The impostor syndrome: language barriers in organizational ethnography

Abstract

Purpose – The use of organizational ethnography has grown significantly during the past decades. While language is an important component of ethnographic research, the challenges associated with language barriers are rarely discussed in the literature. The purpose of this paper is to open up a discussion on language barriers in organizational ethnography.

Design/methodology/approach – The author draws on her experience as a PhD student doing an organizational ethnography of an emergency department in a country where she initially did not speak the local language.

Findings – The paper examines the author's research process, from access negotiation to presentation of findings, illustrating the language barriers encountered doing an ethnography in parallel to learning the local language in Sweden.

Research limitations/implications – This paper calls for awareness of the influence of the ethnographer's language skills and shows the importance of discussing this in relation to how we teach and learn ethnography, research practice, and diversity in academia.

Originality/value – The paper makes three contributions to organizational ethnography. First, it contributes to the insider/outsider debate by nuancing the ethnographer's experience. Second, it answers calls for transparency by presenting a personal ethnographic account. Third, it contributes to developing the methodology by offering tips to deal with language barriers in doing ethnography abroad.

Keywords: ethnography abroad, fieldwork, language barrier, outsider, foreign, cross-language research

Article classification: Research paper

Introduction

Ethnography is being increasingly used in organization and management studies (Brannan, Rowe and Worthington, 2012; Rouleau, de Rond and Musca, 2014). In this growing body of literature, a long-standing debate regards the dichotomy between "at-home" ethnography and ethnography "abroad" (Albu and Costas, 2018). The former is defined as "a study and a text in which the researcher-author describes a cultural setting to which s/he has a 'natural access' and in which s/he is an active participant, more or less on equal terms with other participants" (Alvesson, 2009, p. 159). Ethnography abroad, instead, refers to the study of organizations that one is not familiar with (Albu and Costas, 2018). While many scholars have argued for the benefits of at-home ethnography, others have problematized assumptions such as that natural access is easier for insiders because of the common culture (Delucchi, 2018). Further, ethnography abroad can counteract the challenges associated with being too familiar with the studied setting, as being a stranger enables the ethnographer to identify and scrutinize issues that cannot be seen by insiders (Fine and Hallett, 2014).

The definitional difference between at-home ethnography and ethnography abroad has mainly been attributed to the ethnographer's position in the studied organization. As such, the ethnographer is considered an insider when doing at-home ethnography and an outsider when doing ethnography abroad. While the construction of the self as opposed to others has long been challenged in anthropology (Abu-Lughod, 1991), the insider/outsider dichotomy has only recently been questioned by organizational researchers who experienced alternations between insider and outsider positions while doing ethnographies in their home countries (e.g. Delucchi, 2018; McAllum, 2018). Some have suggested taking "at home" and "abroad" as poles of a continuum to provide a more accurate picture of the ethnographer's experience in the field, as one oscillates between the two (Caronia, 2018; see also Gosovic, 2018). Organization scholars have extensively discussed at-home ethnography from insider and outsider viewpoints. Yet, there is a surprising lack of discussion about the challenges associated with the ethnographer's position, and potential shifts, when doing ethnography abroad.

In this paper, I take the term "abroad" broadly to include ethnography in a foreign country, culture and/or language. This definition therefore includes ethnographic research in both "foreign" organizations, i.e. places where we do not "belong" (Albu and Costas, 2018) such as the emergency department I studied during my PhD, and "at-home" organizations, i.e. organizations where we may be "active participants" (Alvesson, 2009) such as one's university, albeit foreign in terms of location, culture and/or language (see Tienari, 2019). Being a stranger in the field has its downsides and "leads the ethnographer to constantly experience the difficulty of filling the gap between the said and the unsaid, grasping the obliqueness of communication, [and] understanding the intended behind the stated" (Caronia, 2018, p. 129). Not being attuned to local cues, missing out on cultural signs and feeling unable to relate to research participants in any significant manner may lead to feelings of impostorism, also influencing the research process. The key "is to moderate one's ignorance […] and learn to be a credible actor" (Fine and Hallett, 2014, p. 190). However, the literature provides little insight into how to do the latter. In particular, organizational ethnographies rarely discuss the language challenges encountered throughout the research process (cf. Gibb and Danero Iglesias, 2017). How do ethnographers deal with not speaking the same language as their research participants?

The purpose of this paper is to open up a discussion on language barriers in organizational ethnography. The value of considering personal experiences as data has long been acknowledged (Van Maanen, 1979a) and scholars have called for discussions on the ethnographer's lived experience (Yanow, 2012; Anteby, 2013). A few ethnographers have started to disclose emotions, identity work, and other challenges experienced in doing fieldwork (Warden, 2013; Järventie-Thesleff *et al.*, 2016; Delucchi, 2018; Vincett, 2018). This paper joins calls for less sanitized, and more humanized, accounts (Warden, 2013) by discussing another aspect that is largely silenced in ethnographic texts. The paper calls for awareness of the consequences that the ethnographer's language skills may have on the research process and shows the importance of discussing this before going to the field and in academia at large. Further, in order to advance the methodology and support scholars in their work, this paper stresses the need to be open and honest about issues encountered in the field (cf. Yanow, 2009).

This paper explores pitfalls associated with being a foreigner in the field. I draw on my experience as a PhD student in a foreign country, Sweden, where I set out to do an organizational ethnography without speaking the local language. I examine how language influenced my research process, from access negotiation to presentation of findings, drawing on impostor syndrome to illustrate the feelings of inadequacy triggered by the language barriers I encountered in parallel to learning Swedish. This paper makes three contributions. First, it contributes to the at-home/abroad debate (Albu and Costas, 2018) by nuancing the ethnographer's experience, illustrating language challenges and associated shifts in feelings of outsiderness/insiderness in doing ethnography abroad. Second, it answers calls for more transparency in disclosing the ethnographer's research process (Yanow, 2012; Anteby, 2013) by presenting a less sanitized account and acknowledging obstacles that may be encountered in doing fieldwork (Warden, 2013). Third, by offering tips to tackle language barriers, the paper answers calls for developing ethnography as a methodology to better support junior scholars (Järventie-Thesleff *et al.*, 2016; Delucchi, 2018; Vincett, 2018).

