Narrative Works

Transitions and Translations
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Résumé de l'article

This paper is my “story” about the dilemmas I encountered and choices I made whilst carrying out narrative research in higher education in England and Romania, and the role languages played in the study. The research is rooted in my own life events, characterised by transitions and translations within/between languages and cultures, in much the same way as in the lives of the students I researched.

NARRATIVE WORKS
Issues, Investigations, & Interventions

SPECIAL SECTION: NARRATIVES OF TRANSLATION WITHIN RESEARCH PRACTICE

Transitions and Translations: The Story of Carrying Out Higher Education Field Research in Three Languages in Two Countries[1]

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This paper is my "story" about the dilemmas I encountered and choices I made whilst carrying out narrative research in higher education in England and Romania, and the role languages played in the study. The research is rooted in my own life events, characterised by transitions and translations within/between languages and cultures, in much the same way as in the lives of the students I researched.

Several authors argue (see Baumgartner, 2012; Temple, 2002, 2005, 2006a; Temple & Edwards, 2002; Twinn, 1997, 1998) that language-related discussions in qualitative research are rare, and when present they mainly focus on acts of translation as separate from methodological phases of research. Methodological papers written from the perspective of researcher-translators or bi/multi-lingual researchers are uncommon (Baumgartner, 2012). The aim of this paper is to address these gaps by discussing language-related decisions that I, as a researcher who speaks multiple languages, made whilst conducting my research amongst university students in Romania and England.

The research I conducted was not specifically *about* languages; rather, it aimed to explore university students' higher education pathways and transitions to work in England and in Romania. I wanted to map out the life events of students up to their final year of university, the motivations behind their choices, and their perceptions

[1] I am grateful to Dr Cigdem Esin and the two anonymous referees for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I am also thankful to Laura Carr for proofreading my work.

and opinions about their past, present, and future. But as West (1996) and Miller (2007) (cited in Merrill and West, 2009) remark, researchers often have a biographic connection with the topics they research, which was equally true in my case. Much like my own experience as a student, I wanted to investigate student lives and experiences; I was asking my research subjects the same questions I have often asked myself, and I was seeking answers from them at the same time as I was looking for answers for my own actions. For this reason, through my position as researcher and my past experiences, the topic of higher education pathways and transitions to work became strongly connected with language knowledge/usage and I found myself thinking, researching, and analysing, as well as translating words and meaning, within/between languages and cultures. First, I will provide a brief sketch of my personal background, which also situates the research as a multicultural and multilingual project. Then I will discuss language-related methodological decisions in my research and analysis and point out how I dealt with translations and transitions between languages and meanings. I will conclude by arguing for more cross-cultural research, particularly in the area of higher education studies, by researchers who are familiar both with the languages and the cultures they are investigating.

Situating the Research in Multilingual and Multicultural Contexts

As Temple (2006a) argues, "language is used to create and re-create social worlds and identities and no one person is positioned neutrally in these processes" (para. 6). For these reasons I consider it important to start this paper by situating myself within the languages and the issues I researched.

I am one of the 6.5% of Hungarians living in Romania. Coming from a minority ethnic background meant, among other things, that thinking and speaking in multiple languages became part of my everyday life from an early age. Hungarian is my mother language; it is the language I use with family and friends, at school, and in many situations in my hometown. Although in certain parts of the country, like my home region, you can manage without speaking the national language, in other parts, and usually for official business, you need to speak Romanian. I speak Romanian fluently, but I would not consider myself to be bilingual as this language does not represent a significant part of my identity. For me, learning Romanian was similar to learning English. It was a foreign language, even though I sometimes used it in daily conversations in the city, or while playing with other children around the block whilst growing up.

