

***Stranci*: political research and language learning in the former Yugoslavia**

Daniela Lai

Royal Holloway, University of London
Daniela.Lai@rhul.ac.uk

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Abstract

There is a striking contrast between the amount of time researchers spend thinking about and addressing questions of language in relation to fieldwork, and the little guidance provided on this matter in methods textbooks and research programmes. This chapter analyses the challenges of fieldwork in the former Yugoslavia in relation through the lenses of language skills, with a focus on researchers working within Politics and International Relations. The chapter addresses questions such as: how do language skills change the researcher's experience of the field, their relationship with interviewees, and their own positionality? How do they affect the kind of methods used, research findings and their interpretation? What are the ethics of language learning during fieldwork? What motivates PhD students to undertake expensive and long periods of training on the side of the demands of their research degree? The findings presented here are based on interviews conducted with researchers with experience of doing fieldwork in the former Yugoslavia, who had to consider such questions and decide whether to learn a local language, work with interpreters and translators, and/or carry out interviews in English or other non-Yugoslav languages.

1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the challenges of fieldwork in the former Yugoslavia through the lenses of language skills, and from the perspective of scholars studying region from the

perspective of Politics/Political Science and International Relations (broadly defined). Learning the language of your country of research is (actively) encouraged in some fields, but (mostly quietly or indirectly) discouraged in others. Yet, there is little discussion, in political research textbooks, of the advantages and disadvantages of language learning before and during fieldwork: how do language skills change the researcher's experience of the field, their relationship with interviewees, and their own positionality? How do they affect the kind of methods we use, our findings and their interpretation, as well as the contribution of our research to the field? What are the ethics of language learning during fieldwork? What motivates PhD students to undertake expensive and long periods of training on the side of the demands of their research degree? This book chapter addresses these questions, drawing on interviews with researchers who have conducted fieldwork in the former Yugoslav region, as well as on the author's own experience.

On the one hand, while being focused on the former Yugoslav region, the chapter also speaks to broader debates in Politics and IR. As Fuji (2010: 239) noted, 'political scientists tend to reflect less on the many decisions they make "backstage", such as (...) what languages they use for interviews, and how they adjust for rumours and silences during fieldwork. Yet, it is these backstage decisions that bear directly on the quality of the data.'¹ Fuji argued that these issues were part of research 'meta-data' that researchers should carefully consider in their analysis. However, this may not necessarily happen: first, because in some scholarly traditions the researcher is effectively written out of the research to enhance a sense of objectivity in the presentation of the findings; second, because even in more interpretive traditions that encourage reflexivity, issues of language and translation rarely come to the forefront in the analysis or even in methodology sections. Moreover, compared to other disciplines such as anthropology, Politics and IR scholarship puts much less emphasis, overall, on the kind of contextual knowledge that is likely to be informed by knowledge of the local language.

On the other hand, many of the reflections presented in the chapter are specific to the former Yugoslav region. First, the question of language itself – how it is called, how it has changed over the years, how it is instrumentalised for political purposes – is

¹ Such reflections seem more common in other disciplines, such as geography. See Watson (2004).

the subject of intense debates and numerous caveats that researchers include in their writings to explain their references to BCSM, or Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian and Montenegrin and the variants they use. There are also important questions around the role of BCSM as a privileged and assumed *lingua franca* in the former Yugoslav region, compared to Albanian, Macedonian or Slovenian (not to mention minority languages), as some of the interviewees for this project noted. Even today, as most researchers in Politics and IR focusing on the region work on issues directly or indirectly linked to conflict and international intervention, it is far more likely that people will engage in learning BCSM rather than any of the other Slavic languages or Albanian. According to all the researchers interviewed, there was therefore a need to openly engage with these questions while pursuing language training, as well as in the field.

Second, the region has also become the subject of much international research over the past few decades. As I noted elsewhere (Lai, 2020) its location within Europe and the relatively good security situation on the ground over the past few decades made it particularly easy for researchers to travel to the former Yugoslavia with few bureaucratic and practical worries. This could have provided researchers with an incentive (and more opportunities) to learn the language, while also creating a sort of ‘research fatigue’ in many communities. In this context of research fatigue, speaking the language also signals a commitment and greater form of legitimacy to potential research participants (especially given the ‘bad reputation’ of political scientists as going ‘in and out’ of field sites, as noted by one participant; Interview R). It also allows researchers to operate relatively independently, approach communities openly and without necessarily relying on intermediaries. As a result, and despite the fact that this is not an expectation in their field, most researchers seem to take quite seriously the question of whether to learn the local language, and the decision not to do it is not taken lightly.

The chapter is based on 12 semi-structured interviews conducted with researchers at various career stages who broadly identify as working within politics and International Relations/International Studies. They were either directly invited to take part via email, or recruited through social media posts. Interviews took place between January and early July 2020. I anticipated interviewing researchers based in and around London in person, and other participants online. Due to COVID19, all interviews were in the end conducted online or on the phone. Where necessary to protect their anonymity,

some details about the participants' specific research topics or fieldwork setting have been made more generic or omitted. In a few cases, researchers have been assigned two interview codes, one to report quotes or details that could identify them, and one for anonymised references. Due to the limited sample, the geographical area covered by the researchers interviewed includes Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Croatia, Kosovo and Serbia, but not Montenegro, Macedonia or Slovenia. As a result, when referring to the languages used for fieldwork I will refer to either Albanian or BCS, unless it is necessary for the purpose of the discussion to specify which regional variant of BCS was being used. The interviews lasted between 35 minutes and about one hour and a half.