The paper is structured as follows. The next section presents an overview of the literature teasing out the importance of language in organizational ethnography and qualitative research. This is followed by a description of the methodology and my background. Thereafter, I reflect on the ways in which language influenced my research process. Next, I offer suggestions on how to overcome the impostor syndrome triggered by language barriers. The paper concludes highlighting the contributions to organizational ethnography and the implications of doing ethnographic research in a foreign language.

Theoretical background

Language in organizational ethnography

One characteristic that distinguishes organizational ethnography from other research methods "is the need for something more than just a brief excursion into a given social domain or organisational setting" (Brannan *et al.*, 2012, p. 6). Ethnography requires immersing oneself in the setting (Van Maanen, 2006). In this respect, language plays a critical role, as it "is our prime human and professional means of making sense of and to ourselves and others" (Phipps, 2013, p. 339). To have meaningful conversations with research participants, ethnographers need to learn not only the language of the organization but also that of its industry and business in general (Yanow, 2009). Knowledge of the local language is, thus, essential. Some ethnographers have referred to the advantages of doing research in their home countries, as they "shared the same mother tongue, everyday understanding and lay-culture with all the members" (Caronia, 2018, p. 119). "Speaking the language fluently and without an accent, and being able to use slang, idioms and sayings" (Delucchi, 2018, p. 203) can be beneficial in gaining access.

Ethnographies are often multilingual (Gibb and Danero Iglesias, 2017). The importance of language is such that "[i]t can be difficult – if not impossible – to start out by collecting data […] if, as a foreign researcher, you are not fully conversant with the language of those you are studying." (Moeran, 2009, p. 144) A few ethnographers have mentioned challenges associated with language barriers. Talking about her study in Guatemala, Warden (2013, p. 155) noted: "[r]esearching in a language and culture that is not your own can be a constant source of frustration when even the most casual nuances of society such as humour become a struggle". Furthermore, McAllum (2018) admitted that taking a position in a French-speaking university without speaking French seriously hampered her data collection during the first year. Through an autoethnography, Tienari (2019) also discussed the challenges associated with not speaking his school's language and the feelings of outsiderness triggered, even when located in his home country.

Apart from being a methodological issue, language influences our interpretation and construction of reality (Temple, 2002; Larkin, Dierckx de Casterlé and Schotsmans, 2007; Gawlewicz, 2016). Take for example Van Maanen's (1979b) first- and second-order concepts. First-order concepts are the facts taken from the field, which can be "operational" or "presentational". Operational data refer to events happening in the field that the ethnographer engages in and observes. Presentational data, instead, have to do with the façades research participants put up. Second-order concepts are the theories the ethnographer uses to explain the facts, which "are dependent upon the faith the fieldworker can sustain in the first-order concepts uncovered in the setting" (Van Maanen, 1979b, p. 542). This means that second-order concepts may be completely faulty if one does not correctly understand the first-order concepts. Besides the risk of misinterpreting meanings, which is present in any study (Esposito, 2001), language barriers increase the risk of misrepresentation. While self-reflexivity is key in minimizing representational concerns (Hole, 2007), not speaking the informants' language may seriously hinder the ethnographer's ability to derive any concepts.

Despite the importance of language, and maybe because ethnography as a method remains largely "obscure" in terms of what it entails (Evans, 2012), organizational ethnographers rarely discuss language challenges. Even when ethnographers collect data in their mother tongue or a language they are fluent in, most do not discuss the role of language in the research process and only a few acknowledge any issues (Gibb and Danero Iglesias, 2017). This becomes especially worrisome when the spoken language is not English. Publishing research findings without considering the participants' language "ignor[es] the linguistic imperialism central to an unquestioning use of English as a baseline language" (Temple, 2002, p. 847; Temple and Young, 2004). In particular, questions regarding data collection and analysis, translation and publication become critical (Gawlewicz, 2016; Premji *et al.*, 2020). While these questions are rarely dealt with in ethnographic accounts, the literature on cross-language research provides a good starting point to discuss these issues further.

Cross-language qualitative research

Given that language is a means to interpret cultural concepts (Larkin *et al.*, 2007), using the informants' preferred language is ideal when doing cross-cultural research (Squires, Sadarangani and Jones, 2020). While it is uncommon that researchers speak the research participants' language fluently (Temple and Young, 2004; see also Holmes *et al.*, 2013), it is critical to address language barriers[1] to ensure that research findings represent the participants' voices as accurately as possible (Squires, 2009). To tackle language barriers, cross-language studies involve the participation of translators or interpreters (Temple, 2002; Squires, 2009). The main difference between these is that interpreters do "live" interpretations between researcher and informant changing a spoken language into another orally, and translators change text-based data from one language to another[2] (Shklarov, 2007; Squires, 2009; Jones and Boyle, 2011; Squires *et al.*, 2020). Language proficiency, though, is not enough to bridge cultures (Temple, 2002; Court and Abbas, 2013).

While overcoming the language barrier, the use of translators influences the research process in multiple ways. Introducing an intermediary between researcher and informants poses challenges such as issues of representation (Temple, 2002; Temple and Young, 2004), potential

[1] Following Premji *et al.* (2020), a language barrier is defined as a contextual characteristic and not an individual trait.

