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“When we use that kind of language... someone is going to jail”: relationality and aesthetic interpretation in initial research encounters

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to investigate ethical and aesthetic dimensions of negotiating linguistic differences between researchers and participants in the initial research consent process, based on data from a collaborative research project in adult basic education for immigrants, in which a large number of students initially refused to participate. First, we interpret negotiations of consent as relational acts, where teachers and multilingual staff facilitated moral proximity through their affinity or shared biography with students, allowing us to move from anticipated difference to events of subjectivity. Second, we analyze research ethics protocols, notably the standardized consent letter, as aesthetic signs that evoked an affective response, which variously recalled unfavourable subject positions within neoliberal or authoritarian governmentality, including memories of trauma. The dynamic connection between aesthetics and relational ethics highlights the shortcomings of current institutional ethics requirements, since aesthetic interpretation cannot be fully anticipated and instead requires meaning-making in concrete relational encounters.

Keywords: multilingualism; refugees; governmentality; trauma; research ethics

1 Introduction

Social difference is a central concern in applied linguistics, indexing identities and power hierarchies that call for critical reflection on research ethics. Previous applied linguistic work has highlighted power differentials between researchers and

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participants, as well as the limits of informed consent across differences of language, literacy, and experience (e.g., Thomas and Pettitt 2017; Warriner and Bigelow 2019). Given such complexities, researchers need to negotiate ethics in concrete encounters with participants, not only in hypothetical protocols (De Costa 2015; Kubanyiova 2008). Nonetheless, neoliberal institutional ethics regimes generally require an initial encounter mediated by relatively fixed protocols, in which difference from an unmarked norm comprises a dimension of risk, which researchers must take responsibility to mitigate (Caeymaex et al. 2023; Hansen and L'orange Fürst 2021; James 2021). In contrast, relational ethics (Bauman 1993; Lévinas 1985) approaches difference among people as an ineradicable facet of social life and argues for a different kind of responsibility, an ethical responsibility for the Other,¹ which is practiced in proximity and negotiated in concrete encounters.

The aim of this article is to investigate negotiations of consent to participate in research across differences of language, biography and subjectivity between researchers and participants. In particular, we will consider the significance of relationality and aesthetic interpretation for negotiating consent with potential participants who may have experienced trauma. Going beyond the readily observable, the emotionally and bodily lived experience of language (Busch 2017) always comprises a dimension of traumatic events. Particular forms of speech or language may trigger experiences and memories of suffered violence, associated with a perpetrator or the traumatizing situation. These “intensities are not the property of a body, but rather are the product of a given assemblage of time, space, bodies, materials, histories, and enunciations” (Boldt and Valente 2021: 312). In this way, various signs and artifacts, such as words, symbols, and images elicit an affective response, thus going beyond representational or indexical (e.g., Silverstein 2003) levels of meaning-making.

Extending this sociolinguistic work on language and trauma, we will explore the role of aesthetic interpretation in potential participants' affective responses to informed consent protocols (see Black 2018; Tateo 2017), based on a collaborative research project in adult basic education for immigrants. Paying joint attention to ethics and aesthetics allows us to better understand the affective dimension of linguistic differences that may be involved in negotiations of research consent, by seeing research ethics routines as aesthetically laden experiences. In this, we understand aesthetics to refer to affective and sensory experience, not necessarily artistic value (Bauman 1993; Black 2018; Kisin and Myers 2019; Tateo 2017). Indeed, we

¹ Following Lévinas (1985), we use capitalized “Other” as the personal other (*autrui*) whom one encounters, as distinguished from “other” referring to otherness in general (*autre*). This differs from the convention of capitalizing the racialized or colonial Other (e.g., Flores 2013; Said 1978), but is not meant to signal theoretical disagreement with the latter.

will consider trauma as one frame for aesthetic interpretation among participants (see Busch and McNamara 2020; Tateo 2017), rooted in varying histories of subjectivation (Foucault 1991).

Below, we develop our theoretical perspective by considering, first, subjectivity and difference as ethical constructs and, second, governmentality as a frame for linguistic subjectivation. Next, we describe our methods, positionality, and aim. We then present findings on the role of relationality in negotiating difference between researchers and participants and on aesthetic interpretation of research artifacts involved in initial negotiations of consent. We end with a discussion of our contribution to developing an ethico-aesthetic lens in applied linguistics.