The conduct and content of the interviews was inevitably shaped by my own experience of fieldwork in the region, specifically in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and my struggles with language learning. Having spent a considerable amount of time doing research with BCS speaking participants as well as English speakers positioned myself within the group of researchers I was interviewing for this chapter. I shared with many of them a specific educational background, research interests, and membership of specific professional circles and associations. I had in fact met many (though not all) of the participants through academic conferences and events in the past. These commonalities can be an advantage in establishing rapport with interviewees, but they also challenge the researcher to elicit information that interviewees may otherwise take for granted and omit from their accounts due to the shared background between the researcher and participants (Baker 2019). In addition to this, the interview entails a different relational dynamic compared to the kind of interactions that would normally take place between myself and the researchers I interviewed, which can feel unnatural and should be navigated with care, especially to avoid putting interviewees under pressure to disclose things they may not feel comfortable sharing. For this reason, in carrying out these interviews I was striving to adopt a non-judgmental and empathetic attitude towards the participants, in order to create a professional but informal atmosphere within which they felt at ease sharing their fieldwork experiences.

Based on the interview findings, the chapter makes a twofold argument. On the one hand, the research environment in Politics and IR is institutionally indifferent at best, hostile at worst, towards language learning for fieldwork. Researchers struggle with the cost of language training, the time it takes, and the professional cost of having

one's research labelled as area-specific (which the academic discipline does not value). On the other hand, in-depth knowledge of a context and language is highly valued. There is a sense that knowing the local language gives access to contextual knowledge that would otherwise remain out of reach, while also allowing for the establishment of more 'direct' relationships with participants. Because of this, researchers invest time and effort into addressing language issues related to their research, while research methods books and training programmes tend to gloss over such questions. Given the limited sample and exploratory nature of the study, the findings presented in this chapter should be considered as preliminary, with an emphasis on their descriptive, empirical contribution to our understanding of research practices in the former Yugoslav region. There is much scope (and need) for further writings on the question of language and fieldwork in the former Yugoslavia and beyond. The chapter is structured as follows. In the first section, I discuss debates on language and fieldwork with reference to research methods, ethics, and questions of representation. I then outline the various trade-offs and dilemmas of language learning, before moving on to discussing researchers' experiences in the field and how language affected their 'contextual awareness'. Lastly, before concluding, I reflect on how the academic disciplines of Politics and IR perceive language learning and the kind of academic knowledge informed by in-depth contextual knowledge.

2 Setting the context: debates on language and fieldwork

It is difficult to situate discussions on language learning and fieldwork within a broader literature, given the above-mentioned absence of explicit reflection on the matter in Politics and IR. For the purpose of this chapter, this section focuses on three issues specifically. First, it discusses how methods textbooks and training programmes all too often fail to consider language learning as part of research training. Second, it explores representation and legitimacy and how our linguistic positionality influences this. Lastly, it approaches the issue of language learning and fieldwork from the point of view of research ethics.

For research methods textbooks in politics and IR, language learning and the application of language skills to research seems to be a non-issue. Even the books that present themselves as more practical guides to research do not address this as part of chapters or sections discussing fieldwork, the collection of data, archival research, or the analysis of the data gathered. For example, when discussing positionality, a widely-used textbook notes how ‘social characteristics such as age, ethnicity, nationality, and even marital status and whether or not the ethnographer has children, have all been identified as having an important impact on how the researcher is received by informants and the kinds of access to different social worlds that they are granted’ (Halperin and Heath 2017: 328). There is no mention of the fact that knowledge of the local language (and the level of competence) may play a big part in this. Similarly, other books with chapters on fieldwork (Lamont 2015) or long sections on research ethics and relationships with participants (Lamont and Boduszynski 2020) go through a series of practical questions facing researchers but do not address the issue of language and interpretation/translation. More baldly, Gerring (2007: 150) argues that logistical considerations such as ‘familiarity with the language of a country’ play a role in case selection, but ‘have no bearing on the validity of the findings stemming from a case study’. In methods textbooks following a more interpretive approach, issues of language are discussed more openly, but often in the context of challenging the formalised positivist research jargon and adopting registers that better reflect the socially constructed nature of knowledge (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). Such minimal discussion of language skills and learning contrasts with the importance of language for many theoretical traditions in the fields of Politics and IR, which translates into a heavy reliance on text-based data, be it in the form of documents or transcripts. One would think that deciding at what point to translate a speech or transcript would be important for deciding how to code, or for carrying out an analysis of discourse. And yet, such choices are left to the individual researcher to navigate, in the best-case scenario with the support of an experienced supervisor.