[2] For the sake of simplicity, I use both terms interchangeably.

loss of meaning (Kapborg and Berterö, 2002), and threats to validity (Esposito, 2001; Kapborg and Berterö, 2002; Larkin *et al.*, 2007; Squires, 2009; Gawlewicz, 2016; Premji *et al.*, 2020; Squires *et al.*, 2020). To deal with these challenges, apart from language competence (Squires, 2009), interpreters should ideally have cultural competence (Jones and Boyle, 2011), research experience (Squires *et al.*, 2020) and training in the research field (Kapborg and Berterö, 2002). Overall, translators should be active research partners (Larkin *et al.*, 2007) and their role should be considered already in the design of cross-language studies (Premji *et al.*, 2020; Squires *et al.*, 2020).

Whereas the most common strategy in dealing with language barriers is the use of a third party as an interpreter (Esposito, 2001; Squires, 2009), few have discussed the benefits of the researcher taking the dual researcher/translator role. Being responsible for translation and research process may raise ethical issues but can also be beneficial as a bilingual researcher is able to accommodate differences in meanings, acts as a research tool, and is committed to two ethical perspectives: that of the English- and the non-English-speaking audiences (Shklarov, 2007). These characteristics, often missing in external translators, are very relevant in cross-cultural studies, especially in non-Western contexts where the dual role may facilitate mediation between "two cultural aliens" (Shklarov, 2007, p. 534). Regardless of who the translator is, it is important to consider the methodological implications of the role as "[t]he language we use is a product of all the individual experiences we have collected, our age, social background, education, religious attachment, […] values and beliefs we live or choose to live with" (Gawlewicz, 2016, p. 38). Overall, translation is a key component of multilingual research (Holmes *et al.*, 2013) and we cannot assume "that research is language free" (Larkin *et al.*, 2007, p. 469).

Cross-language studies provide a useful starting point to understand the importance of language. Nevertheless, many of the underlying assumptions are not applicable to organizational ethnographies. First, most cross-language studies use research teams to ensure rigor (Squires *et al.*, 2020), whereas ethnography relies on the researcher doing all the work (Zilber, 2014)[3]. Second, cross-language studies tend to focus on issues raised when research participants do not speak English (Shklarov, 2007) and aim at improving these informants' participation to make their voices heard (e.g. Esposito, 2001; Temple, 2002; Temple and Young, 2004; Premji *et al.*, 2020; Squires *et al.*, 2020). This leaves unquestioned the fact that the researcher may not be a native English speaker or that the study may be taking place in a country where English is not the (only) official language. Third, recommendations usually target research design as a way to ensure rigor (e.g. Squires, 2009; Premji *et al.*, 2020; Squires *et al.*, 2020). In particular, "there is an overwhelming sense of caution against the intrusion of the translator or distortion of information by the translator's presence." (Shklarov, 2007, p. 530) Nonetheless, little discussion exists regarding the processes of collecting and analysing data and the implications associated with the researcher being the translator, which are relevant issues to discuss in organizational ethnography. Finally, cross-language studies largely rely on interviews, tackling language barriers with interpreters (e.g. Kapborg and Berterö, 2002; Temple, 2002; Premji *et al.*, 2020). Yet, ethnography entails more than interviews (Alvesson, 2009; Yanow, 2012) so we cannot assume that language issues will be solved using translators.

Ethnographic research entails a variety of practices, which give such work its distinctiveness: observing and talking to people, gathering different sorts of texts, and keeping records of all the material collected (Kunda, 2013). All these activities involve language in one way or another. Further, ethnography largely relies on the researcher as the main tool of data collection and analysis (Sanday, 1979; Warden, 2013; Zilber, 2014). Thus, the ethnographer is

[3] While alternative forms of ethnography exist (see Rouleau *et al.* (2014)), I refer to the more "conventional" form.

likely to be the translator, adopting the "dual role interpreter" (Shklarov, 2007; Squires *et al.*, 2020). Ethnographers indisputably influence the research process and are responsible for discussing and being transparent about it (Warden, 2013). Yet, although language permeates ethnography, there is little disclosure on how researchers deal with language barriers (Gibb and Danero Iglesias, 2017). Answering calls to share the ethnographer's lived experience (Yanow, 2012; Anteby, 2013), in what follows I explore my experience with language barriers in doing an ethnography abroad.

Methodology

In this paper, I focus on language barriers in doing ethnography abroad. The research question posed is, how does language influence the ethnographic research process? I draw on my experience as a doctoral student doing an organizational ethnography of an emergency department (ED) in Sweden between 2012 and 2018.

From the beginning of my PhD, I was driven by an interest on what people do in organizations and how they organize work. Ethnography, as an all-encompassing genre, was a natural choice; it allowed me to use various data collection methods (Sanday, 1979), going beyond fieldwork (Van Maanen, 1979a). To understand the everyday dynamics at the ED, I collected data through observations, interviews, and documents. I also wrote reflections throughout the study. Given that my focus was on the influence of roles on routine dynamics, I aimed at having all professional roles represented to ensure diversity. Thus, contrary to many studies that do not include participants who experience language barriers, I did not recruit informants based on preferred languages (Squires *et al.*, 2020). Further, language was not a selection criterion in any step of my research process which meant I was exposed to and experienced language barriers throughout the whole ethnographic study.

As an empirical setting, the ED was a "foreign" organization, i.e. a place where I did not "belong" (Albu and Costas, 2018). In my fieldwork, therefore, I was a stranger (Fine and Hallett, 2014). First, I did not have any previous relationship with anyone working in the ED. Second, I was a stranger in terms of the subject matter or "professional language"; I had no knowledge about emergency medicine/nursing apart from the basics any lay person may have. Third, I was a foreigner in terms of the country, culture and official language. Overall, the ED was foreign to me professionally, geographically and culturally speaking.

