding other people. That further implies that people’s language filters how they perceive and process situations and relations, including how they understand, evaluate, and construct experiences (Werner and Campbell 1970; Bourdieu 1996; Bourdieu et al. 1999; Ingvarsdotter, Johnsdotter, and Östman 2012). Language, following Bourdieu, 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 ‘culture.’ Language is also significant when traversing between cultures and countries. Being exposed to multiple languages can 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 may 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 can speak and understand foreign languages, but also to their academic discipline (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Language differences present challenges, but they can also be an asset for facilitating relationships, mutual understanding, and international collaboration. Moreover, being a newcomer to a society or community (or the academic field) and not mastering the language can potentially be an opportunity for social contact and collaboration. As many anthropologists and other researchers have experienced, local participants may act friendly and helpful toward visitors who are not familiar with their language and rather inept as to local culture and traditions (Manderson and Aaby 1992). Hence, it may be accepted by native informants that researchers lacking competence in their native language and culture ask questions that would be considered unnecessary or even impolite if asked by a researcher 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 in understanding local concepts, ideas, and traditions, and by well-planned use of interpreters, researchers lacking native competence may arrive at valuable information not easily accessed by any researcher (Jacobsen 1998).

In international, collaborative research, cultural dimensions, including language challenges, are often at stake (Matusiak, Bright, and Schachter 2022). They are important to consider and reflect on to achieve successful collaboration (Serrano LaVertu and Linares 1990). Ethnographic fieldwork is commonly characterized by relatively long periods of data collection, in which ethnographers spend talking to people and observing actions (Reeves, Kuper, and Hodges 2008). Rapid ethnographic fieldwork, in contrast, often has a short and well-defined timeline for fieldwork activities (Baines and Cunningham 2013; Reeves et al. 2013), frequently between a few days to three months (Reeves et al. 2013; Sangaramoorthy and Kroeger 2020). Reeves and colleagues (2013) point to the fact that rapid ethnography is often 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, both multiple, parallel data collection methods, as well as conducting fieldwork as a team, including local and external researchers, can be used as time-deepening strategies (Ranabahu 2017). Still, when conducting more time-intensive forms of ethnography, challenges connected to language can be particularly significant. As this paper discusses, these challenges relate both to internal (within the research team) and external (between the research team and participants) communication. In a review of 168 articles focusing on international research collaborations, Wöhlert (2020) shows that the studies largely focus on the structural dimension of communication, while the focus on the actual communication processes among researchers, including language, is sparse. According to Gibb and Iglesias (2017), field researchers must break the silence about language-related issues in their work. In continuation thereof, based on an internation-

al collaboration study using rapid ethnographic fieldwork as a method, the current article aims to highlight and discuss methodical challenges and potentials related to language by shedding light and reflecting on these encountered challenges and potentials. Moreover, the aim is to contribute to enhancing researchers' awareness of and preparedness to meet and address these in future research endeavors. The article assumes the perspectives of Scandinavian researchers. It is structured so that, first, a brief description of the project in question is given. Next, the article focuses on the theme of *Challenges of Using English as Lingua Franca in Research*, discussing 'Native and Non-native English-Speaking Researchers and Participants,' 'Language at Stake in the Encounters with Participants,' and 'Challenges Related to the Use of Interpreters.' Subsequently, the theme *Required Attention to Linguistic Competence* is discussed, focusing on 'False Friends,' 'Missing Words,' and 'Challenging and Challenged Definitions of Concepts.' Finally, the article ends up with a conclusion.

