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Interactive Comment

Interactive comment on "Interview and translation strategies: coping with multilingual settings and data" *by* B. Filep

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I would like to thank the two referees, Dr. Rhys Jones and Prof. Matthew Hannah, for their laudatory, constructive and helpful, critical, and challenging comments on my paper "Interview and translation strategies: Coping with multilingual settings and data". I will respond to the two referees' comments separately and refer to the major points they raised.

Since R. Jones considers the structure of the paper in some parts to be insufficient, I will revise mainly sections 2, 3.1 and 3.2. In the latter section, I will more clearly point out the significance of the different examples in the light of the translation issue at hand. I might delete one or the other example as they mostly show "subtle variations on a theme" (C12, line 13), but develop the example on lines 10-14, page 37, further.

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Discussion Paper

In section 2, it is no problem to give more but still concise information on the research area (the Carpathian Basin). I will include a map (physical geographic map of the Carpathian Basin with current state borders), if this is possible and welcomed by the editors. I could also provide an ethnic map of the area.

In addition, I can give more background on the “focus of the research” (C10, line 24), the interview partners, “the medium of the interviews” (C11, line 26) and “the languages interviews were conducted with” (C11, line 4). This might help to understand my argument more readily. A table for the interviews as suggested by the referee would make sense with a few interviews; however, since my interview data consists of approximately 150 interviews in five languages (German, Hungarian, English, French and Italian), it might be sufficient to mention the languages used in different regional contexts as well as to discuss the few situations in which I had an interpreter. I initially wanted to point out specific problems in multilingual settings and of multilingual data; however, if more personal experience is desired, I can include it. Here I am referring to line 5, C11: “The author could also mention how he or she acted when faced with some of the situations/challenges encountered in this section (e.g. which term/phrase to use)” and “major point” 6), C12: “Illustrate how he or she acted to solve/lessen the impacts of such problems or avoid conflicts during the course of the fieldwork”. In this regard, I would like to retain the discussion starting on line 20, page 32 and finishing on page 33, because this is based on personal experience.

If I understand the comment correctly, my paper lacks “engagement with more theoretical linguistic scholarship” (C9, last line). Further on, the referee acknowledges that the focus is “more practical-methodological than theoretical” (C10, lines 11-12). Since my practical experience is quite rich, in my opinion, it is more interesting to share this experience than to engage mainly theoretically with the issue of translation. Already in the title (“coping with”), I indicate a more practically oriented article. Since *Social Geography* is clearly a scientific journal for human geography, I wanted to include examples of classical geography (geographical names) that matter in the context of multilingual

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research, and at the same time point out their (geo)-political significance.

As for the more detailed points:

1) The fact that the majority language is taught to minority students as if it was their mother tongue (and not as a foreign language) leads to the problem that many of them do not learn that language properly. As a consequence, they have, for instance, poorer opportunities on the job market. It also harms the inter-ethnic/linguistic relations because minority students are perceived as second class citizens who do not speak the language of the country well (in these countries, there is only one official language, the language of the majority). This is not Switzerland! It is also true that some do not want to learn the language; however, the percentage of people who protest for political reasons is low and decreasing.

2) I explain on pages 34-35 why I think it is better to conduct an interview in a language that is neither the interviewer's nor the interviewee's mother tongue rather than to use an interpreter.

3) I can definitely include Brubaker's thoughts regarding the relationship between language and culture and include "Ethnicity without Groups" in my references.

4) The referee points to the issue of Latin as the official language that avoided the domination of a nationality. This is a very complex question. At the core of the discussion lays the fact that "nation" was defined differently. In Transylvania, for instance, as a part of the Hungarian Kingdom, the three "nations" (defined as those disposing of noble privileges) were the Hungarian nobles; the Saxons, who were "ethnic" Germans or German-speakers; and the Szekler (Hungarian-speakers). The Hungarian nobles were not defined "ethno-linguistically", that is to say, an "ethnic" Vlach – today Romanian – or Serb could also be a Hungarian noble, even though his mother tongue Serbian, for instance. Their language of communication was Latin; with it, no one group dominated either linguistically or 'ethno-politically'. The vast majority of the rest of the population were bondsmen, regardless of their "ethnicity"; they could not be part of the Hungarian

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nation ("nemzet", etymology: "nemes" = noble) since they did not dispose of noble privileges. The language domination issue appeared with the Habsburg rule, when Joseph II temporarily introduced German as the official language. Later, in the second half of the 19th century, within the Hungarian Kingdom, nationalizing policies were applied, official communication was shifted to Hungarian and at schools, Hungarian language classes and teaching were introduced, also for "ethnic" Slovaks, Romanians, Croats or Serbs.

5) The technical corrections will be considered.

