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Vulnerability and multilingualism in intercultural research with migrants: developing an inclusive research practice

Sara Ganassin ^a, Alexandra Georgiou^b, Judith Reynolds ^a and Mohammed Ateek^c

^aSchool of Education, Communication and Language Sciences, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK;

^bSchool of Human and Social Sciences, University of West London, London, UK; ^cSchool of Education, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK

Rationale for the Special Issue

This Special Issue explores the interplay of vulnerability and multilingualism in research with migrant and displaced communities, with a focus on methodological (including ethical) complexities and the development of ‘best practice’.

Increased mobility, migration and the recent conflicts in Europe and the Middle East have drawn attention to the vulnerabilities associated with migration, but how such vulnerabilities intersect with linguistic diversity is not so often attended to. As Blommaert et al. (2005) have shown, migration and mobility can result in the devaluing of linguistic repertoires which had status in one location but are ascribed less or no value in the new context, giving rise to power asymmetries of various kinds including socioeconomic and epistemic inequalities associated with language. Such dynamics often lead to social injustices and vulnerabilities experienced by migrant and displaced communities, who for example may find themselves excluded from or marginalised by the mainstream education system. As researchers in intercultural communication, we need to be able to meet these linguistic, cultural and social demands, including openly and critically discussing the concepts of inclusive research, and negotiating vulnerability in research, in depth (Blommaert & Backus, 2013; Georgiou, 2022; Pinter, 2014; van Liempt & Bilger, 2012). Therefore, we consider the theme of negotiating vulnerability in research where multiple languages are involved to be of particular importance for our field and related fields.

There has been a focus in the intercultural communication literature in recent years on the experiences of migrant and displaced communities (see e.g. Ganassin, 2020; Ladegaard, 2019; Reynolds, 2020). Researchers in intercultural communication have investigated topics including the intercultural communicative competence of highly-skilled refugees (Ganassin & Young, 2020), refugees’ feelings about language used in their creative writing (Chaplin, 2018), asylum seekers’ narratives in arts-based projects (Ciribuco, 2022), and language pedagogies used with multilingual ESOL learners from asylum seeking and refugee backgrounds (Ateek, 2024; Capstick, 2020; Frimberger, 2016). In extant research, methodological issues connected to vulnerability and multilingualism are implicit but are generally under-explored. In contrast, the question of addressing vulnerability in research has been explicitly explored in migration studies (e.g. Pittaway et al., 2010) and in the literature on qualitative research methods (e.g. Block et al., 2013; Wiles et al., 2007), but there are few connections made to vulnerability in relation to linguistic repertoires (however see Perry, 2011).

The special issue of this journal edited by Ladegaard and Phipps (2020) explored the relationship between language and intercultural communication research, theory development, and social/political action, and argues for researchers’ activities to support and advocate for migrant workers and

refugees by ‘giving voice to their stories’ (p. 74). Contributors responded to this call in diverse ways, including for example critically analysing the construction of anti-immigration discourse in the media (Jenks & Bhatia, 2020), and reporting on an online collaboration initiative between researchers and language educator-activists in the context of displacement (Fassetta et al., 2020). In that special issue, vulnerability and multilingualism were at the forefront of many of the discussions, but critical exploration of how they feature as part of research practices and processes was not the central focus.

In a recent edited volume, Holmes et al. (2022) explore the politics of researching multilingually, aiming to document and analyse how researchers working multilingually deal with questions of linguistic power and privilege, and the impact of the recognition and non-recognition of languages, in their research relationships, processes and products. The volume includes contributions that highlight how the researcher’s methodological decisions regarding language use in different stages of their research can have a significant impact on the dynamics of research relationships and the success of the research. Although the volume advances methodological debates about research practice with multilingual communities, there is not a particular focus on research involving migrant and displaced communities with few exceptions (e.g. Georgiou, 2022).

Development of the Special Issue

The idea for a special issue that explores ‘vulnerability’, multilingualism, and best practice in research emerged in a 1-day workshop funded by the British Association of Applied Linguistics (BAAL) as part of the 2022 Cambridge University Press Applied Linguistics Seminar Programme. The workshop *Researching vulnerable multilinguals: Developing an inclusive research practice* was organised by Ganassin and Georgiou; Reynolds and Ateek were invited as keynote speakers. The main theme that attracted the attention of speakers and participants at the workshop was the meaning of ‘vulnerability’ in research, and how we could unpack the term to be understood in the context of linguistic injustice in migrant and displaced communities.