Regarding my background, I am a native Spanish-speaker. Culturally Latin American, I grew up in Argentina. While I studied English since the age of four, I did not use it in my daily life. During my childhood and adolescence, I only spoke English when travelling abroad. As an adult, I have lived in five countries besides my home country, none of them Spanish-speaking, which to me has meant living in foreign languages. I have worked in the USA, completed a MSc program in Scotland, Italy and Sweden, done my PhD in Sweden, and I am currently pursuing a postdoc in Canada. Although I may not fully belong to these countries culturally speaking, I have had my fair share of cultural adaptation/immersion and cross-cultural relationships both professionally and personally. I have grown comfortable with the idea of starting from scratch, even if each new experience is still overwhelming. I have learnt that not speaking the local language is a disadvantage in many ways. Yet, I have gotten the feeling that academics do not question, or at least do not speak of, the fact that a large number of us live and work in foreign countries lacking the language skills necessary to undertake any ethnographic project. Having experienced it first hand, I believe it is critical to discuss language barriers in organizational ethnographies.

In what follows, I provide a retrospective account of my experience with the language barriers I encountered doing an ethnography in Sweden.

Language and the ethnographic research process

Ethnography is not only about the "unspoken", i.e. the observed behaviours, but also the "spoken", i.e. the conversations that organization members engage in as they go about their work. Surprisingly, though, the question of language barriers popped up very few times during my PhD. The first time I got the question I was two months into my doctoral studies. I had presented my research idea to my department during the annual "Doctoral Students' Days", a two-day event where PhD students presented their dissertation progress to fellow students and faculty members. During the Q&A, a non-Swedish senior faculty member asked the dreadful question, something along the lines of "how are you dealing with the language barrier?", referring to my data collection in a Swedish setting. I still recall how uncomfortable I felt as I had been thinking about the language issue and was suffering from impostor syndrome. Yet, having just started my PhD, I felt like an outsider, uncomfortable sharing these feelings of inadequacy with my supervisors and colleagues. Although I managed to give an acceptable answer, that experience triggered a reflective process that continued throughout and after my PhD, motivating this article.

It is worth noting that the description of my PhD position stated,

> *The present position requires […] good ability to communicate orally as well as in writing, in Swedish and in English. Students who lack such ability in Swedish are expected to have gained it within two years. [Document]*

Despite being explicitly stated, this requirement was not enforced. Apart from informal questions and indirect remarks, I was never directly approached by anyone in my host institution regarding my language proficiency. Further, the first time my university offered a Swedish course for academics, I was starting my fourth year of doctoral studies. Thus, the lack of enforcement might as well have been a consequence of the (non-)existing institutional practices (Holmes *et al.*, 2013).

Overall, my ethnographic experience with language barriers in Sweden was ambivalent. Before I formally started my study and during the access negotiation, I felt like a complete outsider and thought language would be an issue. Once I started my fieldwork, I was relieved to feel that it was not as much of an issue as I thought it would be. As time went by, I felt an ambivalence about the benefits and drawbacks of experiencing language barriers, and the insider/outsider distinction. The more I learnt Swedish, the more I realized how much I would have missed out had I turned a deaf ear. In short, learning the local language enriched my fieldwork experience and attenuated my feelings of outsiderness. In what follows, I examine how language influenced my research process, from access negotiation to presentation of findings[4], illustrating the language challenges I encountered in parallel to learning Swedish.

Negotiating access

I started my PhD as part of a research team focused on the study of extreme environments. Due to my interest in doing an ethnography, and the language challenges I could foresee as a foreigner in Sweden, I suggested my home country as an alternative for the fieldwork. Yet, I had a hard time finding allies as an outsider. I got the feeling that, as they were locals, my supervisors could not grasp the challenges associated with collecting data in a setting where one does not speak the official language and does not share the culture nor the professional background. I also understood their argument of the long distance between Argentina and

[4] For the sake of simplicity, the findings follow a linear research process. Nonetheless, in practice, phases were not as clear cut.

Sweden, and the benefits of being close to the empirical setting when doing ethnography. Therefore, we agreed that I would study a Swedish ED.

Contrary to the common belief that access is one of the most time-consuming and frustrating challenges a researcher has to face (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), the initial access to the ED was granted very easily. One of my supervisors emailed, in Swedish, the director of emergency healthcare of a Swedish county in order to establish contact. Besides giving an overview of my research team, the e-mail served as an introduction to my doctoral project on roles and routines in emergency care. Explaining the qualitative nature of my project and the focus on everyday practices in the ED, my supervisor requested approval to conduct interviews with staff members and, if possible, do observations of their daily work. 40 minutes later he received a positive reply and set up a first informal meeting with the director of emergency healthcare, in Swedish.

A week later, a second meeting took place where the director, my supervisor, a project manager and I were present. From the beginning, my supervisor clarified that I only spoke English but that I was studying Swedish, establishing my dynamic position as an outsider working on overcoming her outsiderness. I explained the purpose of my research and my interest in studying roles and routines, the methods I would use and expected outcomes. I got to know how the ED was organized at that time and about a project to change the processes, which was in its planning phase. While I only spoke English, the others alternated between English and Swedish. Despite my efforts to understand, I could not follow everything they were saying so, although strengthening my outsiderness, I was glad that my supervisor was present. The meeting went well, as they were interested in my research topic, and we decided that I would follow the project implementation. Yet, experiencing the language barrier made me question how I would collect data on my own fuelling impostor syndrome.

Data collection

I collected data through documents, traditional interviews, observations and ethnographic interviews, and in three languages: Swedish, English, and Spanish. While I was fluent in English and Spanish, at the beginning of my data collection I had been studying Swedish, part time, for about seven months. Thus, I started with a basic level of the local language, enough to pick up some words here and there.

As soon as I had defined the setting, I started gathering public documents to get an understanding of the Swedish healthcare system. I collected these mainly through the web and included blog posts, brochures, presentations, reports, laws and regulations. As English is not an official language in Sweden, most documents were in Swedish. This presented a language barrier, as I could not read Swedish. In order to understand the material, identify relevant data, and use these in my study, I needed to translate it to either English or Spanish. Further, I conducted three interviews, in English, with four medical doctors to gain a contextual understanding of EDs.