With regard to M. Hannah's comments, I would like to reiterate my comment that my approach was oriented more practically and methodologically than theoretically from the very beginning. Also, I think I have clearly called attention to the issues (and sensitivities) regarding language according to the latest trends in social sciences. The way I present and deal with the examples focuses on the deconstruction of the meaning of certain geographical names and expressions in order to show the sensitivities of language, the difficulties for research in multilingual settings and with multilingual data as well as the strategies or "ways out" of certain dilemmas. However, I can agree with the criticism of the referee regarding my terminology on some points: "The paper expresses a wish to 'avoid' or 'prevent' 'misunderstandings'" (C16, line 27) and the "terminology seems to point to a regulative ideal of transparency and undistorted communication" (C16, line 28). While I agree that the terminology is not quite appropriate here and will definitely change it, I would like to clarify that it was not the aim of my argument to assume "undistorted communication" or "'objective' knowledge". What I wanted to indicate is that it should be a research approach (and/or strategy) to "avoid" or to "prevent" conflictual situations which might damage the outcome of the research. As I tried to show with different examples, it is clearly an advantage to be familiar with certain local terminologies and discourses in order to avoid potentially conflictual interview situations, and also to "ensure" that both interviewer and interviewee "understand" what the other is talking about (see example on page 36: "Romanian country" or page

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37: "forest"). I do not object to the mentioned concepts of "warranted assertability", "intersubjectivity" or "conventional models of truth"; what I tried to demonstrate is that in situations/discussions of politically hot issues and using politically critical expressions (see example on page 36, "Felvidék") there is only little space for communication that "in some sense still 'works' without relying upon assumptions of undistorted communication or perfect understanding" (C17, line 6). This is a feature of multilingual (especially multinational/-ethnic) regions as it is the Carpathian Basin, where historic animosities persist despite EU integration. As S. Husseini has shown in her paper in this SGD special issue on page 151 ("Signifikanten, die multiple Konzepte umfassen"), communication and translation is even more complicated in the Arab context, due to the "grosse Bedeutungsspielraum von Signifikanten in der arabischen Schriftsprache".

I agree with the referee that often "problems arising in multilingual translation settings [are] (...) the very same problems confronting almost any research in the human sciences that relies (as it must) on notions of communication" (C17, lines 8-11). Regardless of the context, we are confronted with certain problems, when we do not know the terminology – where there is a lack of "agreement" on sets of meanings, so to say. But my question to Crane et al. (in this special issue) would be how these problems are "more intense or explicit". As several of my examples demonstrate, there are situations in multilingual settings in which problems clearly arise due to translation problems in a narrower sense.

I am grateful for and can follow the referee's comment regarding the "requirement" or expectation of high linguistic flexibility and cultural competence or the question as to why a single researcher has to be multilingual. However, I do not agree with the assumption that my standpoint is "oddly anachronistic" (C17, line 15). I agree that by working together in research teams linguistic shortcomings of single researchers can be overcome. It is one way to ensure "sufficiently wide linguistic competence" (C17, line 21). Based on my experience in an EU 6^{th} FP project, I realize that without the Greek and Turkish language skills and cultural knowledge of our partners in Cyprus, for

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instance, the access to some information would have been very limited. Nevertheless, I insist on my point that multilingualism is necessary; I myself grew up bilingual and I have experienced very closely what it means to think and speak in two completely different languages, cultures or mentalities (Swiss-German and Hungarian). If we want to understand certain local/regional phenomena and discourses, it is sometimes not enough to “send” our local research partners we sometimes barely know to conduct research “for us”. We cannot always rely on their version and on their researching skills and traditions. These differ sometimes so greatly that our own research goals cannot be achieved, because local research partners have such different approaches; our partners are in the same situation in reverse. Our and their opportunities of intervention are quite limited, especially with regard to conducting interviews and translating them. Also, as I have shown in my paper on page 33, the positioning of the researcher (e.g. as “insider” or “outsider”) is sometimes very crucial in interviews and might influence the outcome of the research. Do we get the same information as our local research partners? Both being either an “outsider” or an “insider” can have its advantages and disadvantages. It sounds to me rather anachronistic not to be multilingual in a globalized world, even if English has become the *lingua franca* in most parts of the globe (see U. Best in this issue regarding the Anglophone hegemony in science). In addition, there is a wide range of literature in local languages that is very important to consider for writing about specific contexts. Depending on the research topic, it is even indispensable to include this literature. As I have attempted to indicate throughout my paper, it is especially socio-political discourses that cannot be covered by monolingual persons. Besides the fact that we will understand people and their concerns better if they share their views with us in their mother tongue, it is another fact that many people still do not speak a single foreign language. Do we want to exclude those people from our research? Further, at least in my research area, not all the “local” researchers speak English or another foreign language; how do we approach them if we are monolingual? In this regard, I would like to draw the attention to the language policy of the Council of Europe which is primarily concerned with the promotion of “plurilingualism” in Europe due to different reasons (see Recommendation No. R. (98) 6 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States Concerning Modern Languages, adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 17 March 1998). In the framework of this policy, for instance, the European Language Portfolio was introduced.

Interactive comment on Soc. Geogr. Discuss., 5, 25, 2009.

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