In terms of education, Hungarian minority students have the possibility to study in their mother language, if they wish, throughout compulsory education as well as during the different stages of higher education. In school, we also learn Romanian as a second mother language from an early age. Regarding higher education choices, Hungarian students have two main options if they wish to stay in the country: they either study a course in the Romanian language, in which case they have a variety of institutions to choose from; or if they wish to study in Hungarian they can pick from a handful of institutions, depending on the desired subject. In many cases the necessity to study in Hungarian language (because of limited Romanian language ability) determines the subject and institution choices.

I attended compulsory education in my mother language and decided to continue my studies at university both in Hungarian and in Romanian. School and social networks influenced my institution choice, whilst subject choice was determined by preferences and opportunity structures (whether the course was available and whether I was granted a state-funded place). Studying further at the higher education level was never a question; I experienced a natural progression from high school to university. I gained admittance to study several courses and, after discussion with my parents, I decided to enrol for two full-time courses at two separate departments (Sociology in my mother language, Hungarian and International Relations and European Studies in the Romanian language). I did not realise at first what this meant for me, becoming a double-status student (Wolbers, 2003), but I started a lifestyle bursting with activities, tasks, and challenges. I experienced a student life in constant transition among subjects, places, people and languages, a life I thoroughly enjoyed. Gaining sociological perspective through my studies, I often thought about my life and the choices I had made; I wondered how I ended up living the fulfilling life I was living and what would have happened if I had taken a different route. These questions inspired the research project that ultimately ended up forming the basis of my doctoral work.

Research Aims and Methodological Approach

I investigated the narratives of students living and studying in two specific contexts: an English university and a Romanian university. Consequently, the research adopted a comparative perspective. It is important to stress that the purpose of the individual stories was not to seek generalisations that could be applied broadly to other contexts; rather, it was to seek explanations for similarities and

differences and to gain a greater awareness and a deeper understanding of social reality within the different university and national contexts (Bryman, 2012). As Dimmock and O'Donoghue (1997) point out, "enlightenment can be provided by an examination of each case in its own right" (p. 3).

Within the two contexts, I conducted the research from a biographical perspective, using students' life stories as a basis for social research in order to understand processes of transition (similarly to Hubbard, 2000; Merrill & West, 2009). This perspective "is indicated where the arena of interest is either the effects of change across time, historical events as these events have impinged upon the individual, or his or her movement along their life course" (Miller, 2000, p. 74).

The methodological approach in line with the biographical perspective was narrative inquiry, as this approach allowed me to capture and present experience holistically in all its complexity and richness. As several authors mention (see Cortazzi, 2005; Goodson & Gill, 2011; Webster & Mertova, 2007) this approach focuses on participants' experience and the meanings given by them to the experience. The researcher is primarily concerned with the interpretations of participants—the voices of the participants gain emphasis as well as their motivations, experiences, and perceptions.

Similarly to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), I believe that "educational experience should be studied narratively" (p. 19), and I feel that prompting for narratives in life history interviews with students can add important layers to understanding their experiences, motivations, feelings, and plans, and facilitates the exploration of the interplay between structure and agency as embedded in students' narratives. Therefore, hearing and analysing stories from students allowed me to grasp the complexities of their experiences, to see "different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning, to bring them into useful dialogue with each other, and to understand more about individual and social change" (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008, pp. 1-2).

The field research was conducted as two case studies adopting the same approach and research methods in approximately the same time frame: a multi-ethnic university in Romania and a multicultural English university. I had had first hand experience in both universities, so I was familiar with the institutional habitus and was able to identify gatekeepers who could help me in the research process. I considered my prior experience in the two settings an asset and decided to use it in the research. From a theoretical perspective, the two cases constitute an unusual comparison, as they are two different national and institutional settings, and consequently, I considered how

researching a universal process in these different places could add an interesting angle to the topic and present the findings in an unusual light. The consequences of this choice are detailed in the following pages.

My familiarity with the languages and the university contexts positioned me as an "insider" in the research, but I was equally an "outsider," as I had not had contact with the Romanian higher education system for four years prior to starting my research, and I had been living and studying in England for only two years at the moment of commencing my fieldwork. Due to this particular background, and due to the nature and timing of my project, I was constantly transitioning between familiar and unfamiliar aspects of cultures and languages during the project.

