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Linguistic ethnography: an approach for forced migration and integration research? Examples from Luxembourg

Paper presented at the 2019 IMISCOE Annual Conference: Understanding International Migration in the 21st Century: Conceptual and Methodological Approaches (Malmö, June 26 – 28, 2019)

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Abstract

This paper outlines the core contributions that linguistic ethnography (LE) can make to the study of forced migration and integration. LE is an interpretative approach that combines the principles and methods of ethnography with a close analysis of linguistic data to generate insights into the workings of the social world. It thus offers an alternative to empiricist-positivist approaches and the associated quantitative survey methods. The paper starts with an overview of the literature examining the complex interrelationships between language, migration and integration. It then offers a basic outline of LE and discusses some potential areas for research and application. It concludes with specific examples from a two-year LE research project that addressed the impact of multilingualism on forced migrants' trajectories in Luxembourg.

Keywords

Forced migration, linguistic ethnography, multilingualism, linguistic integration, Luxembourg

Note: the following is an extract from my unpublished thesis¹ with some minor revisions.

1. Introduction: displacement, language and the nation-state

The worldwide number of displaced persons is at an all-time high: at the start of 2018, 68.5 million people were displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, or generalized violence. Some of the most violent and protracted crises in the world, among them the ongoing crises in the Middle East, are forcing hundreds of thousands to flee their homes in search of safety each year, 'leaving millions stranded in exile, and propelling an entire generation of young people across deserts and seas, exposed to terrible risks' (UNHCR 2018: 8). Early 2015 was marked by a series of migrant boat tragedies in the Mediterranean Sea (Trauner 2016); despite such dangers, however, an estimated half a million people² arrived on European soil that year from Syria and Iraq alone (EASO 2016). Political statements and media reports at the time often distinguished 'deserving' refugees from 'undeserving' migrants, while casting both groups as 'outsiders threatening the well-being of an imagined homogenous Europe' (Holmes & Castañeda 2016: 13).

Ever since the beginning of the refugee 'crisis' of 2015-2016, the fear of being overwhelmed by difference (Ibid. 18) has dominated discourses surrounding language and integration. Integration is a highly contested concept, and the various aspects of what constitutes an integrated

¹ Kalocsányiová, E. (2019). *Towards an understanding of the language–integration nexus: a qualitative study of forced migrants' experiences in multilingual Luxembourg* (unpublished thesis), Esch-sur-Alzette: University of Luxembourg.

² In 2015, the EU+ recorded more than 1.3 million applications for international protection (EASO 2016).

modern society is the focus of much debate (Phillimore 2011). In the context of current EU policy-making, integration is seen as a middle ground between ‘coercive conformism to national norms and values, on the one hand, and the threat of separatism, seen as latent in the excessive preservation of non-European cultures, on the other’ (Favell 2014: 65). The rhetoric of integration alludes to it as a relational, two- or even three-way process³ of mutual accommodation (Garcés-Mascareñas & Penninx 2016), but in reality, the onus is on newcomers who are often blamed for their lack of or slow integration (cf. Entzinger 2010). The current preoccupation with integration led the majority of EU countries to place a pointed focus on promoting and stringently testing the linguistic competences of forced migrants in national languages, ‘commonly arguing that linguistic integration cross-cuts and enables all other forms of (employment, educational, and cultural) inclusion’ (Flubacher & Yeung 2016: 600). Analogously, proficiency in national languages has increasingly been invoked as the touchstone of social cohesion, no matter how at odds this view is with the multilingual fabric of Europe today.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, this long-standing perception of European language communities as homogenous or stable ignores their origins, historical trajectories, and transient character (Lønsmann et al. 2017). As Blommaert (2013: 193) states: ‘social transformations go hand in hand with sociolinguistic transformations yielding degrees of complexity hard to imagine previously, and prompting an escalation of new terminology to describe them’. From language crossing (Rampton 1999) to translanguaging (García & Li Wei 2014), polylingualism (Jørgensen et al. 2011), and metrolingual practice (Otsuji & Pennycook 2010), these new perspectives index forms of communication that transcend bounded and territorialised languages. These developments in sociolinguistics facilitate ‘a more open and inclusive position, attending to the diversity of linguistic practices that people use/need to get themselves heard in arenas that affect their well-being’ (Rampton et al. 2018: 71).