Once access was granted, I had a first interview, in English, with the project manager (PM) responsible for the change project. Despite his good will to participate in my study, I could sense that he felt very uncomfortable speaking English. The following excerpt illustrates,

> *PM: [patients] might be also sent into the hospital, they have mottagningar. What's that in English… receptions? For each different kind of… do you understand what I mean with that receptions? They have…*
>
> *Me: Like you can go and visit doctors without being treated in the ER…*

PM: Yeah, yeah, right. They send them to different specialties. So, during daytime they have that. In Swedish is called mottagningar, I'm not sure what is called in English… receptions or something like that… yeah. [Interview]

His discomfort heightened my feelings of impostorism, triggering guilt for not speaking Swedish and doubts about my ability to undertake the study. When transcribing my interviews, I further realized that I would simplify my English, as shown in the previous excerpt, in attempts to facilitate interactions with participants that did not feel comfortable with the language. Before starting all my interviews, I made clear that interviewees could speak Swedish if they felt more at ease with it. As I was recording the interviews, I thought I could always find a way to translate them. I also started gathering organizational documents, comprising organizational charts, internal reports, project plans, flowcharts and a large number of files used in daily work, all of which were in Swedish. Further, I gathered visual documents, such as videos and photographs, and personal documents, which mainly included e-mails exchanged with the research participants, in English and Swedish.

My initial struggle with language barriers was such that, although I knew I needed to do observations in order to understand the work dynamics at the ED, I was scared of going there. The time pressure of the PhD, and probably my supervisors, pushed me to request a first study visit. I emailed the director of emergency healthcare, in English. He replied positively, in English, putting me in contact with the heads of the ED and inviting me to a workshop with several heads of department regarding the change project. My supervisor asked if I wanted him to join me to what I replied,

Yes, that would be great! I don't think I will understand much so it would be nice if you can also participate. [E-mail]

I further contacted the nurse manager, from whom I got two dates to shadow registered nurses. To my relief, both nurses were fluent in English and comfortable with having me around, which made me feel less of an outsider. Two weeks after these visits, I contacted the nurse manager to ask for more visits and the e-mail addresses of the nurses I had shadowed. I told her that they were fine with having me around more times. She replied that she had talked to them and her boss, and that everyone was fine with me going back to the ED. However, she wrote,

What I need from you is that you sign a paper where you promise not to tell anyone what you see or hear here in our department. It is in Swedish, so I hope that is ok. How much Swedish do you know? [E-mail]

She sent me the confidentiality form and asked me to sign it and give it to her the next time I would visit the ED. I used an online translator and double checked my interpretation with my supervisors to make sure I understood what I was signing. A few visits later, the nurse I was shadowing,

… asks me if I have the secrecy paper that [the boss] sent me. I say I do but that I was waiting with that, as she told me to give it to her personally and, as I have been coming only during nighttime lately, I haven't had the chance to see her. [The nurse] says he can take it and put it in her office. Later, he explained that's the form all new staff sign and said [the boss] was a bit worried asking how much Swedish I understand, and he said I can understand a little but not much. [Field notes]

This situation confused me. On one hand, having to sign the same confidentiality agreement as employees, made me feel like an insider, even if mildly. On the other hand, the boss' worry about my language proficiency, and consequent ability to understand what I observed, made me feel like an outsider.

Contrary to my initial assumptions, not speaking the language in the beginning proved to be advantageous. As I could not follow their conversations, I focused on observing and taking notes of their actions. I also asked a lot of questions. As I did not know anything about the ED, I asked people to explain whatever intrigued me. A foreigner to emergency care, I believe I would not have been able to understand all the medical terms even if I would have been a native speaker. After a few visits, I started to get a feeling for what the tasks were, and who was doing what, attenuating my feelings of outsiderness. I took field notes mostly in English, as this was the language I mainly used with the research participants. Nonetheless, whenever I observed or was engaged in situations where Swedish was used, the language in my field notes could change. The following excerpt illustrates,

> *The medicine doc comes and tells [RN name] what to do with "**sexan**" (i.e. patient in room 6). He calls **MAVA** [a hospital ward]; no answer. [The RN] tells the doc about room 39. Then he goes to room 39 and tells the daughter: "I told him [the doc] but he **måste lägga in några patienter innan**." (he needs to admit some patients before). [Field notes]*

As illustrated, sometimes it was easier to write down conversations in Swedish, as far as I could grasp them, instead of asking or translating on the spot. In such cases, I would do the translations when transcribing my field notes into my computer. Other times, there were words that came to me in Swedish or Spanish but not in English,

> *[…] he goes to **förråd 9** (storage room 9 in Swedish) in the surgery corridor and gets a **pinza** (tongs in Spanish). [Field notes]*

As time passed by, I started to learn the ED jargon in Swedish.

Overall, Swedes are known for speaking good English, which they have as a second language from early on in school. Further, as the ED was located in a university town, there were also foreigners using the healthcare services. Thus, while staff members worked mainly in Swedish, they were exposed to English as non-Swedish patients required communication in English. When patients did not speak Swedish nor English, interpreters were called in to the ED.