Discussions at and following the workshop explored how vulnerability has been defined and studied in different contexts, from health to social and political sciences. Different disciplinary discourses have focused on various aspects of vulnerability (see Brown et al., 2017 for an extensive discussion). Specific to the field of applied linguistics and intercultural communication is the understanding of vulnerability proposed by Badwan (2021), namely vulnerability as either ‘personal’ or ‘collective’, which is useful for researchers and practitioners who find themselves identified as vulnerable or engage with participants who are considered to belong to vulnerable groups. Within migration studies, van Liempt and Bilger (2012) place particular importance on the institutional and social frameworks that researchers need to take into consideration when dealing with issues of vulnerability. More recently, and building on this view of vulnerability as embedded within institutional structural frameworks, Gilodi et al. (2022) offer a useful conceptualisation of vulnerability as a multi-layered (innate, situational, structural), time-linked, experiential and individualised phenomenon. Interestingly for us, the role of language does not feature in either of these contributions to the conceptual discussion around vulnerability and migration. In contrast, for Perry (2011), the linguistic repertoire of participants and researchers is a relevant dimension of addressing vulnerability in research with migrant populations, and she examines critically how this is (not) addressed in institutional ethics guidelines in the USA. Perry notes that universities’ Institutional Review Boards vary greatly in their definitions of vulnerability, and points to the poor guidance related to conducting research with participants whose first language is not English. We would add to this our own observation that research ethics governance processes at universities tend not to exercise much oversight of how researchers deal with vulnerabilities after they obtain ethical approvals. How to proceed is frequently left up to the researcher’s own conscience and discretion.

For these reasons, we felt that the intercultural communication literature would benefit from more focused attention to the interplay of vulnerability and linguistic repertoires in the processes and practices of migrant-related research, and we circulated a call for contributions to this issue.

Aims of the Special Issue

This special issue provides a forum for intercultural communication researchers to critically examine the theoretical and methodological challenges and opportunities they face when working with vulnerable multilingual migrants. It explores the ways in which the concepts of vulnerability and multilingualism are negotiated in research processes and practices with migrant individuals and communities, including both forced and voluntary migrants. The specific aims of the issue are:

- To share up-to-date empirical research on themes related to the interplay of ‘vulnerability’, ‘social justice’, ‘language’, ‘power’ and ‘ethics’ in conducting research with migrant and displaced multilinguals;
- To offer research-informed guidance on how to exhibit researcher sensitivity and gain an in-depth understanding of the power differences between researchers and participants in such research contexts; and
- To foreground, and promote theorisation of, the concept of vulnerability and to encourage critical reflection on the impact of vulnerability in such research contexts.

The focus is on methodological complexities and on the development of ‘best practice’ in carrying out research with these groups. Contributors to the special issue were invited to provide transparent and theory-informed accounts of how they dealt with methodological decisions (e.g. gaining access and consent, ensuring confidentiality, managing relationships with participants and other stakeholders) during the life of their projects from planning to dissemination. The nine contributions engage in diverse ways with issues of vulnerability in intercultural communication research and how this is negotiated or addressed throughout the research process. The special issue offers explorations in different sociolinguistic contexts including immigration advice settings, prisons, the natural environment, primary school classrooms, and higher education contexts; and features work with migrants from different backgrounds. While the work is of most obvious and direct application to the field of intercultural communication, it also contributes to the broader educational discussion and thinking around ‘best’ research practices in the social sciences, particularly migration studies.

Presentation of the articles

The first contribution, from Sally Cook, enriches our understanding of multilingualism and vulnerability research through an innovative methodological contribution. The research combines interpretative phenomenological analysis with ethnographic approaches to explore the impact of multilingualism on the rehabilitation of survivors of torture and human rights violations. Cook provides researchers with insights and guidelines on how to do research with vulnerable multilinguals and explains the essential role of language in contributing to and addressing lived experiences of vulnerability. Cook supports adopting methodological frameworks that best suit each research. In her case, the phenomenological framework was adopted to explore the participants’ lived experiences of multilingualism, since human existence can be best understood in terms of how people experience the world. Cook also pays special attention to the role of language and learning of a new language in the context of recovery from trauma, used as an empowering tool in identity construction and agency building.