Conversely, the conceptualisation of languages as bounded systems linked to bounded communities⁴ figures ever more prominently in integration debates involving (forced)migrants from the Middle East and other conflict-ridden regions. In a number of European countries, heated political debates have taken place over immigration policies in language - related areas (Pochon-Berger & Lenz 2014); these debates have often resulted in the reconfiguration of legislation and bureaucratic machineries ‘by dictating who gets legitimised as linguistically “integrated” and on what grounds’ (Sabaté-Dalmau 2018: 6). Even the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages has faced concerns that it is being turned into an immigration-control instrument (McNamara 2011, Tracy 2017).

Newcomers from outside the European Union (EU) are increasingly subjected to pressures to demonstrate competence in the standard varieties of their host societies’ national languages; as Blommaert (2013:195) argues, ‘this pressure is driven by a monofocal and generative view of “standard” as the unique instrument for integration’. Certainly, language learning for entry into the sites of resettlement is central for individuals in order to ‘re-engage and participate as fully as possible within the political, social, educational, and environmental life of the society’ (Burns & Roberts 2010: 409). It is by no means certain, however, that a single ‘legitimate’ language (cf. Stevenson 2006) will suffice to become integrated into all desired aspects of social life.

Transnational flows of people test the nation-states’ organisational flexibility to encompass dynamic intersections of language communities within their borders (Silverstein 2015) and to regiment the diversity, complexity and unpredictability of accompanying social interplays (Bu-

³ There has been a shift in focus from two actors (immigrants and host communities) to three actors (immigrants, host communities and countries of origin).

⁴ For a detailed criticism of these, see Blommaert and Rampton (2016).

dach & de Saint-Georges 2017). Current practices encourage the management of linguistic diversity via the use of economically powerful lingua francas in their standardised forms, and they also silence, or even sanction, the unorthodox multilingual resources of transnational migrants and their often mixed, low status and transgressive language practices (Sabaté-Dalmau 2018). This attention to standard as a necessity ‘for climbing the social ladder’ – as Jaspers and Madsen (2016: 246; also cf. Jørgensen 2008) argue – ‘paves the way for adoring specific types of multilingualism only, notably those that combine earlier visions of language in a parallel monolingualism consisting of separate European languages’.

Policies of linguistic integration are intertwined with ideas about multiculturalism and language rights; accordingly, the points of criticism formulated against these frameworks are also relevant for our objectives (cf. May 2005, 2015; Stroud & Heug 2004; Rampton et al. 2018). First, current policies aimed at integrating forced migrant populations target elite forms of multilingualism and marginalise people who use (hybrid) non-standard varieties. Second, discourses of integration almost invariably essentialise the languages and groups concerned (cf. May 2005), creating artificial boundaries between ways of speaking that are actually continuous (Rampton et al. 2018). Third, institutional mechanisms are seldom adapted to the fact that individuals ‘participat[e] in a variety of sites in competition for resources distributed along multiple levels of scale, such as the nation, the supranation, the local and the regional’ (Stroud 2010: 200). Population mobility is more often than not left out of the equation. And, finally, present-day debates under-emphasise the specific socio-historical and socio-political processes by which a language becomes accepted as an instrument of integration in the first place (cf. May 2005). I would like to emphasise here that, in order to lead a successful life, it is not sufficient to become integrated in the receiving country’s administrative culture (Blommaert 2013); forced migrants resettling in Europe need to assert themselves as legitimate speakers in a variety of other spaces in both face-to-face and virtual environments.

Because current policies are based on the ‘simple imagery of structuralism’ (Blommaert 2013: 195), relevant language communities and social groupings to which forced migrants need to refer on a daily basis are overlooked. These can be localised in a single neighbourhood, transcend state borders, or comprise social configurations in which transnational varieties and hybrid language practices prevail. In her contribution to the debate, García (2017) proposes to go ‘beyond named languages’ in order to reframe language education for adult migrants. The success of this will hinge on the degrees to which people – researchers, legislators and practitioners – are ‘capable of imagining the levels of complexity that characterise the real social environments in which people [forced migrants] integrate’ (Blommaert 2013: 195).