All staff members I shadowed knew from the start that I did not speak Swedish and accepted having me around on that basis. It turned out that some were even happy to get to practice English with me. Further, some of them would go to work abroad, in English, for periods of time. They would even read literature in English during their university studies and have lectures in English. Thus, they knew most medical terms in English. Yet, some others were very uncomfortable with the language barrier. During one of my visits, the registered nurse (RN) I was shadowing asked an assistant nurse (AN) if I could follow him. I wrote in my notes,

> *[RN name] tells me he will ask [AN name] if I can shadow him while he goes to the meeting at 1 pm. We go to the orthopaedics nurses' office. [The AN] is there. [The RN] tells him he has a meeting and asks if I can stay with him. [The AN] doesn't look really convinced. [They speak in Swedish. Later the RN tells me that the AN said it was okay if we didn't find anyone else]. [The AN] turns to me and says, "I'm not so good at English". I say "no pressure" but he finally accepts. [Field notes]*

While I could not follow their conversation in Swedish, I could see that the assistant nurse was not convinced. When I shadowed him, I felt his uneasiness with the language barrier, which I tried to overcome by reassuring him that it was not a problem. I took this role in numerous instances. In another field visit, a similar situation happened,

> *[RN1] tells [RN2] I will shadow him when he takes the fika (coffee) break. "No! My English is so bad!", says [RN2] and asks [RN1] in Swedish what he has to do. I tell him he doesn't need to talk, I can just look at what he is doing. Then he feels better about it. [Field notes]*

The more time I spent in the ED, the less I felt like a complete outsider. Shadowing foreign staff members also helped in this respect, as some felt more comfortable with English than Swedish, none of these being their mother tongue. Some others had Spanish as their first language and, this being my mother tongue, we communicated in Spanish.

After my fieldwork, I conducted a series of interviews to complement my interpretation of the observations I had done. I had identified clear patterns in my data. Yet, I deemed important to confirm these interpretations with the research participants not only for triangulation purposes but also in case I had misinterpreted, and thus misrepresented, the data due to language barriers. At this stage, even if I still felt more comfortable with English and Spanish, my level of Swedish was much more advanced. I prepared an interview guide in English, which I translated to Spanish. As I did not use interpreters, in the beginning of the interviews, I clarified to the interviewees that they could speak Swedish if they felt more comfortable with it or if they did not know how to explain something in English or Spanish. After interviewing a senior specialist, I wrote in my notes,

> *It was a funny interview. He was really nice but not so good at English, for what he apologized before starting to record. He was throwing in a lot of words in Swedish, and also some funny expressions translated from Swedish. [Interview notes]*

Interviewees would use terms in Swedish every now and then; mostly, technical jargon that I had learnt during my visits to the ED. The following quote illustrates a research participant mixing all three languages (indicated by [SP], [SW], and [EN]) during an interview,

> *[SP] Cuando estas en un [SW] vårdavdelning, […] [SP] estas limpiando todo el tiempo. [SW] Det är väldigt tungt, [EN] it's hard to work there because you have to […] shower [all patients]. So, it's very hard work. [SP] En [SW] akuten [SP] tú no sabes lo que pasa ahí, un minuto está todo bien y después puedes tener 18 pacientes. [Interview]*

The interviews were mostly held in English and/or Spanish.

Data analysis

I collected data in Swedish, English, and Spanish, while having to present my findings in English. The empirical material was in different forms. Documents consisted mostly of written text, in Swedish, and a few visual materials such as videos and photographs. Interviews were recorded in audio files and interview notes were in text. Observations resulted in large amounts of hand-written field notes.

The process from raw data to presentation of findings relied on several rounds of analysis in which language played different roles. Following data collection, I transcribed interviews and field notes into word processing files in order to allow for reflection and to process any additional notes taken. Documents were processed as gathered. To develop an understanding of the ED, its roles and routines, I started by descriptively coding my material. To reduce the risk of misinterpretation, I first went through the data in their original language, i.e. Spanish or Swedish, and translated the material to English when relevant for the study and for publication purposes. In translating from Spanish to English, I considered the meaning that was being conveyed by the research participant instead of doing a word-by-word, literal translation. While my language skills in Swedish improved throughout the study, in the beginning I did not understand much. Thus, I used an online translation service to translate data from Swedish to English and/or Spanish. I also turned to my Swedish-speaking supervisors, colleagues, research participants and even friends, in clarifying concepts, ideas and interpretations.

Relying on multiple data sources, besides aiding triangulation, helped me to deal with language barriers. To illustrate, the "ED treatment guidelines", a 129-page organizational document very relevant to my study as it described many of the roles and routines in the ED, was written in Swedish. While I translated relevant sections, I also used my field notes and interviews with research participants to double check these data. For example, the guidelines clearly stated the activities involved in discharging a patient. Comparing this description to my observations, there were almost no differences. In the case of the triage routine, though, while the guidelines listed the activities to perform, the observations and interviews yielded a much more detailed and dynamic description of the routine. Thus, using multiple data sources smoothed the language challenges I experienced with documents. It is also worth noting that, independently of the language used, staff members brought up very similar issues when discussing the roles and routines performed in the ED, which became evident in the analysis.

Reporting of findings

I presented my ideas and dissertation progress in multiple occasions throughout my PhD. I also presented preliminary research findings in a panel discussion which involved practitioners and academics. All these presentations were in English. Further, I validated my findings in the last round of interviews by asking research participants to corroborate my interpretations. While language barriers had been at the back of my mind for years, I had tried to overcome the anxiety triggered by the impostor syndrome by not talking about it. It was not until after my final internal seminar that I decided to write about language barriers in my dissertation.

The findings of my PhD were reported in English, following my university's requirements to publish either in Swedish or English. Once I had a full draft of my dissertation, a Swedish medical doctor proofread it to make sure that I had not misrepresented the healthcare world. I wrote a solo-authored monograph, which was read several times, partially and in full, by my three Swedish doctoral supervisors. My opponent[5] and two out of three members of my grading committee were also native Swedish speakers.

Any other texts based on my PhD study, such as work-in-progress drafts, conference papers, and presentations, were also written in English. As this is the mainstream academic language, there is an underlying assumption about its use in academic practice. Nonetheless, to ensure transparency and respect the original language of my data, I clarified whenever I reported a translation. I wrote "[own translation]" to show that the cited source was originally in another language, either Swedish or Spanish. For confidentiality reasons, I did not report the original language as doing so could have helped trace down individuals, particularly Spanish-speaking staff who were a minority.