The Project, In Short

The current multi-site, rapid ethnographic fieldwork is part of a larger project investigating age-friendly communities and environments from different perspectives in several countries on four different continents. For ethical reasons, the project is anonymized concerning the title, specific locations, universities, and researchers and participants involved. The project was built on the WHO's global "Age-Friendly Communities" initiative (World Health Organization 2007; 2015). Aiming at addressing complexities, the research team included scholars and partners from many jurisdictions representing several disciplinary and sectoral perspectives. Addressing critical knowledge gaps identified by the WHO,

the overall aim was to investigate how culture and gender matter in creating age-friendly cities and to pay particular attention to how age-friendly cities can contribute to older adults not only maintaining healthy active lives but also to participating and creating meaning in later life. Cities were selected to allow for diversity in jurisdictional and local contexts. Rapid ethnography, involving international and multidisciplinary teams, was chosen both because of the practical challenge of funding long-term ethnographic fieldwork and because of the potential benefit of intensity stemming from collective teamwork, both in terms of data collection and analysis, to some extent making up for lack of time in the field. The field research is currently in process and is planned to be undertaken in multiple cities in several countries on four continents. This paper primarily draws on fieldwork conducted in Denmark (in 2022), Canada (in 2021), and Norway (in 2019). In this project, each fieldwork session lasts about seven days and involves 12-20 researchers, including a small group of researchers from the explored city, who also act as hosts. The remaining researchers stem from a variety of countries. When fieldwork is conducted in a country with a native tongue other than English, the number of 'native' researchers, students, and participants acting as translators tends to be somewhat higher to accommodate the native-English-speaking majority. Professional interpreters were not used for financial reasons. The researchers represent different disciplines, such as health sciences, comparative politics, history, economics, social sciences, and gender sciences, and different career stages, such as professors, post-docs, doctoral students, and master students. Before a field visit, an extensive background report about each city is made by researchers and research assistants in the city in question, supported by the project management and appointed doctoral students.

The report includes the city and country's history, policies, legislation, organizations, and services related to older adults' needs. Furthermore, a report consisting of detailed descriptions of all the research sites to be visited is made. All involved researchers get the reports a few days before the field study to be read before it begins. Once in the city, different pre-identified research sites are explored, often in small groups and sometimes by the whole research team. The team conducts interviews supported by an interview guide, observes, and takes field notes supported by an observation guide, participates in community activities, chats, takes photographs, and records videos. The guides are consistent for all field visits in a specific city, although they vary across cities. Non-professional interpreters are sometimes involved, and the host researchers also assist with translations during interviews and conversations. The study involves meetings with stakeholders, organizations, researchers, older adults, and volunteers, and exploring social activities, libraries, transportation, living places, and more. During the week of the site visits, the assembled team members meet three times to reflect, discuss, and share their insights. The idea is to provide shared opportunities for reflection and critique (see also Rubin and Rubin 2005). Field notes, interviews, meeting recordings, and transcriptions are uploaded continuously during the fieldwork to a secure server and are later made available for the team to use in their analyses. The study is ethically approved in Canada (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al. 2014) and Norway (Helse- og omsorgsdepartementet 2008). Based on Danish legislation, such studies do not need ethical approval when performed in Denmark (National Committee on Health Research Ethics 2019). In the field study in Denmark, personal data were handled under the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2016/679 (European Union 2016)

and the Data Protection Acts in Denmark (Ministry of Justice, Denmark 2018).

Challenges of Using English as Lingua Franca in Research

Native and Non-Native English-Speaking Researchers and Participants

Since English serves as the lingua franca for many Western-dominated international research collaborations, English-speaking researchers are privileged in international research collaboration as the spoken and written language often is their mother tongue (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2014; Kamadjeu 2019) following general societal trends, perhaps particularly in Europe (Odrowąż-Coates 2019). In the current study, about three-quarters of the team members were native English speakers. English was most often a second or third language for the rest of the team members. That leads to challenges that, in principle, are the same when another language, such as French (Wright 2016) or Spanish (Godenzzi 2006), functions as a lingua franca in international research.

One concrete challenge experienced in this project, from the perspective of the Scandinavian researchers, was the speed of conversations, attributed to the fact that the majority of the researchers and participants talked in their shared common tongue. That influenced the internal communication within the team and was a consistent theme needing reminders during the field visits and related team meetings. Collaboration processes occur on multiple levels, such as at 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 lev-

els can be affected by language comprehension and implied power relations. Taking the right to determine the speaking speed can be seen as an inclusion and exclusion mechanism in the team's conversations (Berger and Luckmann 1966), simultaneously making visible power relations and implicitly designating the right to speak (Bourdieu 1995).

