

# Facing Methodological Nationalism

## The significance of multilingualism in qualitative interviews

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### Introduction

Since the end of the last century, the United Nations, through its specialized institution UNESCO, has been addressing the issue of ensuring sustainable development on a political, economic, ecological and social level. In this context, Global Citizenship Education (hereafter abbreviated to »GCED«) is attributed significant relevance. It is linked to the normative ambition of contributing to world peace, human rights and the protection of the planet through education (cf. UNESCO 2014: 9). However, GCED is often the subject of controversial discussions<sup>1</sup>, especially when it comes to the topic of the nation-state: its positioning in the field of tension between, on the one hand, sticking to the concept of nation-states and, on the other hand, the antiquated status as well as the overcoming of nation-states is a much-discussed topic in society, academia and politics (see, for example, Benhabib 2024: 13f.). The brochure published by the Austrian UNESCO Commission by Werner Wintersteiner and colleagues (2022: 4), for example, advocates a paradigm shift: »The perspective is no longer the nation-state, but a broadly networked, globalized and glocalised world society.« [Translated by M.A. & C.B.] Given that UNESCO operates as an association of nation-states and also calls on states to act on the issue of sustainable

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1 Criticism of GCED includes its postcolonial evaluation as a Western-influenced project (cf. Schipling 2020: 101), as a neoliberal economic concept (cf. Starkey 2023: 71) and as neglectful of ecological aspects (cf. Misiaszek 2023: 209).

development (cf. Starkey 2023: 70), this desire for a perspective detached from nation-states seems challenging.

The discussion about the role of the nation-state can also be found in social science research, where so-called »methodological nationalism« (Wimmer/Glick Schiller 2002; Beck 2002) has been problematized for several decades. This criticism is also addressed in research on GCED (cf. Starkey 2023: 71; Kefßler/Szakács-Behling 2020: 184). With Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002), methodological nationalism concerns several aspects: Firstly, the socially constructed nature of the nation-state and the interwoven nature of social science epistemes and programs in nation-states (formation) are ignored; secondly, the nation-state is naturalized as a social and political category of analysis; and thirdly, research interests are developed, conducted and analyzed on the basis of territorial boundaries without questioning the justification of this approach in terms of its national framework (cf. Wimmer/Glick Schiller 2002: 307; Köngeter 2009: 342f.; see also Beck/Grande 2010). Attempts have been made from many sides to question social science research with regard to its methodological nationalism and to develop alternative methodologies. One widely discussed response to the criticism of methodological nationalism is a transnational research perspective (cf. Schippling 2020; Faist 2012). However, transnationality is also the focus of critical debate, for example due to the danger of underestimating the role of the nation-state (cf. Kefßler/Szakács-Behling 2020: 184). Catharina Kefßler and Simona Szakács-Behling therefore recommend a reflexive research approach that includes collaborative and multi-local comparative designs (ibid.: 187).

In the following article, we would like to expand the debate on answers to the criticism of methodological nationalism by adding an aspect that we consider to be central: The aspect of multilingualism. According to Anderson (1983), language is one of the central means by which nation-state formation has taken place and which guarantees or is intended to guarantee the national self-image of *imagined communities* in the long term (see also Schneider 2018: 2f.). The supposedly natural correspondence between (national) language(s), territory and nation is often assumed without question (cf. Auer 2004: 150; Schneider 2018: 4). The role of language and multilingualism in particular is increasingly being discussed, partly due to the reality of migration society in today's modern nation-states. Based on our experiences in a research project in Hiroshima, Japan, in this article we discuss the extent to which multilingual research with interpreters can counter methodological nationalism.

## Reflections on a multilingual research project

In the following, we report on a multilingual and inter-/transnational research project that we carried out together with Lothar Wigger (TU Dortmund) from 2022 to 2024<sup>2</sup>. The aim of this article is to discuss and reflect on the role of multilingualism in this research process. The focus of our research was a project that has been carried out by the Peace Memorial Museum in Hiroshima together with Motomachi Senior High School in Hiroshima, Japan, since 2007<sup>3</sup>. In the project, high school students transform the memories of contemporary witnesses of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima into paintings. We conducted qualitative guideline-based interviews with former participants of the project, both on site in Japan and online. The guiding questions were what experiences the participants had made during the project, how they assessed the project in retrospect and what peace education activities they continued to pursue after the end of the project. We thus researched a project that is embedded in the Japanese context on the one hand, but can also be transferred to the situation in Germany, where questions about the passing on of memories of disasters are also very present and socially relevant.

Multilingualism played a central role in our research when accessing the field, conducting the qualitative interviews, transcribing and analyzing the data. Based on these phases, we will now discuss the significance of multilingualism<sup>4</sup>.

### Access to the field

As the researchers did not have sufficient knowledge of Japanese, as the interviewees could not be expected to speak German or English and as the par-

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2 The research project was carried out as part of a university cooperation between TU Dortmund University, Kyoto University and Tokyo University. Further details on the design, implementation and results of this research project can be found in our publications in Wigger/Bossong/Aydogan 2024; Wigger/Bossong/Aydogan (expected to be published in 2026).