Overall, not speaking the local language was a disadvantage in terms of efficiency, as it would have taken me less time, effort, and resources, to be fluent in Swedish from the start. Further, I am aware that some information may have been missed in the participants', and my

[5] In the Swedish system, an opponent is a scholar external to the PhD student's university. An expert in the field of the dissertation, the opponent plays the main role in the public defence by questioning the doctoral candidate.

own, translations. At the same time, having the research participants talk in a foreign language, i.e. English and/or Spanish, may have been more advantageous than using an interpreter, as it was the same individual describing the own experience instead of an outsider interpreting and translating that individual's experience into another language. Language barriers were also an advantage in observing patterns of action. In the following, I discuss strategies to deal with language barriers as a foreign ethnographer.

Overcoming the impostor syndrome

Having presented my experience, I discuss recommendations for dealing with and overcoming language barriers in doing ethnography abroad. In my case, these challenges triggered impostor syndrome, as I felt like a fraud due to my inability to communicate in the local language. While my role to the eyes of the research participants and academic community was that of the researcher or PhD student, I experienced a transition from feeling like an impostor in the beginning to becoming that researcher as I learnt the language. I use impostor syndrome to illustrate the feelings of inadequacy that may arise in relation to oneself, the research participants, and the academic community and suggest strategies that ethnographers can implement to target each of these areas.

Feeling inadequate with oneself

Feelings of inadequacy may arise around the fact that one is an outsider, which is clearly marked by the language barrier. The following strategies can help in working towards overcoming these feelings.

1. *Learning the language*[6]

While some ethnographers may prefer to focus on research participants who speak their same language, this poses the risk of silencing the voices of individuals with different experiences (Esposito, 2001; Premji *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, my first recommendation is to learn the preferred language of the research participants (Squires *et al.*, 2020). While it is time consuming and usually comes at expense of the ethnographer's free time, it is worth the effort. It will not only enhance the research process but also the ethnographer's adaptability in general, helping "to cushion the effects of culture shock" (Warden, 2013, p. 152).

2. *Immersion in the field*

There is a reason why time spent in the field is the main criterion used in proving what good ethnography is (Sanday, 1979; Brannan *et al.*, 2012; Rouleau *et al.*, 2014). Studying a setting for a long time becomes especially important when the ethnographer starts with no or basic knowledge of the language. While in the beginning I doubted my ability to complete my study due to the language barrier, the more time I spent in the field, the more these feelings decreased. A long residence allows the ethnographer to gradually learn the language while collecting empirical material.

3. *Focus on non-verbal communication*

While one cannot learn a language overnight, linguistic incompetence may be a powerful source of insights (Phipps, 2013). Ethnographers can use the lack of listening comprehension skills to focus the observations on actions. Unlike native speakers, foreigners have the ability to naturally disregard others' conversations when not understanding the language. This does not mean that ethnographers should purposely turn a deaf ear. Yet, linguistic incompetence may be

[6] See Gibb and Danero Iglesias (2017) for a thorough discussion on language learning in ethnographic research.

useful in directing the ethnographer's attention to non-verbal cues such as the research participants' body language, intonation, movements, and use of artefacts. This will facilitate data collection in the meantime.

4. *Data triangulation*

The immersive nature of ethnography enables the researcher to learn by engaging in observations for a long period of time. This allows to develop an understanding for how things work, even when not mastering the language. Further, ethnography goes beyond doing fieldwork (Van Maanen, 1979a) and allows for the use of various data collection methods (Sanday, 1979). Thus, the ethnographer can use different data sources, such as interviews and documents, to double check interpretations, validate findings and minimize the risk of misrepresentation associated with language barriers.

5. *Finding language allies*

Except for native English speakers, the ethnographer most likely speaks at least another language. While it may not always be possible, one can try to find research participants that speak one's mother tongue or English. In my case, although not as widespread as English, I always find Spanish speakers wherever I collect data. This is beneficial as it transfers the responsibility of representing the informants to the researcher, giving more control over data analysis (Gawlewicz, 2016). Depending on the context, it may also be possible to find foreign research participants who have English as their first or second language. In my study, several staff members had Swedish as their third language and felt more comfortable speaking English than Swedish even though they were required to work in Swedish. This provides an opportunity to better understand "cross cultural meanings and interpretations" (Temple and Young, 2004, p. 168).

Feeling inadequate with research participants

Not speaking the local language, one may also feel inadequate in relation to the research participants, especially when questioning one's ability to undertake the study "sold" to them and the organization. I addressed this by:

6. *Being honest*

The ethnographer should always be honest with research participants. While not speaking the language clearly shows, it is important that they know about one's (lack of) ability to speak their language. Although in the beginning of my fieldwork I could only pick up isolated words, after some time taking my language courses and visiting the ED, I started to understand and follow conversations among the staff. Thus, it was important for me to communicate this to them. Apart from being an ethical issue, it will save time for everyone.

7. *Finding an internal sponsor*

Although I got access through the "big boss", it was quite challenging to ensure continuity in the data collection process, especially because of the language barrier. While I felt guilty for not speaking the language, finding an internal sponsor was key. My internal sponsor was a well-regarded staff member who not only was glad to practice English with me, therefore putting the language barrier aside, but also believed that my research was important for the ED. Through time, he started selling my study to other staff members and I drew on what Chambliss (1996) calls "side-in access", i.e. getting access informally through individuals at lower levels. Having an internal sponsor helped me get access to shadow other doctors and nurses.

8. *Having them speak another language*

Although the use of translators is recommended in cross-language research (Squires, 2008, 2009), it can complicate things when it responds to the researcher's lack of knowledge regarding the local language (Kapborg and Berterö, 2002). In my case, having an interpreter could have made staff members uncomfortable. Having built relationships with them throughout my time in the ED, they seemed comfortable talking to me about the work environment. Whenever possible, thus, ethnographers should let research participants speak in a language different to the local one, as long as this is a common language for both parties. This also allows the researcher to analyse the data as collected and have more control over the process (Esposito, 2001). Further, communicating in a shared language that is neither the native language of the ethnographer nor that of the research participant can help neutralize power imbalance between the parties (Holmes *et al.*, 2013).