Language Dilemmas

The decision to conduct the research in two different countries in two particular university settings triggered a series of questions and dilemmas regarding translations and transitions of/between language(s) and my insider-outsider position, in addition to the general methodological questions I faced. The following sections of the paper describe in detail each research phase, the nature of the language challenges I faced, and how I addressed them.

Preparations for Field Research

I realised that decisions regarding language usage in my research would be significant when I started preparing for my field research. Baumgartner (2012) does not report any challenges in the preparatory phases of her research, although due to the nature of the project, I could imagine that she experienced similar dilemmas to mine. Due to my decision to research the experiences of final-year students just before graduation in the two countries, I was constrained by time and place. The timing and the fact that I could not be in two places at the same time made me opt for online resources: sending e-mails and designing an online questionnaire to reach students. I had to decide whether to send direct e-mails to students or to ask a member of the administrative or academic staff to forward my e-mail. My insider knowledge helped me decide which approach to take. In England, students usually receive information from administrative staff or via an online university platform, while in Romania students and lecturers are part of, and communicate via, Yahoo! Groups—the administrative staff members enter rarely into direct contact with students. I also asked members of the student unions to distribute my call to students.

Deciding which language to use to contact people was a sensitive decision. Particularly in Romania, the use of a certain language speaks for itself and since I relied on other people to achieve my aims, I had to make sure that I did not alienate anyone with my approach. Using English as the language of my research in Romania would have meant positioning myself as an "outsider" from the beginning, which I did not want as I was interested in finding out intimate details about students' lives, and consequently I needed to be regarded as someone they could trust and confide in. Similarly, although using only the national language in Romania would have reduced my translation problems, it would also have meant distancing myself from the Hungarian community, consequently hindering my goals. (For a broader discussion about Hungarians in Romania, the historical and political roots of the situation, and the relationship between the two languages, see Benő and Szilágyi, 2005.)

On the other hand, using English or Romanian would have meant that students' language abilities might have affected their participation in the research. Additionally, it has been suggested in the literature that research participants provide their "best" accounts in their first language (Baumgartner, 2012; Twinn, 1998) and to researchers who share their social and cultural characteristics (Adamson & Donovan, 2002, cited in Liamputtong, 2008). Overall, speaking all three languages, it seemed beneficial to use my ability to conduct the field research in the language most natural to my target population in the university contexts selected. For this reason, the decision was to contact people in the language they used at university. In England, where everyone was working and studying in English, all the communication was done in English. In Romania, Hungarian departments were approached in Hungarian, and students who were studying in Romanian were approached in the Romanian language.

Transitions and Translations during Data Collection

I applied the above logic to my research instruments (the questionnaire and the interview) as well. It seemed the best option to consistently employ the language my target group was using at university. This meant that I had to prepare the online questionnaire in three different languages adapted to the specific contexts.

Using equivalent questions and categories was challenging and, in some cases, not possible. Some questions had to be phrased slightly differently in the two countries due to different structural and cultural practices relating to higher education. For example, the question about student finances: in England everyone needs to pay tuition fees and there are support mechanisms in place to help students pay for their studies (student loan, maintenance loan, vacation work,

support from parents, etc.), whereas in Romania there are state-funded and tuition fee places and usually parents support their children through university, even if they leave the family home. Phrasing the question the same way in both countries would not have resulted in meaningful responses, so I asked two questions in Romania and one question in England (see figures below). This was my solution to gaining conceptual equivalence and the colleagues I consulted both in Romania and England shared my views.