The second paper looks at the interplay of linguistic assimilation, precarity and vulnerability in the context of prison education. Sotiria Kalbeni, Evgenia Vassilaki, and Eleni Gana draw

methodological insights from a critical ethnographic study on language education focused on the experiences of young multilingual migrant-refugee inmates in two prison schools in central Greece. The three cycles of Nexus Analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2004) are used both as a methodology and as an analytical framework to explore multiple aspects of participants' vulnerability as a result of the precariousness of their living conditions and experiences of forced mobility. Language ideologies and the dominance of Greek within the walls of the prisons shape dynamics of linguistic assimilation and exclusion that further contribute to the social and physical isolation of the inmate-participants. Overall, the paper proposes how Nexus Analysis and the research tools used during the study can support researchers-as-activists to mediate the negotiation of linguistic inequalities in prisons as stigmatised and yet very diverse contexts, giving a voice to a social group that it is often dehumanised.

Hanain Brohi, in the third paper, explores the term collective vulnerability (Badwan, 2021, p. 209) shared between the researcher and researched. The paper proposes a reflection on her PhD, which examined how a group of South Asian Muslim women at a British university interactionally navigated the socio-political realities of living as part of a minority in Britain. Brohi studies the tensions arising within the research space, a 'Sisters' Circle' of the Muslim women who met regularly within a meeting room (prayer room) at the university. As a member of the Sisters' Circle, Brohi examines her role of being an insider/outsider and reflects on her positionality critically. The paper also discusses Islamophobia, the surveillance of Muslims, and the role of this in building collective vulnerability among minoritised groups who share linguistic citizenship. Brohi argues how the 'Sisters' Circle' works as a counterspace that confronts the somatic norm within the academy.

Kathryn Sidaway's contribution, which follows Brohi's, is situated in the context of research on the language learning motivation of adult migrant learners of English in England. Sidaway reports and analytically reflects on how she sought to mitigate power imbalances, including linguistic asymmetries, between herself and her participants by using more participatory methods of data collection and analysis. Her paper focuses on the strategic design choices she made, in a study which took place largely remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic, for co-producing data and analysis with her migrant learner participants about their language learning motivations. Sidaway describes how she drew on the affordances of digital communication technologies (text messages and video conferencing software) to create more dialogic and democratised channels of communication between researcher and participants, which allowed for participants to exercise their own agency in relation to when, how, and using what language and communication tools they provided information to her as the researcher, and also enabled participants to use communication with the researcher for their own benefit. In her analysis, Sidaway relates this to Gilodi et al.'s (2022) notion of vulnerability as a complex multi-level and time-linked individualised experiential phenomenon, linked closely to the capacity of individuals to resist being positioned as vulnerable by others through exercising their own agency in different ways.

The next paper by Gonzalo Pérez-Andrade and Hannah King problematises constructs of multilingualism, labelling practices, and vulnerability in the context of the English as an Additional Language (EAL) classroom. The authors share insights from a participatory study developed by a London-based Higher Education Institution in partnership with a local primary school, with the goal to examine discourses around multilingualism surrounding students, teachers and staff, and the community. The reflexive approach adopted by the researchers during interviews, observation and 'knowledge exchanges' enabled them to account for the impact of their own agency and involvement in the research process (Consoli & Ganassin, 2023) exposing potential biases that shaped decision-making and labelling processes. Vulnerability is understood as a multi-layered, contextual and individual condition and the authors question the labelling of particular groups as 'vulnerable' (Luna, 2019). Overall, the paper emphasises how the consistent engagement with researcher reflexivity throughout the different stages of a study can enable the researcher-practitioner to challenge problematic labels related to (mono- and) multilingualism

and vulnerability, including current understandings of EAL that position ‘multilingual learners’ as deficient.

In the sixth contribution, Áine McAllister adopts a social activist stance (Ladegaard & Phipps, 2020) in and through her research to both investigate and challenge the vulnerabilities experienced by highly skilled refugees and asylum seekers seeking access to higher education in the UK. As the paper outlines, these vulnerabilities are multiple and structural in nature, being imposed on individuals through the non-alignment of institutional conditions applied to university entrance with forced migrants’ own skills, qualifications and life experiences. McAllister focuses particularly on the imposed vulnerability of linguistic exclusion and agentive resistance to this, also emphasising the need for researchers to implement a practice of vulnerability in their research engagement. She uses Freirean dialogue-based creative methods of eliciting experience narratives, and applied ethnopoetic analysis and poetic inquiry approaches of analysing and presenting such narratives, to show how participants are denied a voice and a role in the higher education space on the one hand, yet are able on the other hand, to resist such imposed vulnerabilities in the space of the research and in other ways. Thus, McAllister argues (following Phipps, 2019 and Butler, 2016) that vulnerability is not the absence of agency; rather, it is a starting point for individuals to exercise their agency to resist inequality and injustice.