There is a different body of literature on fieldwork emerging, especially in IR, which is set to provide more guidance on the practicalities of field research, looking at the dilemmas, mistakes and strategies that researchers have to navigate in the field (see for example Bliesemann de Guevara and Bøås 2020). This literature includes, for

instance, more honest accounts of 'failure' in fieldwork than what is commonly portrayed in the 'finished product' of research, such as those explored in the volume recently edited by Kušić and Záhora (2020). Within the volume, three of the chapters focus on research carried out in the former Yugoslav region, by researchers with different positionalities and backgrounds. In these chapters, language is present in different ways: in its affective and socially-contingent dimension, beyond the spoken aspect of an interview and of translation (Cole 2020); as a way to determine who is 'native' to a specific place, in the eyes of outside observers, regardless of the actual origins of the researcher (Kušić 2020: 152); and, as Summa (2020: 140) eloquently describes in her fieldnotes, as part of her struggle to make sense of an ever-elusive 'real' Sarajevo.

It is in this kind of texts that, for example, more explicit discussions of issues of legitimacy and representation can be found, including reflections on the role of interpreters in the research. This is a particularly important issue when discussing language and fieldwork, as their presence can be simultaneously necessary and challenging for the success of the research. On the one hand interpreters become part of the research process, as the outcome of an interview or other research interaction hinges on their ability to translate questions and answers correctly and in the right tone. Moreover, often the role of interpreters goes well beyond relaying conversations between researchers and participants (Bujra 2006). Because they are often local and embedded in the research contexts, interpreters can sometimes be involved in negotiating access, providing interpretation of non-verbal cues, and even of interview findings, which in turn can pose a problem when – in the write up of the research – the interpreter's contributions are rendered invisible to the reader (Leck 2014). On the other hand, the presence of an interpreter can also deeply affect the relationship between the researcher and the participants, and their position in the surrounding social context. For instance, where interpreters belong to a specific social or political group, this may influence local perceptions of the researcher, whether they are aware of it or not. It may also lead to a loss of meaning when the use of a significant term is missed through translation (Gent 2014). In more extreme cases, it may lead to situations where researchers can potentially exploit their lack of language skills to attend conversations that would otherwise not be held in their presence, and subsequently rely on the

interpreter to convey the meaning of what was going on (Chakravarty 2012: 260). This inevitably entails a degree of deception (Chakravarty 2012: 266) that not all researchers would feel comfortable with. Lastly, interpreters in contexts of international intervention, like much of the former Yugoslav region, become part of a 'peacekeeping economy' (Jennings and Bøås: 2015) characterised by precarity and insecurity (Baker 2012; 2014), an economy to which researchers contribute.

Matters of language, representation and authenticity are thus inextricably linked to research ethics, where ethics are understood a process that continues 'beyond the field' (Knott 2019), informing not only our relationships with participants at the moment of our interactions, but also what we do with our research findings, whether and under what conditions we return to the field, and so on. At times, the lack of language skills has contributed to insensitive practices that can be characterised as unethical. An example of how language and ethics are closely intertwined in the field is the infamous 'Anyone here has been raped and speaks English?', a type of research request that, as Cronin-Furman and Lake (2018: 2) note, has been around for decades and continues to be perpetuated in various forms in fieldwork practices today. Here, it is not only the fact that a researcher from a European or North American university can show up and demand to hear stories of wartime violence that poses an ethical problem. It is also the fact that such stories of violence come to matter (or to matter more) only if and when they are told in English, as the researcher would not otherwise be able to turn them into precious data without additional local help. Clearly, a majority of researchers who do not speak the local language of their field site does not engage in such unethical behaviour. In addition to this, a situation where a researcher with local language skills is excessively confident in their ability to understand the 'local context' can be just as conducive to potentially problematic interactions. It is however important to reflect on how the presence or absence of language skills, combined with the knowledge of the local context, makes us more or less likely to engage in various kinds of insensitive behaviour.

Overall, it seems clear that there is a need for further discussion of language learning and fieldwork, and of practices around translation and reliance on interpreters. In the rest of the chapter, I discuss how researchers working in the former Yugoslav region have dealt with these challenges of research training, navigating the field and

building legitimacy and positioning themselves academically as scholars of politics/IR with a specific regional expertise.

3 Before the field

Some of the choices related to language learning and positionality appear well before researchers get to the field. Deciding whether and how to learn a language from the former Yugoslav region is far from straightforward, and it is linked to institutional support (including funding), time availability, social barriers, and the focus of one's research.