Figure 1. Question referring to student finances in England

Figure 2. Questions referring to student finances in Romania

Deciding to ask students to complete a questionnaire in the first instance had multiple advantages. First of all, I knew that students would be more willing to fill in a questionnaire than dedicate time for an interview, so I could use the questionnaire responses for a double purpose: to gain insight into the characteristics of the student population (although it would not be in any way representative), and also to act as a sign-up sheet for interview participants. This tool provided me with the means to allow students to gain insight into my research topic and decide whether they wished to take part or not. Overall, 58 students (out of a total of 260 who filled in the questionnaire) opted to share their experiences in semi-structured, topical, life-history interviews with me, and I ended up conducting 45 individual interviews (16 in England and 29 in Romania—16 with Hungarian students and 13 with Romanian students), typically lasting around one hour.

In Romania, 28 out of 29 interviews were conducted in the mother language of the respondents. The final interview was conducted in English, as this was the preference of the respondent. In England, all 16 interviews were conducted in English, although I had two Romanian students whom I could have interviewed in their mother language, but they chose to speak in English. In total, I conducted nine interviews with students not in their mother language. I always offered the possibility to conduct the interviews in the respondents' mother language (when possible) and ultimately it was their choice to share their experiences in English and I respected that. It is possible that they would have been more forthcoming in their mother language, but I was satisfied with the amount and depth of information the students shared with me during the interviews. Overall, I feel my decision to conduct the interviews in the languages used by students at university, usually their mother language, was a good decision which led to rich interview data.

Filep (2009) writes about his experience of "mixing of languages" during interviews (switching from one language to another within one line of thought in order to explain issues), as a natural fact. He does not see it "as a problem, but rather as a method that supports the communication process" (p. 64). This phenomenon similarly applied to my interviews. Students explained situations as they experienced them, within the contexts and in the language in which they happened. Liana, the girl who was studying in English at a Romanian university and who decided to conduct the interview in English, switched languages during the interview. As she was talking about her student experiences in Romania, about the university and her department, she switched from English to Romanian and back. It

was not a problem for me because I understood both the language and the meanings.

Gómez and Kuronen (2011) and Temple and Edwards (2002) point out that the same words can potentially mean different things in different cultural contexts and that "the words we choose matter." As seen in the quotation below, Liana used a Romanian word when she was talking about her future plans and she talked about the fact that she needed to pass her exams and gain her degree before she could leave on her gap year. In this situation, the word "licenţa" refers to the university leaving exam. In the Romanian higher education system, students need both to pass an exam based on the curricula they studied and write a dissertation, which they later defend orally in order to gain their BA degree. If you try to translate the word "licenţa" into English, most dictionaries would equate it with "university degree," whereas the term in the Romanian context refers to the exam that is part of the process of gaining a degree and not the degree itself:

> I'm starting ... I think I have till, you know, *licenţa* and my BA degree, so maybe it will be August or September. I will start with Ireland and the United Kingdom and then maybe Amsterdam then maybe some Nordic countries, and then something like Ukraine ... I will see.

My interviewee knew that I would equally understand why she used a Romanian word and what that word meant, so she didn't need to explain it. The mixing of languages aided the communicative process as we were both aware of the meaning; if she had chosen to explain in English it would have been a lengthy and unnatural conversation.

Temple and Edwards (2002) argue that language is not a neutral medium as it defines difference and commonality, excludes or includes others. In the example above, in using a Romanian word Liana has also signalled that I was an "insider" in the story she was telling, that I knew about the processes and the experiences of which students in her situation were a part.

Knowledge (identity) borders as mentioned by Temple and Edwards (2002) were often fluid: the "process of positioning is fluid and contextual and never final." While conducting interviews in Romania, especially among the Hungarian students, I was frequently regarded as an "insider" with knowledge about sociocultural practices and with experience of the higher education process. Another research participant, Doriana, although a Romanian student, strongly identified with my ethnic background and was constantly referring to how she knows Hungarian students and how she wanted to learn the language.