2. Linguistic ethnography: an approach for addressing the language dimensions of integration?

Linguistic ethnography (henceforth ‘LE’) is best thought of as ‘a site of encounter where a number of established lines of research interact’ (Rampton 2007a: 585); as such, it combines ‘a close analysis of situated language use’ (Rampton et al. 2004: 2) with an ethnographic commitment to ‘probe the interrelationship between language and social life more in depth’ (Tusting & Maybin 2007: 576). It is beyond my scope to provide a detailed history of LE as a field of study (which builds on the foundational work of scholars such as Dell Hymes, Frederick Erickson, John Gumperz, and Erving Goffman) – those interested will find the comprehensive reviews of Copland and Creese (2015) and Snell et al. (2015) most valuable. Instead, I aim to emphasise those aspects of LE theory, methods and practice which can guide research into the language dimensions of integration.

In essence, LE explores how languages are used and what this can tell us about wider social structures, ideologies and constraints (Copland & Creese 2015). Ethnographies allow researchers to ‘see how language practices are connected to the very real conditions of people’s lives, to discover how and why language matters to people in their own terms, and to watch processes unfold over time’ (Heller 2008: 250). LEs typically involve prolonged engagement with the group being studied; extended observation of communicative behaviours and learned/shared patterns of language; immersion in the day-to-day lives of the people; close collaboration; and reciprocity predicated on developing rapport and gaining trust (cf. Creswell 1998) – all of which are tied to studies using ethnographic tools (cf. Green & Bloome 1997).

Let us now turn to the linguistic side of LE, which has been influenced by interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz 1982, 2003) and micro-ethnography (Erickson 1992). As Pérez-Milans (2016) observes, close attention to the minute details of language use allows researchers to be immersed in the moment-to-moment of the recorded events and thus explore the process(es) whereby individuals construct frames of common understanding. Studies conducted in the field of interactional sociolinguistics and related research traditions search for new ways of conceptualising the interdependence of language and social structure, while also showing ‘a strong orientation toward the discovery of the local-uncertain-unpredictable- changeable positioning of [individuals]’ (Pérez-Milans 2016: 85). A related subfield is discourse analysis, which can be fruitfully employed to examine what goes on at sites of language learning (and beyond), what counts as language and as legitimate language use, and how features of talk and interaction influence who gets to learn (Rymes 2016). As I see it, spoken words – no matter how situated or autobiographical – cannot be detached from the larger orders of discourse in which individuals operate. This brings us to narrative inquiry – a productive research tool by which to analyse language ideologies (Miller 2014), discourses of integration (Cederberg 2014), dimensions of border-crossing (De Fina 2003; Warriner 2013), and teacher/learner beliefs (Razfar 2012). For linguistic integration research narratives are useful in two ways:

- i. a narrative sequence can be analysed in terms of the *language ideologies* it conveys: as Razfar (2012: 64) observes, ‘narrative practices are embedded with interests, values, and beliefs in the social and ideological sense [...] narrative events tend to be one of the best loci for making tacit cultural assumptions and norms more explicit.’
- ii. and at the same time, narratives offer *glimpses of a personal world*: ‘stories are used, consciously or not, as a device through which people describe and explain themselves and the circumstances surrounding their existence’ (Denscombe 2010: 291).

Furthermore, narrative analysis as a qualitative approach illuminates the temporal notion of experience (Bell 2002), recognising that one’s understanding of circumstances and events is continually changing. ‘Events are not just variously interpreted, but they are multiply remembered against very different personal and deeply emotional associations, which change through time’ (Kohn 2010: 197).

Through a dual focus on both rigorous linguistic work and elements of broader social practice, LE seeks to produce analytical accounts that respect ‘the uniqueness, deficiency and exuberance of [a] communicative moment’ (Rampton 2007b: 5), while at the same time, document ‘slice[s] of experience’ (Heller 2008: 250) and ‘the fullness and irreducibility of the “lived stuff” (Rampton et al. 2015: 17). At a first glance, this form of research might appear unconventional. Copland and Creese (2015: 52), however, remind us that ‘linguistic ethnography’s strength derives from its support of combining different data collection and analysis processes [...] it is in combining the approaches that robust and nuanced findings emerge’.

3. Areas of research and application

Migration is a profoundly transformative experience – it influences personal identities, perspectives and aspirations (BenEzer & Zetter 2015), and, as will be of most interest in this context, the resources in one’s linguistic repertoire (Blommaert & Backus 2013; Busch 2012, 2017). As argued earlier, research in migration and integration is not well served with a priori notions of ‘language’, ‘native speaker’, and ‘competence’. Instead, sociolinguists –especially in LE – now generally work with the notion of linguistic repertoires.