2 Subjectivity, difference, and ethical knowing

Our study concerns unanticipated forms of difference between ourselves and potential participants, beyond those transparently linked to categorical differences such as language, nationality, ethnicity, or educational level (e.g., Caeymaex et al. 2023; Kubota 2016; Thomas and Pettitt 2017; Warriner and Bigelow 2019). The construction of difference can be understood through three interwoven, yet distinct processes that establish our relation to the other: cognitive, aesthetic, and moral spacing (Bauman 1993). Cognitive spacing defines the meaning of social space at an intellectual and reflexive level. In this process, knowledge of the other is constructed through “the sedimented, selected and processed memory of past encounters, communications, exchanges, joint ventures or battles” (Bauman 1993: 146). Therefore, shared biography may provide shared meaning, for instance through common linguistic repertoire or interests that create linguistic affinity spaces (Canagarajah 2017; Dovchin 2021; Gee 2004; Ladegaard 2015). Meanwhile, aesthetic spacing refers to an affective process that maps social space through experiential intensity, most often conceived in terms of pleasure or enjoyment (see Bauman 1993). This dimension of meaning-making centers sensory and affective experience of signs and everyday communication, beyond the traditional domain of art (Black 2018; Kisin and Myers 2019; Tateo 2017). Finally, moral spacing maps ethical responsibility for objects and people in social space, as we will return to below.

Each of these processes constructs relationships and identities through the notions of proximity and distance. In cognitive spacing, proximity and distance refer to poles of familiarity. These range from intimacy to anonymity, where at the anonymity pole the other is a stranger (Bauman 1993; Schütz and Luckmann 1974). The space between these poles is made up of classified humans, with categorical

attributes, and not of humans with personal identities. At a distance, one knows people through the categories to which they belong, through the process of typification (Schütz and Luckmann 1974), and thus the construction of difference, whether linguistic or otherwise.

Whereas cognitive distance may engender mistrust, aesthetic distance may pique curiosity and interest, in the manner of people-watching on a city street (Bauman 1993) or, more insidiously, Orientalist depictions of linguistic and racial difference (Said 1978). In either case, an ethical shortcoming of aesthetic knowing is the fact that one approaches the other with openness to discovery, but not necessarily with concern (Bauman 1993). As noted above, this use of the term ‘aesthetic’ departs from the traditional domain of the arts, while maintaining the conventional emphasis on beauty or pleasure (see Black 2018; Kisin and Myers 2019). However, in our project a different kind of affect is at stake, that is, one driven by trauma. Thus, we extend Bauman’s (1993) work to explore what might be considered the negative pole of aesthetic interpretation and experience. Indeed, Tateo (2017) demonstrates that aesthetic meaning-making forms part of human conduct in traumatic and demeaning events, not only in transcendent or pleasurable encounters. He further illustrates the ambiguity of aesthetic interpretation. For instance, a new beach promenade may appear beautiful to “powerful spectators” (Tateo 2017: 353), while evoking loss and alienation among people displaced for its construction. Tateo (2017) argues, “This aesthetic dimension is regulated through the constant production, maintaining and demolition of signs” (p. 251), for example the destruction of a natural shore to construct a ‘seascape.’ We draw on this work on everyday aesthetics to highlight sensory and affective experience as dimensions of linguistic meaning-making, beyond representational or indexical levels.

In contrast to both cognitive and aesthetic spacing, moral spacing introduces an ethical dimension to meaning-making, as it involves negotiating our responsibility for those we encounter (Lévinas 1985). Moral distance can be traced to a modern understanding of ethics, where meaning is seen to reside in rules and not in encounters (Bauman 1993), much as in a representational understanding of language. This distance leaves little room for unpredictability, yet also requires little of the researcher once the rules have been observed (see also Kubanyiova 2008). In contrast, a postmodern ethical subjectivity relies on moral proximity between the self and Other, factoring in rather than guarding against spontaneity. Thus, ethical subjectivity can better account for semiotic ambiguity, multiplicity, and unpredictability.

At the core of moral proximity lies an unconditional and infinite responsibility for the Other, without an expectation of reciprocity. According to Lévinas (1985), this

responsibility forms a relational subjectivity. In contrast to the more familiar discursive meaning of subjectivity in applied linguistic work (e.g., McNamara 2012), Lévinas here proposes a relational understanding of “*my unique subjectivity as it emerges from my singular, unique responsibility*” (Biesta 2013: 20, italics in the original). In this sense, uniqueness does not refer to enduring distinctions in essence, but rather to situations where the self is uniquely called upon to take up a responsibility. Rather than being an individual attribute, subjectivity can then be seen to unfold in interaction, in what Biesta (2013) calls an “event of subjectivity” (p. 22). This is an interpretive act “that can *occur* from time to time, something that can emerge, rather than something that is constantly there” (Biesta 2013: 22). Thus, the event of subjectivity allows us to consider the initial research consent process as an ethically imbued interpretive encounter, in which aesthetic interpretations revealed differences of linguistic subjectivation rooted in trauma and varying experiences of governmentality.