My position as a researcher was constantly changing between an "insider" and an "outsider" depending on which topic we were discussing during the interview. I was assumed to have knowledge about student life in that particular Romanian city: to know people (lecturers, politicians, student union representatives), names of places (student meeting places, university buildings, squares, pubs, malls), and details about processes (university application processes, accommodation options, graduation)—I was assumed to know, and indeed I did know, the "student languages" they were speaking. Students use different words to describe streets and places in the city depending on where they are from, their mother language, and to which student community they belong. Spaces and places in the city are marked by history, ethnicity, and languages. Students either grow up in or are socialised into this culture upon arrival, where the names of streets and places have two names: an official name (usually Romanian) and a name used and spread by the Hungarian community (usually a Hungarian name). (I have written about the bipolar characteristics of space knowledge and of space usage in this city among Hungarian and Romanian students elsewhere—see Plugor, 2008.)

On the other hand, because I studied further and because I had left the country, especially when students were talking about their future plans, I was regarded as an "outsider," as someone who opted for a different route, compared to their plans to not continue studying further and not to migrate. Similarly, having studied a different subject a few years previous to them, and being at a different stage in my life, all contributed to increase the distance between my experiences and theirs, between being an "insider" and "outsider." Throughout the interview process I tried to maintain an 'outsider' position as much as possible, because I wanted students to explain to me the details of their lives. If they asked questions during the interview I kept my answers short and vague so as not to influence their views. I shared details about my life only after the interview.

In England, even though I did not have first-hand experience of being a BA and MA student in the country, and therefore technically did not share similar experiences to my respondents, the fact that I was part of the same university meant that I was assumed to know about places, names and processes in much the same way as an "insider."

I was aware of these shifts in my position during the interviews, and I reflected on them in my research diary and included them in the data analysis. Some of these shifts were due to my language knowledge (Liana), others connected with my ethnic background (Doriana), while some students compared their own

experiences and future plans to my own educational and career history (Erika).

Translating Data for Analysis

My intention, in a similar vein to what Baumgartner (2012), Irvine, Roberts, and Bradbury-Jones (2008), and Twinn (1998) advocate, was to keep working on the original texts until after I completed the analysis, so I decided to transcribe the interviews in the original language and postponed the translation for a later stage, contrary to the general practice (see Larkin, Dierckx de Casterlé, & Schotsmans, 2007; Sharma-Brymer & Fox, 2008; Temple, 2002, 2006b). I was able to do this because I am fluent in all three languages used in the research project and I had experience in dealing with research texts and had conducted analyses in all three languages in the past.

I transcribed the interviews in their narrative form; I did not force students' speech into written or grammatical correctness. Subsequently, these texts were sent to students for validation, along with two- to three-page English summaries of the interviews. I wrote the summaries in English, as this is the language of my thesis. Even though all previous communication (e-mails, the questionnaire, the interview, follow-up e-mails) was in the language the respondent was studying, I decided to send the summaries in English so that students could get acquainted with and be able to validate my interpretations of their stories in the language in which I was going to use them in my thesis. Students in Romania also had the option of reading the summaries in their mother language if they wished. I received a few comments on transcription and on the summaries, but overall everyone agreed with my interpretations and everyone coped with the English summaries.

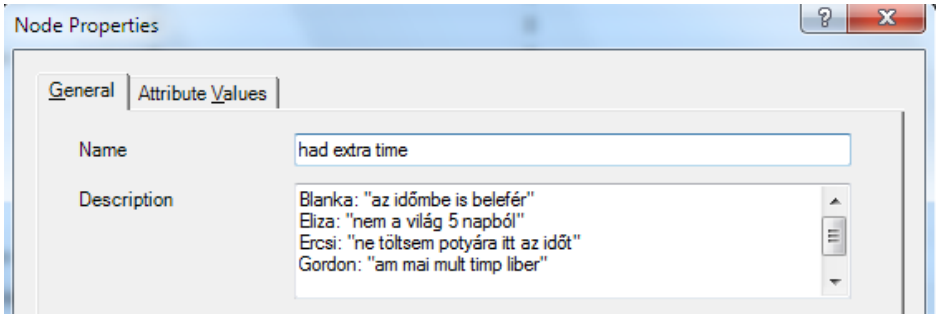
I decided to combine two types of narrative analysis in order to present a holistic picture of the student experiences in the two higher education contexts. Firstly, I carried out content analysis (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998), focusing on the events and experiences recounted in the narrative, and I complemented it with structure or form analysis (Cortazzi, 1993; Riessman, 2008), looking at how the stories are put together. In line with my previous reasons, I decided to read the interviews in the original language, but I did all the coding in the NVivo programme in English. Although I experienced limitations in the programme due to the three languages (e.g. I could not perform meaningful word searches), I did not have problems with developing thematic and categorical codes in English.