First, the motivations for beginning language learning vary greatly. Not all researchers begin the process of language learning for research purposes. There may be personal relationships involved, or interests in the culture, history and politics of the region that pre-date one's decision to engage in academic research (*Interviews R, C*). In some cases, it is also a function of available opportunities, such as access to free training linked to study bursaries for a specific degree (*Interview D*). When it comes to language learning for research specifically, some interviewees mentioned that they wanted to use methods that would put them in touch with people in communities, or that because they wanted to live in the country for extended periods of time, there were very practical needs to be considered, such as the ability to read street signs or ask for directions if one got lost (*Interviews G, P, M*).²

Not all research projects require knowledge of the local language. Some of the participants mentioned that the fact that they were working on the role of international actors, or with organisations with professionalised, English-speaking staff, meant that their interviews would be carried out in English anyway (*See interviews E, F, S, H*). However, there are two considerations to make here. First, as discussed by several interviewees, researchers may still decide to learn the language to access contextual knowledge that will improve the quality of their research interactions, such as the ability

² This is particularly important in cases visual prompts are the main means of communication, such as for interviewee J.

to ask better questions during interviews, or as a route to getting cultural knowledge about the region as well (*Interviews C, J, E*). Second, some researchers who originally conducted projects without these local language skills re-considered their choice when engaging in subsequent projects. This could be either because their methodological approach had changed, or because they felt they wanted to make a sort of 'ethical commitment' to their participants and research contacts they had been working with for many years (*Interviews S, F*). It is also important to note that learning a foreign language entails varying levels of difficulty for different people. This could be due to economic/budget concerns during university, to personal challenges with foreign languages, and also to the fact that one may end up having to learn a former Yugoslav language not from their mother tongue but from English as a second language. Crucially, there are barriers linked to disability that are rarely made explicit when discussing fieldwork (or even research methods in general): one deaf interviewee, for example, felt that they could only be able to achieve a basic level of linguistic competency, which they did for the purpose of carrying out several long fieldtrips in the region over a number of years. However, gaining a high-level of proficiency during the timeframe of a PhD was effectively out of their reach, as for example they would have had to learn how to lipread in BCS (*Interview J*).

When it comes to the process of language learning for research, it is evident that researchers go through different routes. Some participants took formal language courses, but these were not always available in the home/university cities where researchers were based. As a result, where group classes were not available, some took private lessons with a tutor, others did online courses (*Interviews, P, S, M*). Alongside this, several interviewees also mentioned self-study, with textbooks or by dedicating some time every morning to learning vocabulary, listening, or translating something (*Interviews C, R*). Moreover, most interviewees who did language learning mentioned the importance of being in the field to develop language skills, and continuing classes while there. It should be mentioned that all interviewees who attempted learning the language did so for BCS (not specifically the Montenegrin variant as none of them did fieldwork there). None of the interviewees had been studying Albanian for their

research.³ Several researchers problematised this issue. One of them said: 'If you are an actual Balkans expert, you would have to know Albanian as well (...). We often tend to overlook the Albanian angle on Balkan questions, we tend to have a very Yugophile approach' (*Interview E*). There was also a problematisation of language proficiency as the marker of 'good' or 'more ethical' research: one participant said:

'It's useless for me to do this research on the Balkans while there are as many researchers from the Balkans that would be able to do the same research without having the linguistic and cultural disadvantage from the start. It is better for me to do a research on the question of [an international actor's role] in the Balkans.' (*Interview E*)⁴

Similarly, another interviewee said:

'As someone who's coming from [a Western European country] but also from a [university in another European country], then entering a field which I don't have a linguistic competence in, that's something I rather problematise than seeing the added value. [...] there is some added value to at least reflecting on your language journey, for example, but compared to people who are from the region already, who have the complete language competence, I think there's not much added value I have.'

He then added: 'Friends from the region say it's really good to have sort of an outsider view, but I'm still not really convinced by the fact that my particular outsider view is so appealing compared to people who are from the region' (*Interview P*).

Probably the most interesting aspect regarding the process of learning a former Yugoslav language was related to institutional support (or lack thereof). Only in specific cases were participants provided with funds for language classes, for instance if they were funded by research councils, or if they applied to competitive schemes to get funding (*Interviews P, E, M, S*). Area studies schools – like the School of Slavonic and East European Studies at UCL – do provide language training and generally expect students to develop language skills, no matter their discipline. However, even there, at postgraduate level the training is more likely to focus on written language than oral practice geared towards fieldwork.⁵ In several other cases, researchers lamented the lack of institutional funding for language classes even when these skills were seen as

³ None of the interviewees did fieldwork in Slovenia or Macedonia, as mentioned in the introduction.

⁴ A similar point was made in interview C.

⁵ Participants noted the importance of speaking and listening practice, and even interview practice, to prepare for fieldwork.

essential for the specific project for which the researcher was hired. Private classes and even interpreters while in the field are commonly paid out of pocket. Researchers felt that they were left with little institutional guidance or support (except in cases where supervisors had open discussions with them about this) and thus felt the need to individually take responsibility for language training and its costs (*Interviews M, P, and S*).⁶ In some cases, language training was not only not provided or expected for the PhD research, but not even much appreciated within their Department. One participant commented that qualitative research and fieldwork were very much perceived as 'standardised': 'you go for two weeks, do then interviews and come back' (*Interview B*). Another one commented that language competency was 'perceived positively because it improves your expertise (...) but you are operating in an environment where many people go and do very short fieldwork' (*Interview G*).

4 In the field

Being in the field entails building relationships with research participants, but also living day-to-day life in a specific local setting. Language skills (and how we navigate having them or not having them) shape both aspects of the research process. The first part of this section focuses on the positionality of the researcher *vis à vis* local participants and intermediaries such as interpreters and research assistants. In the second part I explore the relevance of language competency for navigating everyday life in the field, and especially for gaining greater contextual awareness.