Khawla Badwan, Caitlin Nunn and Kate Pahl explore, in their paper, the challenges and affordances of researching multilingually with/without language during a research encounter structured around an outdoor activity. They share reflections from a project that examined the role of senses during engagements with treescapes in the UK in the experiences of young men who migrated to the UK as unaccompanied asylum seekers. Central to the documented listening walk are the practice of feeling ‘as a form of cultural politics or world making’ (Ahmed, 2014, p. 12), the sensorial element of the interaction with people and the surrounding nature, and the absence of language and translation. The contribution encourages researchers, who are here seen as ‘travellers’ (Holliday, 2022), to embrace vulnerability as an ontological state while researching with and beyond language, proposing how non-traditional methodologies can support the intentional co-creation of a safe research space for linguistic hospitality (Phipps, 2012).

The penultimate contribution from Tasneem Solie challenges power dynamics between the researcher and the researched through adopting reflexivity when researching vulnerable groups. Solie’s PhD research examines the language that Syrian refugees in the UK use to discuss their stories through a metaphor-led discourse analysis approach. In her paper, she argues that multidimensional reflexivity addresses issues of power asymmetries and leads to more transparent research. She does so by engaging herself as a researcher with personal, interpersonal, contextual and methodological reflexivity (Walsh, 2003) when working with Syrian refugees in the UK as the researched community. The paper describes how these dimensions of reflexivity are applied throughout all stages of research, including discourse analysis. Giving her background, Solie also reflects on her positionality as a researcher with an insider/outsider positionality in the research and narrates how this impacted on her research process, including navigating through labels and making considered decisions about how to draw on a shared multilingual repertoire featuring different varieties of Arabic in the research.

The final paper, by Judith Reynolds and Katy Brickley, is a comparative reflection on migrant participant vulnerabilities and the steps taken to address vulnerabilities arising from the research in separate projects, focused on communicative practices in two different immigration advice contexts in the UK. Both projects involved linguistic ethnographic research in institutions and engaged with institutional actors as gatekeepers and linguistically diverse refugees and asylum seekers. Reynolds and Brickley examine linguistic vulnerability, or an increased risk of harm arising from a mismatch between an individual’s communicative repertoires and those of people they need to interact with, as a dimension of both their research contexts and the research processes. They incorporate this dimension of vulnerability into a conceptualisation of migrant vulnerabilities in research as emerging from the interaction between an individual’s characteristics, the situational context,

and the research methods (Perry, 2011). The paper critically discusses the steps each author took, with different outcomes, to try to de-vulnerabilise participants, and highlights the complicating yet critical role of the gatekeeper in addressing participant vulnerabilities in research of this kind.

Contribution of the Special Issue

Together, the articles included in this special issue help to refine emergent conceptualisations of vulnerability as it is connected to language and migration, which featured in discussions in the BAAL/CUP 2022 workshop referred to above. In various ways, the papers interrogate and reflect on how the linguistic repertoires of migrant participants and researchers interact with vulnerabilities of different kinds within the context of research processes, and how researchers deal with the methodological complexities arising.

Theoretically, the nine papers foreground nuanced theorisations of vulnerability in relation to multilingualism. Many of the contributions draw on a conceptualisation of vulnerability as complex, contextual and changing over time (e.g. Kalbeni et al.; Reynolds and Brickley; Sidaway). As some of the authors highlight, these layers of vulnerability are structurally imposed on individuals (McAllister) by the institutions and contexts framing their lives. Thus, vulnerabilities are often linked to structural factors and are understood as a silencing or a denial of voice imposed on migrants by institutions or social structures.