Forced migrants’ repertoires bear ‘the traces of past times and present times, of lives lived locally and globally’ (Creese et al. 2011: 1206). As Busch (2017: 356) put it, linguistic repertoires reflect ‘the synchronic coexistence of different social spaces in which we participate as speakers’, and anticipate and project ‘the future situations and events we are preparing to face’. Following this, if adult (migrant) learners invest in a language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a new range of symbolic and material resources (Darvin & Norton 2015). However, resources that are valued in one place may be radically devalued in another. As people move across borders, their language(s) become subject to what Blommaert (2010, 2013) calls ‘orders of indexicality’ – i.e. their repertoires are measured against a value system that reflects the norms, ideologies and biases of the given sociocultural context (Darvin & Norton 2015). Yet, one consequence of contemporary (super)diversity is that shared norms can no longer be assumed (Lønsmann et al. 2017). This is precisely why LE research should be taken into account in matters of linguistic integration. To date, linguistic ethnographers have played an important part in debunking essentialising tendencies of languages, dialects, ethnicities and cultures in the economic and social processes of globalisation (Copland & Creese 2015).

Research on adult learners’ trajectories, settlement into and experiences of living and learning in new (pluri)linguistic environments is scarce worldwide (Burns & Roberts 2010). To date, the problem has received scant attention in the research literature, and the body of research that does exist is fragmented and underreported (Beacco et al. 2017). The reasons for this situation are several, relating to the invisibility of the adult immigrant learner both in national educational policy agendas and, hence, in the agendas of academic researchers (Burns & Roberts 2010); to the fragmentation of national and international initiatives; and to the conflation of language learning needs with broader support. Employing an LE approach, the following research areas can fruitfully be addressed:

- How can forced migrants’ existing language resources be validated and used to aid language learning?
- What are the politics of language and integration in settings of complex linguistic diversity? What role do language ideologies play in their creation and/or perception?
- How do policies shape and/or inflect forced migrants’ sociolinguistic trajectories? What types of individual trajectories emerge? What are the lived experiences of forced migrants?

For each these points, I briefly indicate their relevance to research on migration and integration.

3.1 How can forced migrants’ existing language resources be validated and used to aid language learning?

Adult learners are not ‘empty vessels’ – they bring significant linguistic resources and experiences to educational programmes for the newly arrived. The way these learners are positioned in relation to their language expertise underpins successful learning. Classroom experiences can mean as

much a partial loss of linguistic, cultural and social capital as the gaining of such capital (cf. Burns & Roberts 2010). Existing language competences also influence norms of language choice, as shown e.g. by Moore (2017). It is important to note that while language classrooms are not the sole sites of learning, they do offer an important terrain for second language socialisation, especially for asylum-seekers for whom stable interactional opportunities are hardly in sight.

3.2 What are the politics of language and integration in settings of complex linguistic diversity? What role do language ideologies play in their creation and/or perception?

Through an interrogation of ideology one can examine more closely (dis)affiliations to local languages, imagined (linguistic) identities, language choices and the socio-political context of learning the language of the ‘other’. Ideologies also allow an exploration of what counts as legitimate language, who counts as speaker, and how norms come into being in the era of mobility. Importantly, ‘marginal voices are not necessarily counter-hegemonic’ (Cederberg 2014: 48), and individual experiences can be heavily affected by language policies, mobility regimes and societal discourses of language, integration and belonging.

3.3 How do policies shape and/or inflect forced migrants’ sociolinguistic trajectories? What types of individual trajectories emerge? What are the lived experiences of forced migrants?

The twists and turns of language learning, brought about by forced displacement, are best studied and understood at those times when they are actually unfolding. Having the opportunity to observe and talk to people at different moments in time makes it more likely to obtain a more in-depth image of the experiences that migrants are going through (cf. Schapendonk et al. 2018); this provides a strong starting point for attending to the unpredictability of one’s sociolinguistic experience in present-day Europe. Also, interacting with language are issues of citizenship, (im)mobility, social inclusion, and economic and labour market imperatives. Accounts of individual experiences expose the efforts, emotions and constraints inherent in language learning, and elucidate how the development of multilingual repertoires trace, shape and direct the flow of one’s life. LE (combined with a trajectory approach) allows for investigating the temporal unfolding of these processes – an area in need of further research, as argued by Lønsmann et. al. (2017: 265): ‘Whereas snapshots of particular communities and social activities [...] may provide detailed accounts of a relatively stable present, what is often left unexamined is the temporality along which the observed phenomena emerge, and ultimately disappear, or are transmuted into subsequent forms.’ The methodological framework I propose here makes it possible to explore forced migrants’ experiences at various moments in time; in doing so, it goes beyond mere ex-post reconstructions which conceal much of the uncertainty inherent in relocating the centre of one’s life to a multilingual place.