Building relationships, cultivating legitimacy

Choosing the language in which to conduct interviews is not necessarily straightforward, and the fact that a researcher speaks the local language doesn't necessarily mean that this will be used during the research itself. First, the researchers may not feel

⁶ One participant said they were asked whether they would learn the language while interviewing for a PhD position, but found it problematic that this was mostly left implicit throughout the application process.

comfortable enough or ready to use the language in formal settings for example, which may be a matter of confidence rather than one of skills. In some cases, one's ambitious plans for language learning may clash with the actual time commitment required to achieve the desired fluency, leading some researchers to opt for using English or an interpreter, even after years of language learning (*Interviews P and D*). Second, it is important to avoid making assumptions about the language that local participants want to use: in places like Sarajevo, interviewees reported that NGO staff who work in English sometimes felt more comfortable discussing certain issues in English than in the local language. Other participants may have preferred English because they wanted to present themselves as proficient, or simply practice English with a native speaker (*Interview B and C*). This should not come as a surprise to many of us for whom English is a second language, as we often feel more at ease presenting our research in English compared to our mother tongue.

For the researchers interviewed for this project, it was extremely important to leave the participants a choice of what language to use, also depending on the presence of an interpreter. One interviewee, who worked on a project where participants had been language intermediaries, said to them: 'I'll give you the choice to do the interview in BCS or in English and the publications are going to be in English. Translation is going to be happening at some point (...). So essentially giving them the choice of when the translation was going to happen' (*Interview A*). Another important issue to be noted is that, due to the recent history of the former Yugoslav region, you cannot always assume that the participants' second language will be English – it may well be German, or Swedish. Especially in such cases, the choice of language may also depend on the previous relationship with the participants – if the researcher knew them in advance and had established interactions in English or German, than it was more likely for them to keep using this language in the context of a research interaction, such as an interview (*Interview D and R*). Lastly, it is also common for participants to switch to English when they realise the researcher is making a lot of effort in trying to speak the local language.

One of the determinants of the researcher's positionality with respect to research participants and the broader field is working with a local interpreter. Interpreters act as intermediaries and exercise a certain level of control over the representation given to the researcher (*Interview F*). In doing so, they also decide what

to relay and what can be omitted, both during the interview and about the broader context within which the research takes place. One participant, for example, noted how her professional relationship with an interpreter ended after she realised they were omitting details from the interview, because they deemed them too 'strong', and they did not want to 'burden' the researcher. Another interviewee similarly had to change interpreter after the first one they worked with kept interjecting and discussing the findings of other interviews, which the researcher thought was unethical (*Interview F and S*). Researchers can thus be put in a position where they have to explicitly ask interpreters for specific information that would not otherwise be relayed to them (see Fuji 2010: 240). One interviewee recounted: 'When I was in [location] a friend was looking for an interpreter and I recommended a dear friend of mine, but he would come home angry and say "I don't want to translate this stuff" and she would say "I think that when he translates he adds comments that are not required".' (*Interview G*). The positionality of the interpreters themselves also matters greatly, and in fact some researchers reported preferring doing interviews in English wherever possible to maintain a more 'neutral' position towards the participants compared to what the presence of an interpreter would have allowed. Where interpreters are linked to the organisations that are the subject of the research, they can even unwittingly shape the communication process in specific ways, which researchers sometimes only discover when going over transcripts or translations produced by a second assistant/translator. In some small towns, interpreters can be known to interviewees and associated to a specific social group or environment, to which the researcher would then also be linked (*Interviews G, M, and F*). On the other hand, some of the interviewees had particularly positive experiences with interpreters and translators who had a professional background in this field, as they were found to be more 'neutral' during interviews (*Interviews S and M*). Researchers also developed ways to make working with an interpreter easier or better, such as establishing clearer rules around translation and non-disclosure, and having de-briefings about how an interview went and thinking through specific moments in the interview or anything that was missed in the moment

(Interviews S and F). Overall, the work of local interpreters is considered essential and generally highly valued (although not always well remunerated) by researchers.⁷

While not the focus of this chapter, it's important to note that interpreters can be just as affected by the emotional toll of interviews (Leck 2014) or by difficult relationships with researchers. On the former issue, interpreters need the skills and sensitivity to deal with the possibility of an interviewee breaking down in tears. This is not just a problem related to the frequency of discussions on war or violence in research interviews in the former Yugoslav region. It is also part of the interview process itself, which often elicits personal memories and feelings that may not be linked to the research topic and cannot be foreseen by the interviewer (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). In these instances, trust in the interpreter is crucial: 'I am already an outsider (...) but when these conversations come to that I'm even more of an outsider... which is fine, like, I don't need to impose myself on that and I trust my translator to be able to navigate that space more than I can' (Interview D).