The speed of the spoken language was enhanced by another language-related challenge that arose during the field visit in Canada, which took place at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. The facemask requirement in public transport was, for example, lifted in the middle of the field study period. The project had a COVID-19 protocol, which determined that the team had to wear high-quality masks in indoor spaces during the study. During team-based outdoor and team-only events (e.g., team meetings, tours, and meals), masks were optional. However, the researchers had different COVID-19-related experiences and personal histories, which meant that some wanted to wear their masks in all social situations, while others preferred to drop them whenever possible. Nonetheless, wearing facemasks reinforced the language barriers both in the internal communication with researchers and external communication with participants, as it was impossible to 'see' what people said and to read their facial expressions. Words faded into a murmur, which made the audio decoding difficult. 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-English native-speaking researchers. Relatedly, also in the Canadian context, part of the rapid ethnography had to be altered from physical to

digital presence because of a COVID-19 outbreak. While the technical aspects of that worked out well, thanks to research organizers and adaptive service organizations, that presented a similar challenge for non-English native-speaking researchers. Here, as for listening to people wearing protective masks, facial expressions, and mannerisms became less visible, less 'live,' and, likewise, made it more difficult to 'hear' or to 'sense.' Also here, in other words, the Scandinavian researchers were made aware of the importance of facial and bodily mannerisms, this time contorted through a digital medium, to understand what was being communicated. It is easier to decode words and meanings in one's mother tongue than in a second (or third) foreign language. That means the use of facemasks and/or digital meetings potentially reinforced the language-related challenges in the research team, but also among researchers and participants in the study. Such challenges were not specifically related to the used method, that, rapid ethnographic fieldwork, but calls for awareness and attention in all kinds of research projects where communication is at stake, regardless of the lingua franca in research, as it could be other than English, for example, Spanish (Godenzzi 2006).

Language at Stake in the Encounters with Participants

The external communication with participants during the field visits demanded increased attention toward language-related challenges. While most participants in the Canadian part of the fieldwork were proficient in English, language barriers were more visible during the Norwegian and Danish field visits, particularly regarding the researchers' encounters with study participants. Often, English-speaking researchers expect people to be able

to understand and speak their language, while accepting imperfect versions of their mother tongue related to faulty pronunciation and grammar, a mix of words from other languages, et cetera. During the field studies in Denmark and Norway, some study participants with Danish/Norwegian as their mother tongue agreed to do the interviews in English, while others declined. Some participants were relatively proficient in English, while others expressed that they could only speak 'tourist' English. During a visit to senior co-housing premises, parts of the visit took place in English, while other parts took place in Danish. During that stay, it became visible to the Scandinavian researchers how many details in the older adults' narratives unfolded when Danish was spoken and how speaking Danish influenced the English-produced narratives, which were less nuanced, although body language was used in both languages. Additionally, not speaking in one's mother tongue may be a potential risk resulting in simplifications, miscommunication, and misunderstandings (Matusiak, Bright, and Schachter 2022; Pinho and Reeves 2021). The participants occasionally searched for words and concepts that they never found. Resch and Enzenhofer (2018) call for attention to participants struggling with expressing their thoughts when they have to 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 ability to express oneself verbally can be important, in part, for the participant's sense of well-being and participation in research and, in part, for the quality and trustworthiness of the empirical material that is constructed during the field visit. Language and related