At this point, it is worth looking at what LE can actually contribute to research on migration/integration, and for this, I will refer to my own research from Luxembourg.

4. Forced migrants in Luxembourg: a view from linguistic ethnography

The research reported here is strongly grounded in the Luxembourgish context, which represents an important European focal point for exploring the dynamics of linguistic integration. Because

of its geographical location ‘at the crossroads of Europe, Luxembourg is synonymous with language contact and linguistic diversity’ (Ehrhart & Fehlen 2011: 288). It has often been described as ‘triglossic’ with specific reference to the three languages used in the education system and recognised by the Language Act of 1984 (de Bres 2014; Hoffman 1996; Horner & Weber 2015). According to the provisions of this law, Luxembourgish is the national language, French the language of the law, and Luxembourgish, German and French are all acknowledged as languages of administration.

As a country, Luxembourg supports individual competence in more than one language – plurilingualism – which has been promoted by the Council of Europe since well before the establishment of the European Union (Kingsley 2010). Since the 1970s, Luxembourg’s economic growth has largely been accommodated by immigration⁵ and cross-border worker inflows (Amétépé & Hartmann-Hirsch 2011). This has reshuffled the linguistic-symbolic hierarchies, giving rise to heightened complexity and rapid changes. Today, the country ranks among Europe’s linguistically most diverse regions. Horner (2009: 103) argues that people living and/or working in the Grand-Duchy, ‘are experiencing sociolinguistic changes bound up with global processes in a particularly intense manner’; this is evidenced, among others, by the fluctuations in Luxembourgish language policy since the early 2000s.

Since 2013, Luxembourg has registered around ten thousand applications for international protection⁶. So far, very little attention has been paid to the everyday experiences of these newcomers. Relevant evidence on questions related to their language learning needs comes from only a handful of research studies; these featured language as a minor aspect, used a very small corpus (e.g. Fehlen 2009; Franziskus 2016), or were framed to determine which language is being used most often (e.g. Gilles et al. 2011; Heinz & Fehlen 2016) while disregarding mixed forms, variation and the virtuosity of everyday languaging.

Whilst the Grand Duchy recognises the importance of state-subsidised language training for these newcomers, the ways its institutions conceive of language differ from the linguistic practice on the ground. For instance, no explicit reference is made to languages other than French or Luxembourgish in the Guided Integration Trail (Parcours d’Intégration Accompagné) for beneficiaries of international protection; in addition, the programme merely provides for a first contact with the Luxembourgish language, thus promoting an almost monolingual model of integration. This runs counter to the sociolinguistic realities of Luxembourg, which were once described by Guy Berg as

[...] a Babel of tongues from all the corners of the earth, with many ingredients mixed up and stirred like some exotic dish. And in the midst of all this there is a taste of home cooking: Luxembourgish. A secret language? A code for insiders? A spot of local ethnic colour? A tool for integration?

Ideologies surrounding the Luxembourgish language education of immigrants is one of the topics investigated in my doctoral dissertation. But it is far from being the only one.

I started negotiating research access in the winter of 2016, planning to gather data on language socialisation in temporary homes for asylum-seekers and other displaced persons. Although my initial request for doing fieldwork at reception facilities was denied, I was sent off – as a

⁵ Luxembourg has the highest proportion of foreign-born population in the EU: non-Luxembourgish passport holders account for 47.8 per cent of the total population of 602,005 (as of January 1, 2018; cf. STATEC 2018a); in addition, the country employs about 188,000 cross-border workers from Belgium, France, and Germany (cf. STATEC 2018b).

⁶ In 2015, the Grand Duchy registered one asylum application per 230 inhabitants, which is far more than the EU-28 average (one application per 391 inhabitants).