As a counterpoint to this, issues of resistance and agency as relating to the vulnerability of multilingual migrants, are also central to many of the papers in the special issue. Several papers illustrate how research can become a way of empowering participants, whilst rejecting labels that confine them to particular positionalities (e.g. Badwan et al.; Cook; Pérez Andrade and King). One way in which this is done through using the research spaces and the participant–researcher relationships as co-constructed safe spaces within which vulnerabilities can be shared and expressed (e.g. Brohi; Kalbeni et al.). In addition, some contributions emphasise the necessity to do research differently, questioning whether conventional ways of researching are disempowering and instead proposing more non-traditional methodologies such as poetic inquiry, nexus analysis, and creative practice-based inquiry (e.g. McAllister; Kalbeni et al.; Badwan et al.). In so doing, these papers encourage an understanding of vulnerability not as the absence of agency, but as a starting point for the building of resilience and the resistance to inequality and injustice (Butler, 2016; Phipps, 2019). Regardless of the methodology adopted, the contributions emphasise how a practice of reflexivity at all stages of the research is essential to a deeper engagement with vulnerability in multilingual spaces (e.g. Solie; Sidaway; see further Consoli & Ganassin, 2023).

Our goal as editors is to better understand the relationship between vulnerability and multilingualism, and part of this involves reflecting on the conceptualisation of language itself. Many of the papers resonate with the concept of spatial repertoire (Canagarajah, 2018), defined as a configuration of communicative resources that (1) are assembled in situ, in collaboration with others, and in the manner of distributed practice; and (2) include all possible semiotic resources that are embedded in the material ecology and facilitated by social networks (p. 37). In our contributions, within spaces such as a meeting room at a university, a classroom in a school or in a prison, or an unstructured and unconstrained space in nature, vulnerability is present and impactful; yet diverse spatial repertoires are employed to make meaning, valorise identities, and build resilience. This leads to the empowerment of individuals whose opportunities for self-expression have been constrained by and in other contexts.

What is unique to this special issue is the foregrounding of language, and specifically the complexities of multilingualism, as a core dimension of vulnerability in migration. The discussions and debates in this issue extend existing work on vulnerability in migration contexts, and on how such contexts should be researched, by highlighting that language and/or the absence of language is integral to human experience and social relations and is worthy of greater theoretical scrutiny. In the context of migration, it is undeniable that language itself can become a source of vulnerability (e.g.

through a mismatch between an individual's linguistic repertoire, and those which are dominant in the new context, giving rise to inequalities). However, the contributions have also shown how as researchers, the ways in which we mobilise and engage with language(s) and multilingualism, and also other modes of expression, in our research processes and activities can shape or challenge existing vulnerabilities and may help to devulnerabilise individuals and groups in the space of the research.

A note about the term 'vulnerability'

We are particularly pleased to publish this collection of work in *Language and Intercultural Communication*, which has an editorial policy of requiring articles in English to also include an abstract in another language. The pertinence of this policy to the focus of the special issue is worth commenting on because in more than one case we as co-editors have become aware of debates amongst our contributors about how exactly to translate the English term 'vulnerability' into other languages. For example, the word 'vulnerability' in Arabic was translated as 'ضعف' which means 'weakness' and also as 'هشاشة' which means 'fragility' by different translators. The fact that there were sometimes several alternative translations with different connotations, none of which fully captures the complexities of meaning present in this collection, only highlights to us that different multilingual individuals are likely to have different understandings of what it means to be 'vulnerable' (whether in a research process or otherwise), and that we as intercultural scholars need to exercise critical care over the application of this label to others and the use of this term in multilingual research. It is also noteworthy that (as in English) it was sometimes commented on by translators that 'vulnerability' as a concept is rarely used in the context of 'language' in other languages. For us, this reflects the relative inattention paid (outside our academic circles) to language and languaging (Phipps, 2011) as a primary vehicle for being and doing in the world on the one hand, and to the impact of languaging practices on our social positionings on the other; and only emphasises the need for this special issue.

Conclusion

We are writing this editorial in the United Kingdom in the summer of 2024, during which the country has seen significant anti-immigrant public unrest that was fuelled by divisive rhetoric and discourse in political and media spheres. Whilst we cannot, either through a special issue or through research more broadly, directly change the structural inequalities (e.g. in accessing education and employment) faced by many migrants today, we can and should still create spaces for linguistic hospitality (Phipps, 2012) within our work and our engagement with migrant participants. We hope that this special issue provides at least some guidance and inspiration for other researchers who find themselves grappling with the interplay of vulnerability and multilingualism in their research with migrants.

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ORCID

Sara Ganassin  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0373-542X>

Judith Reynolds  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3154-4919>

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