challenges thus imply a significant ethical dimension, which must always be reflected before, on the spot, and after the conduct of the study as part of good research ethics. It is also important in terms of minimizing and problematizing language-dependent methodical and analytical challenges. Tanu and Dales (2016) show that language use and fluency, moderated by contexts, impact ethnographic research. Working in a non-native language may call for the need for awareness of the difference between one's fluency and that of the participants, as 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, and similarities between researchers and participants, can create a perception of sameness and proximity in the research process, where the researchers or participants fail to realize that the perceived fluency 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. In the Scandinavian field sites, informants proficient in English tended to be prioritized, although there were exceptions, as we will return to. At a 'stakeholder meeting' in Norway, for instance, a leader of the Council for the Elderly declined participation, stating language barriers as the reason. Also, when doing fieldwork in organizations, informants proficient in English were easier to recruit. That tendency can, as mentioned, imply a selection bias, primarily in the sense that, in a Scandinavian context, 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. Fryer (2019) recommends researchers remove the 'English

speaking participants' criteria from research studies and pay attention to how it can, in unintended ways, function as hidden criteria, as seen in the current case, 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. We further argue for the importance of being sensitive to untold stories, which may be unimportant at first glance, but may reveal an otherwise hidden phenomenon or viewpoint (Bourdieu et al. 1999; Glasdam and Øye 2014). The issues related to the use of the English language in non-English populations must also be taken into consideration in other non-rapid qualitative research methods.

The mix of languages in meetings between researchers and participants with varied mother tongues can be regarded as a language-learning process. In addition, the local researchers are often more familiar with their 'home-based' study site and national context as compared to the international researchers, who have less knowledge of the city and the studied context. Additionally, language learning takes time, which is challenged by the concept of rapid field visits because of the limited time spent together at the field site. 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 this language in different situations, such as choosing well-suited phrases or expressions. In that light, native-speaking field researchers have a better opportunity to understand what the language refers to. It also opens up the possibility for second-language-speaking researchers to, to a certain extent, understand what is at stake on the second-language-speaking field visits.

With Bourdieu in mind, researchers who do not, to some extent, know the language spoken in the culture they are studying have a harder time decoding what is at stake. The differences between cultures are reflected in and made evident through the use of language. At the same time, languages are dynamic, they keep growing and changing, including language 'subcultures' and dialectical variations. Mastering the nuances of a language can nonetheless help understand people and their culture. Also here, we see that rapid ethnography 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, before and during site visits as ways to minimize misunderstandings and misinterpretations. However, 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 culture 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. A post-study reflection is that such research team 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, the empirical material that is generated, and the related ethical considerations. It could also be a way to balance power asymmetries within the team and to recognize that different competencies are equally important to facilitate a well-conducted study.

Challenges Related to the Use of Interpreters

During some field visits in Norway and Denmark, students or Scandinavian researchers were used as simultaneous interpreters from Norwegian/Danish to English and vice versa. The presence of researchers who master different languages and the use of interpreters in research comes with multiple challenges as languages are dynamic, and language affects people's experiences of their 'realities' (Werner and Campbell 1970; Bourdieu 1996; Bourdieu et al. 1999; Ingvarsdotter, Johnsdotter, and Östman 2012). Language can be said to be associated with worldviews and the comprehension thereof. Challenges connected to alternating between languages, between researchers, and between researchers and participants were, for instance, noticeable during the Norwegian field visits. In one community organization frequented by many local older adults, both individual interviews and focus-group interviews were conducted in *pronto* in the public space of the host. Based on the participants' preferences, most interviews were conducted in Norwegian, while a Norwegian researcher or student acted as a simultaneous interpreter between the participants and researchers. That was, however, a cumbersome process as the conversations had to be translated both ways, from English (from the international researchers) to Norwegian (to the participants) and vice versa. The ebb and flow of the interviews suffered accordingly. That had at least two unintended consequences. First, the answers from the participants became relatively short and to the point and, one would assume, not as in-depth as if the interviews were conducted without interpretation. Second, and in part as a reaction to that, the interpretations gradually became shorter and more efficient, more summaries than verbatim interpretations. It was particularly