3 Further information on the project can be found in the following texts: Wigger/Yamana 2024; Yamana 2019.

4 When reflecting on the role of multilingualism in our research process, we found the work of Clara Holzinger, Anna-Lena Draxl and Cintia Hirschvogel – including their podcast contribution in the »Methoden:Koffer« podcast from 16.11.2024 – inspiring and supportive.

ticipants needed to be able to express themselves as freely as possible in the interviews, Japanese interpreters were used. Through a university contact, two people were selected as interpreters, a master's student and a doctoral student, who had a very high level of English and were familiar with scientific research. They had no previous experience in professional interpreting. Prior to the interviews, a joint meeting was held with all the researchers and the two interpreters to get to know each other and to discuss in detail the aims of the research, the interview guidelines and important aspects of the conduction of the interviews.

Our gatekeepers (cf. Breidenstein et al. 2020: 62) were the art teacher who is the head of the project and Jun Yamana (University of Tokyo), who has been providing academic support for the project for years. Contact with the former participants of the school project was established in Japanese by the art teacher and head of the project. After we had received the contact details of interested former participants from the teacher, we contacted them in English. For the interviews, we gave the choice between a Japanese-English interview with an interpreter and an English-language interview without an interpreter. All twelve former students who responded to our email wanted an interview in Japanese with the help of an interpreter. In consultation with the two interpreters, appointments for the interviews were then made by email and the privacy policy (in English) was sent.

## Conducting the interviews

A total of twelve qualitative interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted online by three people (interviewer<sup>5</sup>, interpreter and former student) via the Zoom platform. The interviewer asked the interview questions in English. The interpreter translated these into Japanese – if necessary after clarifying brief follow-up questions. The interviewee answered in Japanese. As soon as they paused, the interpreter reformulated what they had said in English. The interviewee then either continued speaking or the interviewer asked another question, which was then interpreted again.

Thanks to the interpreters, the interviews were conducted successfully despite the researchers' lack of knowledge of Japanese. However, the situation was unusual for us, as we had no previous experience of working with interpreters. One aspect was that basic tasks could not be carried out by the re-

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5 The interviews were conducted by Meryem Aydoğan and Caroline Bossong.

searcher. When conducting interviews, the beginning of the conversation is usually used to establish a relationship, which reduces uncertainty and creates a familiar atmosphere. In our interview situations, however, the interviewer was unable to carry out this interpersonal work. She was dependent on the interpreter, who took on this task to a varying degree. During the interviews, the interviewer typically shows verbal and non-verbal signals of understanding and interest towards the interviewee. They direct their gaze towards the interviewee and supports the flow of conversation through their body posture, approving sounds such as »Mhm« or paraphrasing. However, this form of interaction was severely limited by the interviewer's lack of language skills, the time delay in interpreting and the online setting. Interest and understanding could therefore only be signaled through gestures, such as nodding, or facial expressions, such as a smile.

At the same time, the presence of the interpreters resulted in a closer interview relationship between interviewee and interpreter. There was an emotional and temporal ›buffer‹ between interviewer and interviewee. In almost all interviews, we had the impression that the interviewees felt comfortable. The interpreters confirmed this at the end of the interviews. It is possible that the close contact between interviewee and interpreter made the experience of foreign interest seem less unfamiliar and intimidating: The person conducting the research, who can also be perceived as an examiner and critic, is further away; there is no direct communication, which creates a kind of protected space. For the interviewer, however, this closer relationship between interviewee and interpreter was something that could cause irritation and uncertainty. A feeling of being unable to act or of being irrelevant was evident in some interviews. It was necessary for the interviewer to endure these feelings and continue to act confidently in her role<sup>6</sup>. There was also a time buffer: the short pauses between the interviewer's and interviewee's speeches could be used as an opportunity to reflect. However there was always a risk of losing concentration.

Challenges arose in the interviews in particular due to the fact that the interpreters had no professional training in interpreting. As a result, the interpreting took a very long time, there were long pauses, some phrases were not interpreted or the meaning was slightly shifted.

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6 Holzinger and Draxl (2024: 284) point out that the presence of interpreters can also be perceived as a relief, as the responsibility is spread over several people and the interviewer has time for other tasks.

In addition to the multilingualism, there has been another aspect that influenced the implementation of the qualitative interviews: they were conducted online via the Zoom platform. The setting led to increased distance between all participants. There was also a risk of disconnections, which occurred at times in individual interviews and affected the flow of the conversation. The beginning of the interview, which is normally used for informal conversations, was also influenced by this. It was less possible for the interviewer to consciously create a friendly and familiar atmosphere – regardless of language skills. On the other hand, the online setting made the interviews possible in the first place, as the great geographical distance did not have to be overcome. It also had the advantage that physical distance can also create a sense of security: one can stay in their familiar physical environment. And it enabled all participants to take notes in between, to keep an eye on the time as an interviewer or to look up vocabulary discreetly as an interpreter.