3 Governmentality, institutional ethics, and linguistic subjectivation

Governmentality (Foucault 1991) has been used to explain processes of linguistic subjectivation in which the individual is called upon to inhabit politically or economically desirable linguistic subject positions through consent and self-regulation (e.g., Del Percio 2016; Flores 2013; Pájaro 2022). In general, governmentality refers to governing a population through a diffuse complex of power involving institutions, practices, analyses, and reflections, especially as exercised in Western neoliberalism (Foucault 1991: 103). Del Percio (2016) has highlighted intercultural communication as a technology of neoliberal governmentality in Italian refugee processing, which may lead asylum applicants to accept more precarious living conditions, under the pretence of linguistic accommodations as empowerment. Similarly, Pájaro (2022) has identified the role of fixed scripts to establish individual responsibility in the Norwegian refugee introduction program. In her study, intake interviews enumerated refugees’ rights and responsibilities in a fixed manner, which the refugees did not have interpretive frames to understand or question, despite the participation of an interpreter. At a systemic level, Bendixsen (2020) argues that neoliberal governmentality allows Norway to deny services to ‘irregular’ migrants, usually asylum seekers who have had their applications rejected, while preserving its self-image as a comprehensive welfare state. Although participants in our study had been granted permanent residency in Norway, and thus rights to services, they might well have been aware of co-nationals who had

eventually fared worse in the system, even faced forcible return (see O’Kane and Hepner 2009, regarding Eritrean returnees).

Similar processes of self-disciplining control have led researchers to also identify Western research ethics regimes as increasingly characterized by neoliberal governmentality (Caeymaex et al. 2023; Guta et al. 2013; James 2021). James (2021) notes that institutionalized ethics review transfers management and mitigation of ethical risks to the researcher, while framing the relation to research participants antagonistically, such that the researcher willingly undergoes ethics review to commit to ethical conduct through compliance, rather than relational engagement. At this enforced distance, researchers can only anticipate participants’ subject positions as delimited, idealized types, such as immigrant or native-born, native speaker or non-native speaker, educated or uneducated, thus reducing difference to fixed categories (Caeymaex et al. 2023; Schütz and Luckmann 1974). Furthermore, within the logic of ethics as risk management, social and linguistic differences are linked to vulnerability, as potential dimensions of risk, rather than as social reality to investigate (Caeymaex et al. 2023; Hansen and L’orange Fürst 2021). Caeymaex et al. (2023) have argued that such anticipatory ethics fail to recognize the flexible distribution of power that in fact characterizes neoliberal governmentality. In their study, this gap became visible as participants renegotiated the role of predefined informed consent protocols by refusing to formalize on record consent that they had already given informally, due to concerns about negative consequences of the written form or audio recording itself.

Yet experiences of other forms of governmentality may entail different processes of subjectivation (Dean 2009). In contemporary Syria, Ismail (2018) describes the exercise of power under the Ba’ath Party as authoritarian governmentality (see Dean 2009), involving subject formation based on cultivation of fear “through practices of monitoring, surveillance and discipline of citizens” (p. 74), which then take on symbolic value. Similarly, O’Kane and Hepner (2009) describe coercion of the population as a key feature of state power in Eritrea, in a bid to maintain sovereignty while adapting to a neoliberal economy. In our study, participants’ lived experiences of language (Busch 2017) and interpretive frames drew on such rationalities of governance, even as they entered into new processes of subjectivation in Norway. We will argue that biographical differences, rooted in varying experiences of governmentality among adult students, intermediaries (e.g., teachers, research assistants), and researchers, help to account for differences in aesthetic interpretation and affective responses to research consent protocols in our study.

4 Methods, positionality, and aim

This article is based on a one-year study with an ethnographic monitoring design, commissioned by Skills Norway.² Ethnographic monitoring is a form of action research in which researchers and practitioners collaborate closely throughout the research process towards jointly defined goals, drawing on ethnographic methods for data collection and analysis (De Korne and Hornberger 2017; Van der Aa and Blommaert 2017). The aim of the research project was to strengthen the knowledge base on the use of multilingual strategies and resources for adult students with limited formal schooling, in order for multilingualism to become an active, central, and organizing dimension of education. The setting of our study was a state-funded adult education center in a medium-sized city in Norway, which has an immigrant population near the national average of 18 %. We collaborated with five teachers, four of whom were employed as classroom teachers and identified as L1 speakers of Norwegian and one employed as a bilingual support teacher (Zahra).³ We also engaged two multilingual assistants to communicate with students whose languages were not covered by staff at the center. In total, 36 students, aged between 17 and 57, consented to participate. Many were refugees, including one third from Syria and others from Afghanistan, Congo (DRC), Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, or Somalia. All had permanent residency in Norway. Our analysis is based on ethnographic data that elucidate the consent process. More specifically, we draw on field notes from classroom observations, our research diary on collaboration with the teachers and assistants in the consent process, and an interview with Zahra.