Baumgartner's (2012) choice was to code and analyse the transcripts in the original language, as she felt this was the best way to

"understand the overall 'atmosphere' of the interview and to build up a coherent high level understanding of the scope and contexts of the key experiences under investigation" (p. 12). Although I agree with her perspective, I feel that for my personal analysis, using the original languages would have been counter-productive. I was writing my research diary in English and thinking about my research in English, so it seemed natural to write all the memos and notes in English. It was not something I consciously chose; rather, it was something that felt natural to me, the same way it seemed natural to conduct the interviews and the communication with my participants in their mother language or in the language they were studying. I did not feel that doing the coding in English distanced me from the transcripts and I did not feel this jeopardised the analysis or that the literal and free translations I was doing were rushed or incorrect.

I spent a considerable amount of time developing and organising the codes and where I felt necessary I kept the original texts in the description. For example, in the case of in vivo codes I first created the codes in the original language and later translated them to English, as seen in the example below.

Figure 3. Example of in vivo coding



In the example above, all of the students were referring to time in the context of explaining why they engaged in extra-curricular activities and they were saying how they had extra time on their hands. Some students were explicit and said they "have more spare time," like Gordon, but others used different phrases. The literal translation of what Blanka said is that "it fits in my time"; Eliza mentioned that "it's not the world out of five days"; while Ercsi felt that she should "not waste any time in vain." Instead of using different in vivo codes, I captured the meaning of what the respondents said in one code.

Transitions and Translations during the Analysis

Although I speak all three languages at a proficient level, grasping and fully understanding student narratives of motivations, experiences, and plans was a challenging task. I come from a particular background with a particular habitus that has many elements in common with Hungarian students, some similar features with Romanian and also with international students studying in England, and less overlap with English students. Translating and depicting meaning accurately was the biggest challenge I encountered in my research.

I started translating the interviews as I was writing up the findings of the analysis. The translations were entirely done by me in the NVivo programme and I kept the English versions next to the original texts both in the programme and in the written accounts I produced (the PhD thesis and journal articles) until the interpretations were finalised. My general aim during translating the Romanian and Hungarian interview texts into English was to maintain equivalence in meaning whilst doing literal translations as much as possible. In some cases a "free translation" (Birbili, 2000) was more adequate as I had to change or add words to receive meaningful English sentences. I kept the hesitations and interruptions in flow and I did not tidy up grammar as long as the translated text was understandable for English audiences. Similarly to Riessman (2008); Temple (2005); Spivak (1992, 1993, cited in Temple & Edwards, 2002); and Venuti (1995, 1998, 2000, cited in Temple & Edwards, 2002), I believe that the original texts are part of the data production process and I also feel that they represent the contexts the respondents belong to, so I often opted to keep words or phrases from the original language in the English translations and provided additional notes when necessary (as in the examples below).

Eliza, a Hungarian girl living and studying in Romania, was talking about how she sees her fellow colleagues and university life:

> *Original text:*
> A diákok először is fel kell ismerjék ezt a hiányosságukat és el kell jussanak oda, hogy ezen változtatni kell, mert amúgy hátrányba lesznek hogyha kikerülnek. És a másik oldal, az egyetem, ha már amúgy is annyi mindent a szánkba rág, akkor rágja már azt is a szánkba, hogy van lehetőség ezen javítani, és mi szervezünk nektek egy ilyent. Ti csak gyertek el.