The interviews were followed by brief discussions between the interviewer and interpreter to discuss their impressions of the interview. Both the interviewers and the interpreters wrote post-scripts of all interviews. The transcription of the English-language passages of the interviews was carried out by the two interviewers, while the interpreters transcribed the Japanese sections.

## Data analysis

Due to the physical distance, the interpreters were no longer involved in the analysis of the data. The qualitative content analysis was carried out jointly by the three researchers<sup>7</sup>. First, the English parts were analyzed and hypotheses about the meaning were developed. In order to eliminate translation difficulties in the interview situation and between the languages, we referred to the original Japanese passages for relevant parts. These were translated into German with the help of DeepL and the hypotheses were corrected accordingly. At the end of the interview process, an exchange took place with a German-speaking Japanese who compared our interpretations with the original Japanese passages and discussed the meaning of what had been said with us.

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7 Further information on the interpretation process and the results can be found in Wigger/Bossong/Aydogan 2024.

## Summarizing considerations

A central condition for the success of our research project was undoubtedly the meeting of young, educated women during the interviews. This created a relaxed atmosphere, encouraged the participants to express themselves freely and enabled us to collect high-quality data. Working with interpreters made it possible to carry out the research project despite a lack of language skills. It had a positive effect on the research, as the feedback during the research process allowed for valuable moments of mutual learning. Through constructive criticism and encouraging praise, beneficial behaviors could be both adapted and maintained. Nevertheless, it is clear that the exchange as a central condition of cooperation between interviewer and interpreter must be carefully planned and thought through. Experience with professional interpreting and qualitative interviews must also be taken into account when recruiting interpreters. Since we evaluated the interview transcripts using the qualitative content analysis method (Mayring), individual passages that were translated ›incorrectly‹ were less significant than would have been the case with other, reconstructive methods (cf. Holzinger/Draxl 2024: 285).

The retrospective observation also shows that the presence of an interpreter makes the interview less predictable and less plannable for the interviewer than a monolingual interview without an interpreter. One has to adapt more quickly and flexibly to the unfamiliar situation and one has to cope with the distance to the interviewee. The presence of an interpreter changes the research process, this cannot be denied. However, a systematic joint exchange during the interpretation phase can also be fruitful for the research. The involvement of interpreters must be planned well in advance; the additional time and costs must be taken into account when planning.

## Methodological nationalism and multilingualism in qualitative interviews

The examination of our research project points out that multilingual research approaches offer many advantages. Above all, it becomes clear that in some contexts, research can only be realized through multilingualism. In our case, for example, all interviewees took advantage of the opportunity to participate in the interview with the support of an interpreter. Whether the interviews would have taken place in English without this offer remains unclear. Multilin-

gualism is a central approach for research on GCED, trans- and international comparative research perspectives and for studies in migration society contexts. When it comes to constellations in which the participants speak different first languages, English is often used as the *lingua franca* (cf. Lüdi 2020) or the respective national language. However, this means that central perspectives are not made visible, but rather excluded. In addition, it may not be possible to fully grasp the complexity of an object of investigation, as speaking in the first language allows for greater depth of content than communicating in second or third languages (cf. Holzinger/Draxl 2024). In addition, different languages go hand in hand with different approaches to the world (cf. Gümüşay 2020), that can therefore be taken into account.

Furthermore, this practice leads to the unreflected reproduction and naturalization of the national language – and thus also the nation-state – in research: This practice promotes methodological nationalism. The standardization and nationalization of language (cf. Anderson 1983; Adick 2014: 227) as well as the marginalization of ›other‹ languages (cf. Gogolin 2008) leads to the exclusion of the diversity of languages (as well as socio- and dialects) and to a container conception of language (cf. Schneider 2018: 2). Research shows that languages do not adhere to national borders (cf. Ritz 2009). Languages are fluid, change and can, in principle, be learned freely. By integrating different languages and corresponding approaches to the world into the research process, a more comprehensive understanding of complex social dynamics can be achieved. Experiencing the complexity of contemporary societies through a multilingual research orientation can give rise to a deconstruction of the idea of the territorially defined nation-state. Multilingual research can also be useful for breaking through national (and therefore linguistic) boundaries and making the diversity of languages visible.

Learning foreign languages as a researcher or the use of interpreters in the research process can be helpful here. Multilingual interviews cause the routine and self-evident research practice to be irritated. Unconscious convictions and epistemic presuppositions (which may be related to methodological nationalism) can become reflexively accessible through the uncertainty that arises from this unfamiliar situation. The exchange on translation processes (cf. Lit-tig/Pöchhacker 2014) simultaneously leads to a more conscious reflection of subtle linguistic and thus semantic differences and a deeper understanding of the meaning of language in its respective social context. Processes of Global Citizenship Education are thus not only researched, but also experienced by the researchers themselves.

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