In writing about difference and research with immigrants, we believe it is important to mark our own positionalities (see Souza 2019), emphasizing that we view difference as relational and intersubjective, as much a function of our particularity as that of participants. Like the students, we both identify as multilingual and have transnational backgrounds. Ingrid grew up between Norway and the United States. She also worked in Palestine for several years, where she partnered with refugee-run organizations, whose experiences in some ways resonated with those we discovered in our analyses. Joke grew up in Belgium and moved to Norway early in adulthood, where she has taught sheltered classes for newly arrived children. Yet compared to students in the current project, we occupy more privileged social positions by various measures, as we are considered White native speakers of Western European languages, with several university

² Now called the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills.

³ In the Norwegian educational system, the term ‘bilingual teacher’ refers to someone who teaches in Norwegian and a minoritized language other than Sámi or Kven. All participant names are pseudonyms.

degrees and relative economic stability. These categorical differences seemed significant to us in anticipating negotiations of access in the current project (Caeymaex et al. 2023; Thomas and Pettitt 2017; Warriner and Bigelow 2019). As a result, we sought out help from people with linguistic and cultural repertoires more similar to those of potential student participants, especially the bilingual teacher Zahra (Arabic, Assyrian, Kurdish, and Norwegian) and the research assistant Samuel (English, Norwegian, and Tigrinya). Like the students, Zahra and Samuel have refugee backgrounds, from Iraq and Eritrea respectively, and moved to Norway in adulthood. They both had higher education from their respective countries of birth, unlike most of the students, but at the time of the study did not have permanent jobs, like most of the students.

Despite multilingual assistance and facilitation by the classroom teachers, institutional ethics regulations imposed significant constraints on the consent process. The key legal and ethical requirement that we consider is that of informed and voluntary consent to participate in research (European Union 2018; NESH 2021). In Norway, research involving personal data is subject to legally required ethics review, generally carried out by a national government agency, the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (Sikt). This process entails a high degree of standardization, including through a recommended template for project information and participant consent, comprising three and a half pages.⁴ Sikt's website now includes two examples of forms using partially simplified language, in Norwegian and English, but these were not available when we sought project approval in the fall of 2020. Anticipating the difficulty for students with limited formal schooling, let alone any layperson, to understand the dense language of the template, we therefore simplified the language of the form ourselves to the extent that seemed permissible, creating versions in Norwegian and English.

As is common in Norway, the participating adult education center normally provided information to students in Norwegian, though sometimes assisted by multilingual staff upon availability. We asked the teachers in advance about the students' preferred languages (twelve in total), so that we could have our simplified consent form translated into these languages as a support to presenting the project (see Thomas and Pettitt 2017). We structured the consent form with multiple participation options, including participant observation with field notes, audio and video recording; screen recording; sharing class work and communications; and interview. In a previous project, such translations and participation options had

⁴ <https://www.nsd.no/en/data-protection-services/notification-form-for-personal-data/information-and-consent>.

facilitated discovery of participants' linguistic preferences and supported agency in shaping forms of participation (Beiler 2020). However, reactions to our consent form were quite different in the current study, as a majority of students initially refused participation in the project. Therefore, the aim of this article is to investigate ethical and aesthetic dimensions of negotiating linguistic differences between researchers and participants in an initial research consent process facilitated by teachers and multilingual assistants.

5 Relationality in negotiating linguistic difference

In this section, we consider the ethical dimension of negotiating linguistic difference through the lens of moral proximity. By doing so, we analyze consent as a relational act grounded in responsibility, which may exist in tension with legal requirements. Due to both the institutional ethics regime and our anticipated linguistic and social difference from participants, we initially accepted a degree of distance between ourselves and potential participants (Caeymaex et al. 2023). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic limited our possibilities for extensive fieldwork and, thus, relationship building. Recognizing these limits, we relied on teachers and multilingual assistants to help us take ethical responsibility, as we moved from anticipated difference to events of subjectivity.