But how does language (and translation) affect relationships between researchers and participants? To begin with, it might make it easier for people to get access to organisations or communities. According to a few interviewees, even writing an email in BCS rather than in English can make a big difference. Trying to establish relationships and contacts, and grasp what is going on at events is clearly also much easier with a knowledge of the local language (as another interviewee noted, people quickly revert to speaking BCS when in groups, and it was only thanks to the relationships the researcher established over the years that it was possible for him to get back into the conversation) (Interviews B, G, and F). Another interviewee noted that because of 'research fatigue' in Sarajevo, people would only start taking her more seriously once they heard more about her research topic, the fact that she was going to stay for a long time, and that she learned the language: 'I also realised that they were more willing to, you know, support me with social capital (...) to find participants. (...) There was definitely more warmth and willingness to engage' (Interview R).

Those interviewees who spoke BCS in the interviews (as mentioned in the introduction, none of the interviewees spoke Albanian) felt that they gained in

⁷ An emblematic quote on this: 'Without him I couldn't have done the research, because he translated and transcribed a lot of important interviews of my PhD' (Interview F).

legitimacy in the eyes of their participants. As one interviewee put it: 'I think that was the main source of credibility I had, in effect, you know, as somebody who was coming from outside and purporting to understand their stories and life experiences, and then somebody who's going to be going away with the responsibility of representing those' (*Interview C*). Some concepts used in BCS had a deeper cultural and theoretical meaning that could not be grasped in English-language interviews, or even with the presence of interpreters (*Interview R and M*). There was a sense that using BCS could allow a more direct or less unequal relationship than what would have been possible in an 'internationalised' or 'operative English' version of the interaction (*Interviews F and P*). One interviewee put in terms of demonstrating humility to rebalance power relationships: 'you expose yourself to their [the participants'] judgment when it comes to grammatical errors. When using English, and you are doing a PhD in English, you could master the language in a better way and expose the other person to the use of a language that is not theirs' (*Interview G*). Even when researchers did not speak BCS well enough to conduct a whole interview in it, they found that participants appreciated attempts at making initial contact in the local language and the fact that they were learning it, also as a sign of commitment to the region: 'If you are a learner rather than somebody who simply just doesn't speak, I think people take more time to explain things to you (...). There's also a sense to which they're helping you with your language learning as well as your research' (*Interview S*).⁸

There could be potential pitfalls to making an effort in conducting interviews in a foreign language, when we are not fluent. Interviewees thought they may have missed things, used language not as precisely, or not be as reactive as they would have been in English with probing and follow-up questions. Instead, having an interpreter could sometimes allow the researcher to capture background interactions they may have otherwise ignored, and which could re-orient the interpretation of an event or conversation (*Interviews B and M*). One researcher also found that participants unwittingly changed the way they presented themselves and the dynamic of the interview depending on the language used: 'the people I spoke to in German, they were then more identifying with their 'German part' so to say (...) I feel like that part of their

⁸ See also interviews B, E, P.

identity was somehow more present, which makes sense. Whereas when I was speaking in the local language they were very much like *'ti si naša'*, and you know, you're basically Bosnian (...), and yeah, making jokes that they can find me (...) a nice local husband...but I feel like that was a lot stronger when I was speaking the language.' She also found that they 'explained' things less in BCS, and tended to assume that she knew the context, compared to when using English or German (*Interview R*). In some cases that could constitute a challenge, as knowledge that is assumed is not made explicit and may not be recorded as a result. Ultimately, while there is a risk of establishing a distance when not speaking the local language, language skills may not be the main variable in how the researcher is perceived. One interviewee said: 'I feel like I have made up for it by my knowledge and my willingness to spend so much time in the region' (*Interview F*). Sometimes, other language skills that have to do with the organisational language used by participants are more important: one interviewee who shared some professional experience with the officials she was interviewing could count on that to establish rapport and build legitimacy (*Interview S*).

Relationships between researchers and participants are ultimately based on trust, which in some circumstances can take time to build. Perhaps a striking example of the importance of trust are the numerous occurrences where participants jokingly questions the researcher about them being a spy. This is not a unique feature of fieldwork in the former Yugoslav region (see for instance Knott 2019: 143). Discussions about the link between government agencies and researchers date back to at least the early twentieth century (Price 2000, 2016).⁹ This is a delicate topic, as in some contexts accusations of being a spy can put the lives of researchers and participants at risk (Owens 2003; Rivetti and Saeidi 2018). Many of the participants who mentioned this issue have an in-depth knowledge of the language and/or of regional politics and events. In fact, scholars have noted how some of the behaviours we adopt and skills we cultivate (such as language skills and contextual knowledge), which are often considered best practices of careful field research, also make it more likely that we will be suspected of being spies (Driscoll and Schuster 2018). Underpinning such joking questions may also

⁹ In the former Yugoslav region, it was not uncommon for foreign researchers to be accused of being spies during socialist times. Anthropologists Berit Backer noted in her ethnography of Albanian Kosovar communities, carried out in in the 1970s, how many of her informants told her they originally thought her to be a foreign agent (2003: 30).

lie feelings of incredulity of some participants as to why foreigners would learn a language that remains quite 'marginal' in Europe and is spoken by few million people, at a time when many people from the former Yugoslav region are looking 'outwards' (and learning the languages of countries many of them will emigrate to) (*Interviews P and D*).