‘compensation’ – to observe a language course run by volunteers. Roberts (2010: 213) may have been right in suggesting that language and cultural training ‘may be the only way in which [people] are willing to offer their organization as a field site for research’. Difficulties associated with gaining access led me to adopt what Buchanan et al. (1988: 53) refer to as an ‘opportunist approach’ to selecting research participants; a total of five participants were obtained: Ram, Manan, Yazdan, Ahmad and Patrick (pseudonyms). For the next two years, I followed these young adults⁷ through various educational spaces, and other diverse settings of language learning and socialisation. The research sites included language courses in French, English and German, mathematics courses, application and web development training, as well as diverse leisure activities.

After an introductory meeting, at which initial consent was obtained, I conducted narrative interviews with each participant to elicit information about their repertoires, language learning aspirations, and language practices in their new sociocultural milieu. Since then, I have periodically interviewed them using on occasion walking interviews and other mobile methods. Additional evidence was collected throughout the project, including field notes gained through sustained observations, audio recordings of classroom discourse and talk-in-interaction, photographs of classroom practices and participants, and field documents such as teaching materials, written texts, policy statements, certificates, texts from mobile messaging platforms, official correspondence with educational institutions, municipalities and state agencies, and website information. As in all LE research, data was also gathered in less formal, often unplanned and spontaneous ways; Rodgers (2004) calls this participatory approach ‘hanging out’, and endorses it as an ethically desirable technique, indispensable for research conducted in the chaotic worlds that forced migrants inhabit.

During the first stage of the study, I examined structured language learning tasks and broader social interactions, showing that a multilingual pedagogical orientation creates ‘learning spaces that help forced migrants to see the local languages as new functional resources in their growing repertoires’ (Kalocsányiová 2017: 489). This insight is of special importance in contexts of forced migration, where adult learners need to become users of the languages they are learning from the first day onward. In the study, particular focus was placed on how processes of translation, translanguaging, and receptive multilingualism provide opportunities for language development, and meaning making, in a language course attended mostly by Syrian and Iraqi applicants for international protection. It was precisely the deployment of these multilingual strategies that allowed the research participants to engage with the multilingual social world of Luxembourg.

The second part of the study moved towards a more relational lens, by drawing attention to and problematising hegemonic ideologies that inform linguistic integration (Kalocsányiová 2018). For this part, a second (auxiliary) pool of participants was recruited from among the representatives of the main institutions involved in integration processes and the teachers who gave courses to the forced migrants participating in the project. The interviews conducted with these participants were intended to reveal their assumptions about forced migrants’ language learning needs in Luxembourg (and beyond), along with the linguistic integration routes they considered plausible and/or advisable. This, combined with the longitudinal LE data collected from and with the main participants, allowed for scrutinising the instrumental and integrative dimensions⁸ of language, as articulated and perceived by the participants.

⁷ Sustained efforts were made to involve women in the project; however, all attempts in this direction proved unsuccessful. A variety of factors contributed to this disparity: e.g. the distribution of first-time asylum applicants by sex shows that far more men than women were seeking asylum between mid-2015 and early 2016 (Shreeves 2016); similarly, women often missed out on language training and other adult learning courses, where recruitment took place, due to childcare needs and cultural expectations.

⁸ For Ager (2001), instrumental motives assume that individuals are interested in accumulating new language resources to satisfy specific goals, usually economic targets, while the integrative dimension is based on the desire of individuals to associate themselves with [imagined] target communities.

In most instances, the research participants adopted ideologies in which language (and more specifically the French language) was positioned primarily as a resource for economic advancement; this, in its turn was ‘construed as a prerequisite for integration which, however, was often equated with mere survival in the new sociolinguistic milieu’ (Ibid. 13). The participants’ language learning aspirations were aligned with the dominant language hierarchies, signalling a clear wish to fit into the mould of a state-endorsed multilingual ideal. Conversely, as the more ethnographically grounded data revealed, the preferred medium of communication of the people in the main participants’ social circles seldom included the languages of Luxembourg’s traditional triglossia. Interestingly, the national-symbolic importance of Luxembourgish – a language that used to be considered as a dialect of German and has only recently been promoted to the level of ‘national language of Luxembourgers’ (as stated in the Language Act of 1984) – along with its integrative potential was embraced by most research participants, although to varying extents: mastery of the national language was at times foregrounded as an absolute necessity for social participation, while at other times a bit of Luxembourgish was considered sufficient proof of one’s commitment to integration. Finally yet importantly, language traits played a crucial role in how forced migrants imagined, constructed and located themselves and other members of the local population within the native–immigrant continuum.