A field note from our first field visit demonstrates the reliance on categorical difference within an initial research encounter that was significantly mediated by procedural requirements. In anticipation of linguistic differences, Ingrid had brought consent forms in what were reported to be the students' first languages. However, this gesture quickly met with resistance from the teachers, as described in the following field note:

At our first meeting, the teachers almost immediately react that their students cannot read in their mother tongue. Instead, they think the project needs to be explained orally to all but a few students. After some negotiation in the meeting, the center leader says she could bring in multilingual staff from the municipal school system to explain the project. However, we will have to cover some languages ourselves, including Swahili and Tigrinya, through research assistants. (October 13, 2020)

The field note presents our efforts to take responsibility for potential participants by providing information in comprehensible languages (see Beiler 2020; Pájaro 2022). However, the teachers questioned whether this would comprise a meaningful accommodation, given most of the students' limited first language literacy. In response, we redirected our joint efforts to making oral explanation available,

employing the affordances within the ethics regime for accommodating limited print literacy (see Caeymaex et al. 2023; NESH 2021). Though sensitive to the need for adaptation, this approach to ethical responsibility remains largely procedural rather than relational, as it still assumes representational accommodations to facilitate ethical decision-making (see also Pájaro 2022). This may add layers of unpredictability to the consent process, yet without moral proximity (see Bauman 1993; Lévinas 1981).

Categorical difference also remained salient in our initial encounters with students, though these introduced some greater complexity. After the meeting with the teachers, Ingrid described her introduction to the first of three classes (field note, October 13, 2020):

The first class I visit is for adults considered to be preliterate. In the hallway, four students are speaking Arabic, so I greet them in Arabic as well as Norwegian. One of them says to the other, “بتحكي عربي” [she speaks Arabic], but we do not talk more before entering the classroom. Once I am seated, another student, who turns out to be Thai, starts a conversation with me in English. I am surprised at her ease of speaking English, since the teacher [Karin] has not mentioned being able to communicate with students in English. Then Karin has me introduce myself. I tell them where I am from (Norway and the United States) and which languages I speak (Norwegian, English, French, and some Arabic), explaining in Arabic that I have lived in Palestine. Karin asks the students to say where they are from and which languages they speak. When Sorani Kurdish is mentioned, I tell them the three words I know from visiting Iraqi Kurdistan – straight, right, and left – commenting that I unfortunately only learned how to give taxi directions. I do this to demonstrate interest in students beyond those who speak Arabic, also making sure to smile as I make eye contact. Although I wish I could communicate more freely, it feels like a friendly first encounter.

In the initial encounter with students described above, Ingrid used the knowledge she gained of students’ linguistic repertoires and nationalities to attempt to build relational proximity. Specifically, she used any overlap of linguistic repertoire, whether more substantial (Arabic, English) or very limited (Kurdish), to develop trust. In the case of English, a student invited contact, in the process breaking down her own categorization as a monolingual Thai-speaker, which we had been led to expect. In the case of Arabic, students responded with recognition of an Arabic greeting and a tentative recategorization of Ingrid as an Arabic-speaker. Finally, Ingrid attempted to establish relational proximity beyond what her linguistic overlap with students allowed, through embodied communication that might be more broadly meaningful, including smiling and eye contact.

Though Ingrid seemingly had a positive initial encounter with some opportunities for linguistic bridging, the widespread initial refusal to participate came after this personal introduction, as well as similar ones in the other classes. We

perceive this refusal as an event of subjectivity (Biesta 2013), in which we needed help from others to interpret and respond to the Other. The classroom teachers explained that one reason for the refusal was students' loyalty, as they apparently thought that we had come from the university to check on their teachers. Teachers are indeed subject to monitoring within neoliberal governmentality (Winter 2017), even if they were, in this case, collaborating on the project design. As a result, the teachers' assurances were essential for negotiating students' mistrust. Although these teachers had even less linguistic overlap with their students than Ingrid, they had, over time, built affinity spaces (Gee 2004) across differences of language and biography, but with shared interests, such as students passing exams and establishing good lives in Norway (see Canagarajah 2017; Ladegaard 2015). The teachers' good relationships were important for establishing our further possibilities for building relationality with students across our own linguistic and social differences.

Moreover, in contrast to the other teachers, Zahra and Samuel shared quite a lot of biography with the students, placing them closer to the pole of intimacy (Schütz and Luckmann 1974). Zahra described her relationships with the students as follows (interview, November 27, 2020):⁵

Extract 1:

1 what has surprised me, they have so much trust in me, they have so much trust that I
 2 am completely, surprising, so that I get to know them in one day in an hour, and then
 3 they come and tell me everything, their difficulties to me, because they really want to
 4 talk to me, they really want to tell me everything. so, I I tell them that I'm not a
 5 psychologist but I can't tell them that either, I say it to myself, but because they
 6 realize that I understand their language and I understand them, so they often come
 7 and tell it to me

In Extract 1, Zahra explains how the students' trust in her (line 1) makes it easier to get to know them, as they seek emotional and affinity spaces for relief (see Canagarajah 2017; Dovchin 2021; Ladegaard 2015). She attributes this trust to aspects of their joint biographies, such as similar language background and lived experience (lines 6–7), which make it possible to develop a connection in little time and thus be confided in (lines 2–3), sharing experiences that would otherwise remain masked (see Dovchin 2021). Although Ingrid was in a position to communicate to an extent

⁵ Interview extracts are translated from Norwegian by the authors; originals are available upon request.

with students in familiar languages, these codes were not enough on their own to establish trust or relational proximity. In contrast, Zahra's greater social proximity, including her shared and multifaceted knowledge about the Other, allowed her to do more than pass on representational knowledge, as in a translated consent letter, or to demonstrate personal interest, as Ingrid attempted from her more distant social position.