noticeable during focus-group interviews as the interpretation part made conversations virtually impossible. The participants, in one case three female older adults sitting around a table with two native English speakers and one Norwegian-speaking researcher, became increasingly passive, giving short answers before waiting for the translation. Instances where the participants elaborated on a thought sequence or added to another's comment were largely missing. 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, with more (Ingvarsdotter, Johnsdotter, and Östman 2012), which must be reflected in all kinds of research using interpreters. These factors can represent barriers that lead to biases, miscommunication, and different 'levels of freedom' in how interpreters handle their tasks (Ingvarsdotter, Johnsdotter, and Östman 2012). Ingvarsdotter and colleagues (2012), for instance, showed that interpreters at times chose to translate or not translate 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 research projects, such as the currently discussed project, in which interpreters were non-professionals, with varied language, cross-cultural, and disciplinary skills and knowledge. A particular challenge in the current rapid ethnographic study was the time factor. The organization of the ethnographic field visit in Denmark, for instance, meant that within five research days, many different visits had to be carried out to generate as much empirical material as possible.

That meant that each visit was limited in terms of time, usually to 1½-3 hours, with a few exceptions. It takes time to 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 rapid ethnographic field studies thus calls for reflection on such language challenges, not least considering the limited timeframe.

Mastering the language nuances proved a strength in the meetings with some participants. That was seen in an example where the research team’s language skills could support that immigrants with the same native mother tongue as the visiting researchers chose to speak up. That was illuminated on a visit to an activity and drop-in center in Denmark. The interpreter was delayed, which was why the research team started the visit without an interpreter.

Researcher 1: Our interpreter was about 15 minutes late. We had to start without him, which was actually kind of fun and amusing because everybody was trying to understand each other and there was lots of goodwill, even though the staff did tell us that some people were a bit skeptical about us coming. [team meeting, notes]

This participant was a native English-speaking immigrant. According to the center staff, s/he used to visit the drop-in center daily and usually kept very quiet. Now, s/he spontaneously stepped in and acted as a simultaneous interpreter from Danish to English and vice versa. S/he connected participants and researchers and actively contributed to the research. Here again, it was notable how common native languages can contribute to uniting people and inviting them to tell, nuance, and share their stories and knowledge. That leads to the thought

that the current study includes participants with different cultural and language backgrounds within the respectively studied countries, which makes the distinction between, for example, Scandinavian/English even more complicated and in need of thorough attention.

Required Attention to Linguistic Competence

False Friends

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 (Carroll, Littlemore, and Dowens 2018). One example is from a visit to a Danish nursing home, where an employer explained how older adults were allocated to nursing homes. In Denmark, there is a municipal job position called a *visitator*. A Dane can easily associate this word with an English origin, and the interviewee also translated this job title to ‘visitator,’ easily associated with the English word ‘visitor’ or ‘visitation.’ A Danish ‘visitator’ is an administrative homecare allocator responsible for assigning municipality assistance according to existing laws and local standards (Glasdam et al. 2013). 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). A retrospective reflection is that researchers ought to consider beforehand the potential consequences for participants and themselves of not conducting interviews in the participants’ language. Partly,

participants may feel linguistically amputated and somewhat powerless in their expression, partly, the empirical material may not properly reflect the participants' world and knowledge. van Remoortel (2022) calls for reflections on how researchers, in all kinds of research, 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.

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). It means that those researchers are prepared and attuned to possible misunderstandings. However, it can be difficult to spot such situations and realize that there may be a misinterpretation. Such a situation, for instance, happened in Canada when the research team was on a guided tour of a social housing building under construction. The guide talked about the premises and the intentions behind the social housing project while they guided the research team through the whole building and showed the team a bachelor room (see: Picture 1). One of the Scandinavian researchers was acquainted with two meanings of the word bachelor—a university degree and a single (unmarried) man—and could not get those two meanings to fit into the context of the social housing idea. Loudly, the researcher asked, "I wonder if it is so in Canada that single men are not able to live on their own and must live in social housing?" (field notes). That gave rise to amusement, but also thoughtfulness in the research team. It also helped to decode the word's meaning in the current context, namely, that a bachelor room was the same as a studio, a one-room-apartment, avoiding potential misinterpretations in the further analytical processes.

Picture 1. Bachelor room in a social housing building under construction



Photographer: Stinne Glasdam, 2021.