The third part of the study (Kalocsányiová, in press) used a trajectory approach to investigate how experiences of linguistic inequality and/or success are imprinted on forced migrants’ repertoires and shape their understanding of successful integration. The focus was on two participants who shared similar, multi-layered linguistic repertoires but reported disparate experiences. For one of them, ‘the once unsettling environment evolved into a space of self-fulfilment’ as his expanding multilingualism translated into enhanced opportunities for economic advancement and social participation (Ibid., 230). By contrast, the second participant’s early accounts, collected shortly after re-settlement, depicted Luxembourg’s multilingualism in almost utopian terms: as ‘a sign and means of cultural reconciliation, and a chance to reinvent himself as a multilingual speaker’ (Ibid., 223). Subsequent difficulties in transitioning to the workplace and higher education dampened much of this initial excitement, and the participant’s enthusiasm for multilingualism gradually waned: ‘despite his extensive language learning efforts, his aspirations to progress contrasted sharply with his actual experience of moving downward’ (Ibid., 230).

Experiences of moving downward push forced migrants to be active across borders and/or even re-migrate within Europe. Their legal status, however, places considerable restrictions on these aspirations. In order to become mobile again, forced migrants in Luxembourg ‘will have to take on the challenge of demonstrating their competence in the Luxembourgish language [...] a major criterion for naturalisation and the contingent right to free movement’ (Kalocsányiová 2018: 13). Accordingly, one of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is the immobilising effect of languages, in terms of both spatial and social mobility.

5. Limitations

I have previously given what might be seen as a very positive account of this research approach. However, LE has attracted some critical comments relating to its i) eclecticism (Rampton et al. 2015), ii) mingling of realism and constructionism (Hammersley 2007), iii) tensions between participants’ and analysts’ perspectives, and iv) the impact of researchers’ political commitments (Tusting & Maybin 2007). It is the last two point that are of particular

concern here, and I will address them together. According to Bell (2002: 210), ‘when researchers take people’s stories and place them into a larger narrative, they are imposing meaning on participants’ lived experience’. Ethical research demanded that I share ongoing analysis/reflections with the research participants, but they could never be fully free of my interpretation of their lives and actions (cf. Bell 2002). On the other hand, if a research study like mine becomes limited to description alone, it ‘leaves its constructs open to interpretation and misuse’ in contexts that were not necessarily intended (Andrews 2013: 10). I believe that LE provides opportunities to understand the complex mechanisms of forced migrants’ integration, but it needs to be done in a manner that does not ‘reinforc[e] myths of deviance that we should be seeking to dispel’ (Ibid. 10). As Düvell et al. (2009: 229) put it, ‘our professional responsibilities lie in researching irregular migration and informing society about the phenomenon in a manner that does not contribute to discrimination against these groups but, instead, improves understanding’.

Exchanging stories of lived experience also necessitates a ‘larger story of friendship’ (Bell 2002: 210); this profound personal involvement combined with the time required for this type of research makes it unsuitable for large numbers of participants. Perhaps the most commonly identified limitation associated with LE research is the perceived inability to generalise study findings. However, social scientists such as Flyvberg (2006), Miles (2015), and Thomas (2011) have disputed the role that generalisability plays in research, suggesting that it is the ‘focus on the *particular*, on *examples* and *experiences* that enable understandings of accounts of practice [emphasis added]’ (Miles 2015: 311). According to de Saint-Georges (2018: 98), generalisations strip ‘phenomena of their inherent contradictions and complexity’ and fail ‘to create social representations that hold enough ambiguity and tension to be discussed or debated’ – that is, the very aims of LE research.

6. Conclusions

This paper has discussed the ways in which LE contributes to the study of language and forced migration/integration. LE research closes in on real-life situations and tests views directly in relation to the researched phenomena as they unfold in everyday life (cf. Flyvbjerg 2006). It generates rich, context-dependent evidence, and is thus an effective approach for documenting (forced) migrants’ language learning trajectories across time and societal influences. It is also valuable for theory-building, and can help cut a path towards innovation, by uncovering resources and barriers that were invisible before, as well as by raising new questions on topics that would normally be taken for granted (cf. de Saint-Georges 2018). Hence, it provides a constructive alternative to quantitative and empiricist-positivist approaches which are traditionally more strongly represented in migration research.

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