No one is completely unique in the abstract, but once we develop trust in someone, they become unique and thus, in some sense, irreplaceable. In the world, Zahra is not unique as an Arabic-speaker or as someone who has experienced the trauma of war, but at this specific juncture in students' lives, she was unique as a person in whom they developed trust, based in part on shared linguistic repertoire and biography. Zahra's relationality with the students then permitted us to negotiate unanticipated aspects of difference and gradually build trust through moral proximity, rather than through legal documents (see Bauman 1993). These unanticipated differences especially surfaced through students' aesthetic interpretations of research artifacts and practices, to which we turn next.

6 Research artifacts and practices as aesthetic signs

In this section, we analyze the aesthetic dimension of participants' reactions to initial consent protocols. Notably, we analyze the standardized information letter and consent form in its totality as a sign that elicits an affective response, beyond the semantic value of its content. The aesthetic value of this sign first became apparent to us through the initially high rates of refusal to participate in our project, described in the previous section.

Though certain students' initial refusal could be understood through relational allegiance and resistance to neoliberal monitoring, other responses did not relate as clearly to immediate circumstances. Instead, the aesthetic qualities of our research protocols, notably the consent letter, appeared to evoke traumatic memories of authoritarian governmentality (see Ismail 2018). This insight became available to us through Zahra and Samuel. In the following interview extract, Zahra reflected on students' initial refusal to participate (November 27, 2020).

Extract 2:

1	Zahra	yes it was those forms like consent forms, I think that was very difficult for the
2		students, translation was a bit, bit too difficult for them to understand, so what
3		I had I thought that maybe that could be a little simpler, in a way, don't write
4		so much about everything, like you do, it would have been just a little easier
5		write a little, how will we protect you how will we protect them (xxxx) so
6		there was a little too much for them
7	Joke	right, we'll do that, we will raise that, because we're required to use those
8		specific forms, but uh, it is, I completely agree with you that it became too
9		difficult [...]
10	Zahra	I read and translated everything that was there right, and then the students say,
11		but I have not understood anything, what is it about? what does it mean? and
12		then I could just explain what I have understood because even though I
13		translate at a a very low low level for them in Arabic it was difficult for them,
14		and then there are many of them who are traumatized, they have, many of
15		them have internal traumas, so when they hear those kinds of words then the
16		anxiety comes, then it's best to use very easy language, because in homeland,
17		like in Iraq when we use that kind of language that's in the form in Arabic, the
18		only thing we have heard of is when there was a letter from the police or from from
19		when someone is going to jail, so then that is what, was a bit too difficult
20		for them
21	Joke	do you think, uh, that another time that we should just have had the forms in
22		Norwegian and had for example a person like you explain in the mother tongue
23		and that they then sign in Norwegian?
24	Zahra	yes I think so, I think that is a bit easier

Extract 2 can be divided thematically into two sections, each of which suggest a different subtext of governmentality. In the first section (lines 1–13), Zahra and Joke discuss the difficulty for students of understanding the language of the information letter and consent form, even when translated and explained orally in a language the students know well, in this case Arabic. Zahra specifies that she made a conscious attempt to adapt the wording of the information to the students, who are presumed to have little formal education, using “a very low low level for them in Arabic” (line 13). Even so, she experienced two problems: first, the amount of information was overwhelming (lines 3–6); second, the information remained incomprehensible despite adaptations (lines 10–13) (see Pájaro 2022). Here, meaning must be seen to reside beyond the text, as Zahra relays questions about the broader interpretive frame within which to situate the letter. Paradoxically, she suggests that a lesser enumeration of rights would have better communicated the intention to protect students (lines 4–6), suggesting that the optics of the information may override its content. That is, the aesthetic impression is one of impenetrability, rather than reassurance. In response, Joke points to ethical

regulations, including the *de facto* requirement for a lengthy consent letter, as a frame that imposes forms of communication that conflict with her own professional judgment. She expresses agreement with Zahra's concern, aligning with the expressed need for more contextualized forms of communication. This intersubjective agreement contrasts with the rigidity of formulaic language within a neoliberal ethics regime (see Caeymaex et al. 2023; Hansen and L'orange Fürst 2021; James 2021).