Feeling inadequate with the academic community

Experiencing language barriers when doing ethnography may also arise feelings of inadequacy in relation to the academic community. The following are two ways to deal with this.

9. *Talk about it*

As researchers, we have the ethical responsibility "to produce honest and sound scientific results free of any distortion that might result from language challenges" (Shklarov, 2007, p. 535). Yet, to accomplish this, ethnographers must first acknowledge the issue. Until journals "begin to demand details regarding the issues of translation in qualitative research" (Esposito, 2001, p. 577), we can do our part and communicate about it. That was the main motivation behind this paper. Further, ethnographers should talk about it in their universities. Countless times I have heard workplace discussions regarding staffing problems due to a lack of teaching staff speaking the local language. Yet, I have never heard a local saying a foreign colleague could not do research due to language barriers.

Although many of us work in countries where the official language is not English or our mother tongue, our ability to do fieldwork in any context is largely taken for granted. Language barriers exist and, as long as academia continues to build on global meritocracy (Tienari, 2019) and English as the lingua franca (Holmes *et al.*, 2013), universities should acknowledge the disadvantage that foreigners are at by not speaking the local language. Incorporating language in their diversity agendas may favour the adoption of initiatives that are more inclusive of foreign students and faculty providing equal opportunities to everyone. Further, this could also encourage the recognition of the possibilities afforded by multilingual research (Stelma *et al.*, 2013).

10. *Use other forms of ethnography*

While I opted for the conventional form, innovative ways of doing organizational ethnography are on the rise (see Rouleau *et al.* (2014) for an overview). Team ethnography seems particularly interesting as a way of tackling language barriers, especially if one is already part of a research team. Working with a multilingual team can help divide research activities based on the researchers' language competencies.

Certainly, these ten strategies are not exhaustive, and some may work or not depending on the context. In my case, most of them were useful in strengthening the trustworthiness of my study. More importantly, they helped me overcome the impostor syndrome and feel confident about fulfilling my moral and ethical responsibilities towards proper research.

Concluding remarks

The aim with this paper was to open up a discussion around language barriers in organizational ethnography. Following other researchers exploring the experiential side of organizational ethnographies, I drew on my PhD experience to illustrate how language influenced my research process in doing an ethnography abroad. Reflecting on the language barriers encountered, I offered practical tips to overcome these. While one cannot predict how things will unfold, being aware of and preparing for potential challenges will likely attenuate the impact of language barriers on the study and the ethnographer. This paper makes three contributions to organizational ethnography.

First, it adds to previous studies arguing that the insider/outsider dichotomy is too simplistic, and represses other forms of difference (Abu-Lughod, 1991), particularly considering increased academic mobility (Gawlewicz, 2016; McAllum, 2018). Further, it supports the idea that at-home ethnography and ethnography abroad are dynamic rather than static positions (Caronia, 2018). Uncovering language as another critical aspect of ethnographies, it nuances the ethnographer's experience and shows that one can be an outsider in her own organization (cf. Tienari, 2019) and experience different levels of outsiderness in doing ethnography abroad. This suggests that the definitional difference between at-home ethnography and ethnography abroad should move beyond the relationship between the ethnographer and studied organization to include other aspects such as location, culture and language. This would allow us to bridge the chasm between outsider and insider positions and explore different shades of outsiderness and insiderness.

Second, this paper responds to calls for transparency regarding the ethnographer's research process (Yanow, 2009) and lived experience to develop insights (Yanow, 2012; Anteby, 2013). It contributes by presenting a personal account and acknowledging challenges experienced in doing ethnography. Third, this paper answers calls to develop ethnography as a methodology to better guide junior scholars (Järventie-Thesleff *et al.*, 2016; Delucchi, 2018; Vincett, 2018) by adding language as an important component to consider in the training of ethnographers. While verbal communication may not be possible from the beginning, this paper offers practical advice to deal with language barriers and overcome the impostor syndrome.

This paper has implications for how we teach and learn to do ethnography. We have to debunk the myth that ethnography cannot be taught and needs to be learnt the hard way. Otherwise, we run the risk of pushing away doctoral students and early-career scholars who may see ethnography as "a mysterious rite of passage" (Evans, 2012, p. 97). Being aware of, and discussing, the influence that the ethnographer's language skills may have on the studies conducted will not only help guide new ethnographers but also communicate across communities (Yanow, 2009, 2012).

Further, given globalization and the challenges associated with academic mobility (Gawlewicz, 2016; McAllum, 2018), this paper has implications for research practice. As long as universities keep celebrating global meritocracy (Tienari, 2019), English will remain the dominant language (Temple, 2002; Holmes *et al.*, 2013) and academic mobility will continue to rely on the recruitment of faculty based on publication records. If universities openly acknowledge the influence of language proficiency on research, it will be easier to better support foreign researchers in learning the local languages and/or assign them to research teams with the required competencies.

Finally, this paper has implications for how we think of and treat diversity in academia. Diversity work is highly dependent on how diversity is portrayed in organizations (Ahmed, 2007). In my experience, while diversity was depicted as a very important issue in Sweden, most discussions around equal opportunities referred to gender equality. Thus, other aspects such as multilingualism remained largely unaddressed. This may also be linked to the fact that diversity is an umbrella term, often loosely and differently defined depending on who is talking (Ahmed, 2007). Further, as language is deeply intertwined with power dynamics in academia (Tienari, 2019), the inattention to the consequences brought about by language barriers can be another way in which the term diversity may "conceal the continuation of systematic inequalities within universities" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 236). While I do not believe we should only do research in "language-friendly" contexts, universities need to acknowledge the language and other cultural challenges that derive from academic mobility as part of their diversity agendas. Only by doing so will we be able to provide ethnographic accounts that are legitimate and inclusive of diverse scholars and research settings. Language is an integral part of ethnographic research. Let's give it the place it deserves.

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