Contextual awareness, not belonging

Language skills are not only relevant in the context of carrying out research, but also for the broader context of fieldwork: from arranging field visits to dealing with emergencies and keeping safe. In the context of the former Yugoslav region, interviewees noted that it is extremely easy to arrange logistics in English, such as booking accommodation and getting around, and even socialising. One researcher noted how in places like Sarajevo, speaking English rather than the local language is not much of an obstacle socially, even when compared to other capital cities in continental Europe (*Interview E*). However, interviewees did mention that speaking BCS made them feel more at ease speaking with landlords or taxi drivers, asking for directions when they got lost, repairing one's phone or similar emergency situations. It was also useful in contexts where phone calls, rather than emails, were necessary to arrange interviews – but it is important to bear in mind that there may be barriers other than language to making phone calls: due to their disability, one interviewee had to resort to other people's help with calls in order to reach people during their fieldwork in the region (*Interview J*). Researchers also deemed fieldwork in the former Yugoslavia generally safe, regardless of one's language skills. Moving between places where different variants of BCS are spoken did not constitute a major issue either. While researchers were sometimes corrected by their interlocutors when using the 'wrong' word for something and were generally quite self-conscious about this, problems were more likely to occur when they were asked about their local connections and these were perceived as politically or ethnically aligned with specific groups.

It is also the case, however, that in all these circumstances, having contacts and friends in the field is just as important (if not more important) than speaking the language. For example, a participant who needed emergency surgery during fieldwork was overwhelmed with support from local friends who helped inform their university,

and even dealt with some aspects of their hospital stay such as arranging for an English-speaking anaesthetist. Another interesting finding from the interviews is related to the support role of language teachers (including those based outside the former Yugoslav region), which is another way in which language learning can support one's experience in the field. In some cases, language teachers helped researchers find accommodation. In another case, a researcher was put in touch with some key participants for her project while in Zagreb, thanks to her language teacher's contacts.

When it comes to university support for the logistics of fieldwork, several participants felt they had not received guidance or support on this (including in relation to visas). They were not usually asked whether they spoke the local language when filling in ethics forms or risk assessments. Over the past years, there has however been a change in how universities deal with risk assessment procedures and fieldwork, especially after the death of Cambridge-based PhD student Giulio Regeni while he was doing research in Egypt in 2016 (Russo and Strazzari 2020). While interviewees mentioned doing very 'light' forms of risk assessment and being able to arrange accommodation autonomously at earlier stages of their career, at the moment most UK institutions require that researchers book travel and accommodation through the university's travel agency. This results in researchers having to stay in hotels or studio flats, somehow separated from the local context, which results in fewer opportunities to make social connections and even practice the local language (*Interviews M, S and H*).

Lastly, researchers generally valued speaking the local language for a more significant kind of contextual awareness: the experience of everyday life, talking to neighbours, going out at night or sit in a café and read the daily newspaper to know what is going on around you. It helps researchers feel less 'disconnected' or 'isolated' (*Interviews G, E, D, B, F*). However, even as this allows them to understand some nuances, and ask for more meaningful questions of their research participants, there is also an awareness of the fact that they remain outsiders to the local context and community, lacking the 'deeper level' of understanding that comes from being from that context and not merely from language skills (*Interviews D and P*).

5 Language as a ‘bonus’: from the field to the ‘academic field’

The 2014 UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) Sub-panel 16 (Politics and International Studies) noted in their report that they were ‘concerned at the seeming decline in the volume of research drawing on primary fieldwork conducted in languages other than English’ (REF 2014: 78).¹⁰ In fact, as one interviewee pointed out, the REF separates area studies from Politics and IR (*Interview M*), and scholarship informed by non-English language sources is more likely to be found in the former category than in the latter. While the REF is UK-specific, this kind of distinction is not unique to UK academia. About half of the interviewees for this chapter came from non-UK institutions, and yet they spoke of similar dynamics where the knowledge of the target language of research is, at best, considered as a ‘bonus’ (*Interview C*), and at worst used to distinguish a sort of ‘genuine’ IR or Political Science work focused on theory and concepts from empirical or area studies hybrids. One interviewee noted that it is fairly common for researchers in these fields to design projects based on whom they can interact with in English, while another one felt that learning the language was ‘kind of perceived as a waste of time’ (*Interview G and C*).

Interviewees generally thought that there were few professional penalties resulting from the lack of language skills, when it came to their professional life as academics in Politics and IR. One of them argued that people generally appreciate when you speak a foreign language in academia, ‘but they do not take into account the effort and the time it takes. This does not appear in the results, (...) when you publish. (...) It’s rarely discussed in methodology sections that “ok, I know the language and thus have a better ability to grasp what’s going on”.’ (*Interview B*). Another interviewee said: ‘no one has ever asked me, at a conference, in informal interactions, in a job interview, or even editors of journals, can you speak the language’ (*Interview M*). Perhaps more problematically, some interviewees mentioned having their research ‘labelled’ as area-specific and thus their expertise linked to the former Yugoslav region rather than their topic of research, which can be a disadvantage when trying to publish in disciplinary journals or applying for jobs: ‘you have a label on your forehead that says “she is the

¹⁰ I thank Denisa Kostovicova for mentioning this in her keynote at a BISA South East Europe Working Group event held at LSE in 2018.

one of the former Yugoslavia and will talk about and explain all phenomena related to the former Yugoslavia' (*Interview G*). As other interviewees pointed out, it is easier to have your work read in Politics and IR if you emphasise the conceptual and theoretical dimension of it. From the side of Politics and IR, there also seems to be a mislabelling as an 'area specialist' of researchers whose work is locally-grounded or informed by contextual historical and cultural knowledge. In many cases, interviewees see themselves as doing this kind of work for the understanding of transnational or global phenomena, 'because there is a lot to be learned from the region, *beyond* area studies' (*Interview F*).