However, Zahra then shifts into a different explanatory frame of authoritarian governmentality, which further highlights the aesthetic dimension of the letter (lines 14–24). This second reading departs even further from representational meaning, as the problem posed by the consent letter is not its semantic difficulty, but rather its negative affective value. The kind of language used in the form, which Zahra contrasts with “easy language” (line 16), provokes anxiety, as it might evoke past traumas (see Busch and McNamara 2020). Zahra further likens the language of the consent letter to a police summons, although the content of such letters presumably would differ significantly. This comparison helps to establish the salience of an aesthetic rather than semantic reading of the letter, where the formal Arabic letter in its entirety functions as a sign beyond its content. Specifically, this letter elicits a fearful subjectivity learned through authoritarian governmentality, which Zahra relates to her own experiences in Iraq (line 17), but which for many Arabic-speakers stemmed from Syria (see Ismail 2018). When Zahra here suggests that the language “was a bit too difficult for them” (lines 19–20), the difficulty is affective rather than linguistic, in light of traumatic associations (see Busch and McNamara 2020).

We nonetheless learned of one instance in which specific content likely triggered traumatic memories. Zahra related in a subsequent conversation that one student initially did not consent to our writing field notes, despite consenting to arguably more invasive methods such as video recording, because he had been tortured in prison in Syria and associated field notes with notetaking during police interrogations. The practice of notetaking by an observer thus evoked memories of a traumatic experience (see Busch and McNamara 2020; Tateo 2017).

Finally, responding to Zahra's insights, Joke asks if written information in Norwegian with an oral explanation in the students' mother tongue would have been preferable to a written translation. Zahra agrees that this would have been easier (lines 21–24), an evaluation that should again be understood as affective and not merely linguistic. Translating written information into participants' best languages of literacy is generally advised or even required (e.g., NESH 2021; Thomas and Pettitt 2017), yet the new language of Norwegian may paradoxically entail a lesser emotional burden in cases where more familiar languages are charged with traumatic memories (see Busch and McNamara 2020). This latter possibility

would introduce different ethical dilemmas, yet it highlights the multiple layers of meaning-making involved, where semantic and aesthetic readings may conflict with each other.

Samuel had similar reflections about reluctance to participate among Eritreans, which further highlighted the semiotic ambiguity of our letter and the need to treat signs aesthetically. After a conversation with Samuel, Joke wrote the following in our research diary:

When students initially resisted the research invitation, Samuel reasoned that many Eritreans are sceptical towards official letters and do not want to sign them. However, today he nuanced this by pointing out that Eritreans in Norway do look for and respond to official letters they are expecting (e.g., from the public welfare agency). In contrast, our letter came from the University of Oslo, an institution with which they were unfamiliar. More importantly, letters are not routinely used to inform people of plans in Eritrea. The only time students could possibly have received an official letter in Tigrinya is if they had to serve in the military. Even then, they would most likely have been informed orally at the end of compulsory school. The military or police do not send official letters; they just come and arrest you without any warning. In addition, the Tigrinya language in the letter was not always easy to understand. To Samuel, it would have been better to explain the purpose of the project orally, reassuring students that it is safe to participate. (February 28, 2021)

As in Zahra's reflections, Samuel invokes the students' multiple interpretive frames for the consent letter. Although he initially assigned an inherently threatening value to official letters, he subsequently distinguished between those that index Norwegian government bureaucracy, which would generally be written in Norwegian, versus those that recall forcible military summons in Eritrea. The former may be treated as a technology of neoliberal governmentality, which may have become an alienating yet predictable aspect of life in Norway (see Bendixsen 2020; Pájaro 2022), while the latter may evoke the trauma of living under authoritarian governmentality (see O'Kane and Hepner 2009), in which avoidance may become a survival tactic. Our consent letter introduced semiotic ambiguity, being from an unfamiliar Norwegian institution, yet written in formal Tigrinya. As in the interview extract above, the consent letter is treated as an aesthetic whole, eliciting an affective response grounded in trauma, even if difficult language adds an additional barrier.

Samuel's final suggestion, that an oral explanation would have appeared less threatening and more comprehensible, also carries a dual subtext. While the experience of authoritarian governmentality engenders mistrust, neoliberal governmentality exacerbates the appearance of threat through the requirement for consent letters to enumerate risks and rights (see Hansen and L'orange Fürst 2021). Like Zahra, Samuel suggests that a focus on reassuring potential participants of their safety would have been more appropriate. Whereas Zahra and Samuel could interpret such imperatives of neoliberal governmentality (e.g., enumerating

personal protections) as well as affective responses borne out of authoritarian governmentality, we did not have the same biographical repertoires to anticipate the multiple aesthetic values of formal written Arabic or Tigrinya to potential participants.