> *My translation:*
> First of all students need to realise that they have a shortcoming and they need to reach a point when change is needed [ezen változtatni kell], because if not they will be disadvantaged when they graduate. And on the other hand, the university, if it is spoon-feeding us [szánkba rág] so many things, they should also spoon-feed us that there is a way to remedy this, and we organise things. All you need to do is come. [Ti csak gyertek el.]

The way Eliza speaks about her colleagues and university life, and her choice of words which carry implied meanings, reveals some of the characteristics of the Romanian education system. The fact that she opted to use the words "szánkba rág" (meaning "spoon-feed") refers to the way teaching is done in that country. Academics dictate lengthy and detailed texts during lectures and students are expected to write everything down and learn them by heart for the exams. When she talks about how students first need to realise that they have a shortcoming and that "change is needed," her use of the passive voice signals students' role in society and within the higher education system. They have limited voice and status and when changes are implemented in the system it is a top-down initiative. Her choice of words also indicates the general passivity of students. They are not expected to be active participants during lectures and so their general attitude is similar to a sponge; they absorb whatever information comes their way without actively seeking more opportunity. The last sentence of the quotation also refers to this attitude: "All you need to do is come."

Eliza's viewpoint is that there are opportunities outside of university, but students need to take the initiative; they need to want to know more, to experience more in order to come across these opportunities. Eliza is both criticising the Romanian higher education system in this section and showing that with small changes within the system there are possibilities for more impact. My short analysis of Eliza's quotation is in line with what several researchers mention (see Filep, 2009; Gómez & Kuronen, 2011; Shklarov, 2007; Temple, 2002): that communication across languages involves more than "just a literal transfer of information"; it is rather "a matter of translating culture and national/ethnic concepts, history and memories" (Filep, 2009, p. 69). When translating from one language to the other translators "constantly make decisions about the cultural meanings which language carries, and evaluate the degree to which the two different worlds they inhibit are 'the same'" (Simon, 1996; cited in Temple & Edwards, 2002, p. 5).

The words and language chosen by study participants are important and can have subtle but important differences, as is visible in the quotation below where Margaret, a Romanian girl, speaks about her university experiences and offers opinions about her degree:

> *Original text:*
> Nu prea sunt mulțumită de cursurile pe care le facem, de câtă atenție dau profesorii pentru acestea, cât de puțini suntem.... Nu mă consider antropolog după trei ani. Nu am aprofundat cunoștințele. Trei ani, foarte puțin și a fost prea lejer.
>
> *My translation:*
> I am not really satisfied with the courses [modules in England] we are doing, the amount of devotion lecturers give to these [câtă atenție dau profesorii], how few we are…. I do not consider myself an anthropologist after three years. I did not get thoroughly into / I did not deepen my knowledge [Nu am aprofundat cunoștințele]. Three years are too little and too laid-back [lejer].

If someone not familiar with the Romanian higher education system or language were to read the English translation without the explanations in brackets they would assume this particular student was talking about her degree and not the separate modules she had taken over the years. The words "courses" or "university course" in Romanian refer to both the lectures and the modules a student is attending, and in this context Margaret was referring to the separate modules she had studied as part of her degree. As I was reading this interview I realised that there is a difference between what the word "courses" refers to in the two languages. In Romanian, "attending a course" refers to going and listening to a lecture, whereas in English "course" refers to the whole series of lectures in an academic subject.

The same student summed up her opinion about her degree as "Mi se pare că nu a fost mare brânză. A fost foarte interesant ca past time activity și nu ca ceva din care știi ceva," which in English translates as: "It was a piece of cake. It was very interesting as pastime activity but not as something after which you know something." She was using an idiom that has an English equivalent in meaning to explain her opinion about her degree, but not a literal translation. Overall, I feel my task as translator was not simply to conduct literal translations but rather to discuss differences and similarities in concepts and how these are connected to students' higher education experiences and the meanings they attach to them. My role was to

introduce my readers to the contextual information which might be unfamiliar to them, and to make my own viewpoints and influence apparent throughout the process.