Another issue that arose was related to the different languages' alphabets, which differed and were the source of misinterpretations that affected the research process. When non-Scandinavian researchers do research in Scandinavia, they may operate in a foreign context with a foreign language. In Denmark and Norway, the alphabet encompasses three additional characters that do not exist in the English alphabet: æ [æe], ø [oe], and å [aa]. That demands special attention to, for instance, avoid mistaking geographical names, as shown in the quotation below.

We arrived an hour and a half late because we confused A-løse [district of a city] with Æ-løse [town]. XX and YY [co-researchers] checked on their phones [map app], which showed 18 kilometers. And we said, "How can this be?" Because we knew it was only 5 kilometers away [from the hotel]. [Researcher 2, team meeting, recorded/transcribed]

Researchers being late for appointments was regarded as impolite by some participants. In Denmark, for instance, some participants gave the organizer a phone call wondering if they had wasted their time and waited in vain. Other participants experienced that as unproblematic, for instance, participants from a social place for homeless people who were used to 'a deal not being a deal' with their visitors. During some of the visits, it became a jokingly amusing narrative about 'errant researchers' among the participants and the researchers. The researchers were often invited to the participants' locations, including their homes, workplaces, and social meeting points. The way researchers enter their hosts' premises can impact the establishment of trust between researchers-participants, affecting their relationship and thus also the empirical material quality (Rosteius et al. 2022). The language thus proved to be a factor at play in terms of delays, sometimes reinforced by the inability to assess distance in unfamiliar environments. That points to the need to be attentive, thoughtful, and careful when doing research in other cultures with a language that differs from the researchers' mother tongue, whichever research method is used, and also in rapid ethnography.

In another example from the Norwegian field study, an interview was conducted with a female older adult who was both a patron and a volunteer at one of the studied organizations. Two native English-speaking researchers were supported by a Norwegian researcher. As the interviewee was proficient in English, which prevented interruptions for translations, the ebb and flow of the interview worked well overall. Nonetheless, the Norwegian interpreter had to contribute even here, mostly by translating terms and concepts connected to the peculiar political and bureaucratic aspects, which were largely untranslatable in the sense of not having a direct equivalent in

the other country. However, the Norwegian interpreter could function as a perhaps necessary bridge between the two cultures as they had considerable knowledge about both Norway and Canada. However, as with the previous case, that took considerable time, and being only peripherally relevant to the topic of the interview, also led to missed opportunities. Considerable time was spent on clarifying these linguistic technicalities, 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 cultural preparation related to the concrete rapid field visits by all involved researchers, including language and country-related concepts. That is not a new method-related issue (Ranabahu 2017), but challenging considering active field days, which require 'handling on the spot,' as well as proper preparation, for example, by taking part in the context-related preparatory work and reports as in other kinds of interview studies and ethnographic fieldworks.

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. Some specific concepts, like the English word 'healthcare assistant,' frequently employed in the United States and Canada, seemingly meaning the same as 'hjelpepleier' in Norwegian or 'social- og sundhedsassistent' in Danish, but designates a staff category not existing in Denmark or Norway. As used in North America, the concept may encompass both workers with no or less than one year of formal health education. In the Danish or Norwegian contexts, it designates

nates healthcare workers with at least two years of health education. In that, and several other 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 are more challenging as they tend to inform, at a higher level of abstraction, ways of approaching another national or local context. The word/concept 'culture' is central to the current project and has significance both internally in the research team and externally in the meetings with the participants. A classical and influential anthropological understanding of culture is that it provides a map of and for reality (Geertz 1973). Hence, culture is a multifaceted resource that both guides people's actions and helps them make sense of their world and their everyday life. However, in the current project's plan, the concept of culture is employed in a more limited sense, stressing diversities due to, for example, global migrations, indigenous people, gender roles, community characteristics among people with disabilities, and characteristics of LGBT+ groups. In Denmark, we visited a local culture house, which in Danish is understood as a public institution that offers a variety of cultural activities, such as exhibitions, lectures, communal dining, courses, and related socializing. However, the pre-defined culture concept challenges the understanding of what a culture house could be in the research team.