7 Discussion

In view of the multiple interpretive frames described in this study, we would like to consider how an aesthetic understanding of initial consent protocols might contribute to a linguistics of ethical encounters. While neoliberal ethics regimes insist on initially maintaining distance to potential participants, relational ethics instead require encountering an Other who is essentially unknowable and ineradicably different (Biesta 2013; Lévinas 1985). This is because relational ethics assume complexity at the proximal end of social spacing, which means that difference can only be grasped in specific events of subjectivity (Biesta 2013). The shortcomings of the current procedures become especially visible in the interaction between aesthetic interpretation and relational ethics, since the affective response of the Other cannot be fully anticipated and, thus, necessitates a subjective negotiation in concrete relational encounters (see also Caeymaex et al. 2023).

Nonetheless, looking beyond the level of personal encounters, we must consider whether these shortcomings in current procedures represent a logical expression of power within neoliberal governmentality, rather than a mere oversight. Previous studies of linguistic governmentality as it relates to refugees in Europe have demonstrated that the effect, if not the stated purpose, of neoliberal governmentality is to ensure efficient management with minimal challenge from those marginalized by the system, through processes of subjectivation (e.g., Bendixsen 2020; Del Percio 2016; Pájaro 2022). In particular, Del Percio (2016) demonstrates that effective linguistic bridging easily becomes a technology of neoliberal governmentality, rather than increasing the agency of migrants who inhabit a materially precarious situation. By extension, there is a danger that aestheticizing initial negotiations of consent could redirect attention toward surface features, for instance by making research invitations more aesthetically pleasing in order to increase response rates, rather than to attend to affect, relationality and voice. Given this disciplining tendency of neoliberal governmentality, the right to resist participation in research remains crucial. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that our interest as researchers may not align with those of potential participants (Guta et al. 2013), even as the current configuration of research communications may trigger different experiences than

we intend to introduce (see also Caeymaex et al. 2023). We therefore caution against emphasizing aesthetics without simultaneous attention to ethical responsibility (see also Bauman 1993).

Others have highlighted the rigidity of neoliberal ethics regimes for the researcher and the ways in which this may limit inquiry into social life (Hansen and L'orange Fürst 2021; James 2021), yet fewer studies have considered the conduct of (potential) research participants' conduct within such regimes. In line with our participants' reactions, Caeymaex et al. (2023) found that informed consent protocols often generated mistrust, even in cases where consent had already been given orally and off the record. We have extended this insight through an analysis of the interpretive processes that may engender such reactions, which suggests that, at an aesthetic level, research protocols are more similar than different to other bureaucratic artifacts that establish institutional authority, shifting responsibility to individuals for their outcomes. Tateo (2017) suggests, "if we can understand the aesthetic dimension at stake in meaning-making, we could better understand contemporary phenomena, such as the use of specific semiotic devices to regulate both collective and individual conducts" (p. 252). This includes signs that "produce not 'fear' as an emotion, but fear as a stable societal condition" (Tateo 2017: 252). It is unlikely that standardized research protocols are intended to instill such a state of fear. However, they might produce a weaker variant: rather than fear, a type of watchfulness or alienation, alerting individuals to potential risks in opaque bureaucratic language, while transferring the responsibility to them to certify that they understand (see also Caeymaex et al. 2023). To the extent that such protocols appear impenetrable to certain groups, such as adult migrants with limited formal schooling, neoliberal governmentality might construe these individuals as too marginal or too expensive to merit systems change, preferring instead the "normalised absence" (Phoenix and Husain 2007: 7) of minoritized people in research. It is in view of this context that attention to aesthetics and relationality may support ethical decision-making.

In conclusion, our study contributes to developing an ethico-aesthetic lens for understanding and relating to linguistic difference when negotiating consent with potential research participants. By analyzing the response to these routines as an event of subjectivity (Biesta 2013), we draw attention to the relational nature of research ethics, the complexity of linguistic difference, and the insufficiency of "one-size-fits-all" anticipatory ethics" (Caeymaex et al. 2023: 4). Lévinas (1985) states that our uniqueness makes us morally responsible, but we do not arrive at a research site as uniquely qualified, better suited for the job than anyone else. Rather, in the encounter with the Other, researchers can make a choice to take up a responsibility for the Other, as we did here upon seeing that our research invitation evoked traumatic memories. That is, uniqueness is not an inherent characteristic of who we

are as researchers, but rather something we develop by choosing to take up our ethical responsibility for the Other in specific encounters. These encounters can only happen in proximity, yet institutional ethics regimes tend to position social distance between researchers and potential participants as an ethical safeguard (Caeymaex et al. 2023; James 2021), relying on the adequacy of representational meanings and sidelining potential participants for whom this may be inadequate. By highlighting this discrepancy, we argue for devolving greater control over research communications to researchers themselves, while also calling for greater responsibility for the Other (Lévinas 1985).

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