Temple, Edwards and Alexander (2006) argue that researchers are often "expected to produce easy-to-read English texts in which the process of production is not apparent," but I did not try to convert my texts into BBC English (Temple, 2005). Venuti (1998, cited in Temple, Edwards, & Alexander, 2006) calls this process of presenting interview transcripts as if everyone speaks perfect English "domestication," while Spivak (1993, cited in Temple, Edwards, & Alexander, 2006) refers to it as "translatese." Both these authors argue, and I also subscribe to their views, for re-introducing language and cultural contexts and "sending the reader abroad."

Researchers have suggested techniques that they argue address translation dilemmas; for example, back translation and using professional translators (see, for example, Esposito, 2001; Pham & Harris, 2001, cited in Temple 2006b) to check whether a translation is "correct," I did not choose either of these techniques. After I finished the translations I asked a colleague, who had a similar background to mine (Hungarian mother language, grew up in Romania and was fluent in Romanian, has been living and studying in England and was fluent in English), to read both the original texts and my translations and identify possible discrepancies. We had discussions about parts of translated texts about which I was unsure, but overall I always considered (similarly to Temple, 2002; Temple & Edwards, 2002) that there can be no single correct translation of a text, in the same way that the experiences of respondents can be interpreted in different ways. I designed the research, conducted the interviews, did the data analysis, and translated the interviews from the perspective I disclosed at the beginning of this paper, and this is how I represented my participants. The findings of my research therefore need to be read taking this into account.

I agree with researchers like Temple & Young (2004) who state that belonging to different cultures, speaking multiple languages fluently, and shifting between being "insiders" and "outsiders" positions them in such a way that they are able to shed light on different layers of understanding and hidden meanings of their respondents, something which is potentially overlooked by other researchers. This does not mean that their research is better or more valuable; it is just conducted and presented from a different perspective which is currently absent in higher education research.

In this paper I tried to address this gap. I presented my background and my position so that readers could understand the

lenses through which I conducted the research, analysis, and translations. I believe that my cultural background and language knowledge helped me make informed decisions during the various steps of the research process and I reflectively traced all the steps of my research with an explicit aim: to provide a transparent account of the entire process.

When I embarked on this research journey, I never imagined that language would play such an important role, or that I would be transitioning among three languages and cultures throughout the process. I read several texts about conducting social research, especially from comparative perspectives, but these rarely reflected on language-related dilemmas in the different phases of the research and were not written by researchers who shared both language and cultural background with the population investigated. I made language-related decisions based on my familiarity with the contexts and settings of my research and I opted for what seemed most natural to my participants. In retrospect, I feel that the decision to approach students in the language they used at university was appropriate and resulted in rich narrative data and multi-layered analysis which captures the holistic picture of what it means to be a student in that particular social context and time. Because it was usually their mother language, students felt comfortable talking to me, they were able to express themselves, and even when it was not their mother language, like in the case of Liana, our shared language and cultural knowledge aided the interview process. Transcribing and analysing the interviews in the original language also proved fruitful, as I was able to grasp several layers of meaning in students' stories, richness which I hope to have conveyed by presenting words and phrases from the original language in the English translations.

My task as researcher and translator was not simply to conduct research and then do literal translations, but rather to transition between languages and contexts, and to grasp as well as to discuss differences and similarities in concepts and experiences and how these are coupled with meaning-making by students. I was able to fulfil this role due to my multi-lingual and ethnic background, a position which although special, I am sure is not unique. It would be useful to hear the voices of other multi-ethnic and multi-lingual researchers and see the transitions and translations they make between cultures and languages while conducting research on different topics.

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