Researcher 3: We had a debate about what culture was, and I think it took a while for me, but I could make sense of it by thinking of it as a community house. What I would call a community house. So the word culture for me means more kind of high culture or ethnic culture.

Researcher 4: I asked her [the manager of the culture house]: "How do you define culture? Who said

this is a culture center? Then how do you define the culture?"...[the manager answered]: "I don't have my own agenda, those who come here define what the culture is"...I asked her how the government defines culture; then she said, "It varies all the time." I asked her what the most recent definition was and then she said, "Now, the culture is to make money out of tourism".

Researcher 5: [Expressing that it is not a real culture house] In Canada, we might think of this as a community center, right, so it kind of falls in that guise where it's got municipal funding, but unlike a lot of community centers she keeps the programming kind of under the wire, so she said everything is mouth to ear. [team meeting, recorded/transcribed]

According to Andersen and Hellmann (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. Ravn and 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 Hellmann 2021). However, in the current case, the different English definitions of the concept 'culture' are similar to the Danish definitions, whereas the project's definition of the concept seems rather limited, instead of acknowledging and encompassing a wider diversity of definitions associated with such a concept. Predefined 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 inter-sections across nationalities and research disci-

plines. Marañá (2010) points out that culture is not a static set of values and practices. Over time, the concept recreates itself as people question, adapt, and redefine values and practices when facing changes and interchanges of ideas. The English language's dominance is also seen here, where the English-speaking researcher(s), probably unconsciously, come(s) to translate the Danish culture house concept to a Canadian community center.

The complex composition of the research team, with members representing several countries and a broad range of disciplines, led to important questions being asked that would otherwise not have been asked. As an example, a historian will ask other questions as to the context of a built structure or a cultural institution than a social scientist. Still, even in such an advantageous situation, it seems important to work hard on pre-defined definitions when exploring and trying to understand the culture at stake as a way to frame (international) relational perspectives when a 'case' is investigated. That calls for challenging pre-defined concepts and embedded myopia in a project and to aim toward openness and curiosity to explore the content of the culture concept in, for instance, the Danish context and reflect how that can enrich the project's international context. Furthermore, it calls for ethical reflections, where the right to define a concept's contents is inscribed in power relationships (Bourdieu 1990)—internally in the research team and externally among researchers and participants, as seen in the current study.

Conclusion

Based on an international, multi-sited, rapid ethnographic field study about age-friendly communities and environments involving researchers from several countries and a broad range of dis-

ciplines, the current article shows that language was at stake both internally within the research team and externally between researchers and participants. 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 research participation, language comprehension, the interpretation of what is being communicated, with 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 a limited period. As seen in the current case, the time-limited nature of rapid ethnographic fieldwork 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 data, 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 future rapid ethnographic studies and other kinds of international studies. The article calls for attention to both visible and invisible language-related challenges, which are embedded in the culture. Such attention is significant for

international research collaboration, methodical choices, research ethics, and research quality and trustworthiness. International, multi-sited, rapid 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 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 and territories. Some experiences from the included project, like the above-mentioned story of the bachelor room,

illustrated that an inquisitive, patient, and open-minded attitude could result in valuable learning, benefitting the overall research. Other examples indicated that a rapid ethnographic approach, when working across jurisdictions involving pronounced linguistic and cultural differences, might sometimes lead to important cultural and social differences not being fully understood.

Acknowledgments

We thank colleagues, staff, partners, and participants associated with the current research project. Specially thanks to the involved persons who made formidable practical efforts in carrying out the field visits in Canada, Norway, and Denmark, respectively.

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Citation

Glasdam, Stinne, Frode F. Jacobsen, Gudmund Ågotnes, and Sigrid Stjernswärd. 2023. "Language at Stake in International Research Collaboration—Methodical Reflections on a Multi-Sited, Rapid Ethnographic Study." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 19(3):6-24. Retrieved Month, Year (http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.19.3.01>