More than an area studies/Politics and IR divide, we can identify a divide within IR between a type of research that is conceptually and methodologically locally-grounded and scholarship produced from 'the outside', where people can travel 'from field, to field, to field, and are not actually engaging in the history and culture of that area' (*Interviews E and M*).¹¹ That is not regarded as problematic by everyone, especially as some sub-fields of Politics and IR have an explicit interest in top-down, elite processes. Moreover, personal and professional barriers may emerge during one's career to continuing fieldwork-based work. Language skills are often cultivated by researchers who have the intention and the time to spend long periods of time in the field. This is more likely to be the case at the time where researchers are doing PhDs or research-intensive post-docs than later in their academic career. At later stages, other pressures may intervene. Getting a permanent academic job, having children or other significant caring responsibilities, would require a researcher to balance the time required to keep up the language, the number and length of research trips with the personal, private costs of being away from one's family. One participant said: 'I ended up taking the decision, or making the decision through inaction (...) that I'd leave the intensive physical field-based stuff to people who were in a better position to do it' (*Interview C; see also Interview M*).

¹¹ See also interview G.

6 Conclusion

Language learning for fieldwork in politics and IR is one of those issues where there is a stark contrast between how much the issue is explicitly discussed in textbooks and research training programmes (very little) and the great amount of time the researcher will actually spend preparing and dealing with linguistic issues in the field. There seems to be a need for greater engagement with the complexities of language learning and translation in research methods and fieldwork literature, which could also provide some guidance to researchers approaching the field for the first time.

This chapter has shown that researchers in Politics and IR doing fieldwork in the former Yugoslavia generally value language learning. Speaking, or even just learning, a local language is thought to give more 'legitimacy' and help establish relationships of trust with participants. Not all of them, however, have the opportunity and need to learn the target language. There is a lack of institutional support and guidance, as well as funding, which makes access to language learning unequal. This practice also seems to be disincentivised by the academic field of Politics and IR. Speaking the target language of the research can enhance one's profile, but is considered more like a 'bonus' than an expectation. Where in-depth knowledge of a context and language is emphasised over conceptual contributions, it also makes it more likely that one's research will be mislabelled as 'area studies' rather than Politics or IR, even when researchers do not consider themselves area experts.

Most importantly, the chapter shows that legitimacy and trust are not just about whether you speak the local language or not, but also how you navigate speaking or not speaking it. Interviewees often felt an emotional attachment to the former Yugoslavia and saw their time spent working there and writing about the region as an important part not only of their professional life, but also of processes of personal growth and change (see also Carabelli and Deiana 2019).¹² How researchers provide choice to participants, avoiding assumptions around their preferred means of communication, is hugely important. The presence and positionality of an interpreter can be beneficial, as well as challenging, for the success of a project. Ultimately, it may be more useful to

¹² See also Interview F, S and W. One interviewee also saw language learning was a way to 'anchor them' to the region at a time when they could not travel to the region (due to COVID19).

frame the discussion in terms of what is gained and missed when we can or cannot rely on local language sources, and to centre the discussion around the silences of academic knowledge production about the former Yugoslavia and how our work may be contributing to those. In order to address this, we would also have to discuss the importance of seeing the former Yugoslavia not just as a place we visit for fieldwork, but as a space where academic knowledge and theories are produced, in English, in BCSM, Slovenian, Macedonian or Albanian. Language learning and translation are not just important for our ability to 'gather data', but because they shape our ability to read academic literature and inform our conceptual understanding of the region. This is still not sufficiently appreciated within Politics and IR. One interviewee felt uneasy for being commended for drawing on BCS academic literature in writing academic articles, a practice they felt should be normalised (*Interview C*). Another interviewee thought she would face challenges in publishing her work if she relied on concepts coming from theoretical traditions from the former Yugoslavia without referring to specific concepts that are well established in Politics/IR literature (*Interview S*).

Despite being based on a limited sample and preliminary analysis of the transcripts, this study demonstrates a need for more explicit reflections on the role of language in fieldwork. It also calls for universities to take these questions more seriously, and to provide more explicit guidance and support, while also highlighting the need for Politics and International Relations to adopt less Anglocentric standards and practices. Further research that includes researchers working in other areas of the former Yugoslavia would also be necessary in order to strengthen the findings of this study and identify the specific challenges of working with people who speak minority languages, or languages that fewer researchers decide to learn, such as Albanian.

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