

Playful Experiences of Linguistic Diversity

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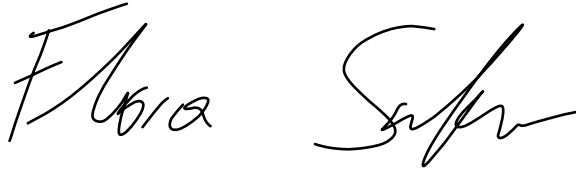
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A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the name 'Flora' followed by a stylized surname 'Sauer'.

Wien, 9.5. 2025

Flora Safar

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Für meine Schwester Charlotte
Wie schön es ist, von dir verstanden zu werden!

Abstract

Living in an interconnected, linguistically diverse world requires creative communicative solutions and a differentiated but empathic view of what it means to be human and to use language in interaction with others. This thesis is centered around the following question: What are the factors leading to successful communication and how can they be explored in a playful manner? The text traces the development of an artistic experimental method to experience, observe and discuss linguistic diversity and communication between people of multilingual backgrounds. The method takes shape as a game called *Charrada*, based on a multimodal version of charades. The name *Charrada* was made up in reference to other names for charade games from which the here presented version varies only in the aspect that the use of different languages is a central mechanism of the gameplay. To lay the groundwork for this playful artistic research method, the text offers a thorough analysis of the different shapes language can take. It presents a perspective of communication as a dynamic, collaborative social effort and suggests that mutual understanding is always attainable. Through deconstructing common (mis)conceptions of language and considering the many modes of expressions that comprise social interactions, my work outlines human communicators as beings intrinsically in search and capable of interpersonal connection.

German Abstract

Das Leben in einer vernetzten, linguistisch diversen Welt erfordert kreative kommunikative Lösungen und einen einfühlsamen und differenzierten Blick darauf, was es bedeutet, ein Mensch zu sein und Sprache in Begegnungen mit Anderen zu verwenden. Die Frage im Zentrum dieser Arbeit ist folgende: Welche Faktoren führen zu erfolgreicher Kommunikation und wie kann man diese auf eine spielerische Art erforschen? Der Text folgt der Entwicklung einer künstlerisch-experimentellen Methode des Erlebens, Beobachtens und Diskutierens sprachlicher Vielfalt. Diese nimmt in Form eines Spiels namens *Charrada* Gestalt an, welches auf einer multimodalen Version von Scharade basiert. Der Name *Charrada* wurde in Anlehnung an andere Namen für Scharade-Spiele erdacht, von denen die hier vorgelegte Version sich nur insofern unterscheidet, dass der Einsatz verschiedener Sprachen ein zentraler Spielmechanismus ist. Der Text bietet die Grundlage für diese spielerisch-künstlerische Forschungsmethode durch eine umfassende Aufarbeitung der verschiedenen Formen, die Sprache annehmen kann. Kommunikation entfaltet sich als dynamische, kollaborative, soziale Aktivität, die immer die Möglichkeit gegenseitigen Verständnisses birgt. Durch die Auflösung gängiger (Vor)urteile über Sprache und der Erkundung der vielfältigen Möglichkeiten sich in sozialen Interaktionen auszudrücken, präsentiert meine Arbeit den Menschen als kommunizierendes Wesen das von Grund auf nach zwischenmenschlicher Verbindung strebt und in der Lage ist, diese zu erlangen.

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Introduction

How do humans communicate?

Do we have to use the same language?

You do find a gemeinsamen Nenner ('common denominator') at the end. You stick to the language that everybody knows.

-Matea, Charrada #2

Through gestures, gaze and movement?

Non-verbal connection and knowing someone's non-verbal Wortschatz ('vocabulary') makes a huge difference.

-Charlotte, Charrada # 2

Is it particular to each situation and context?

We built up our own little language (...) Some of the words actually had a different meaning within this group.

-Albi, Charrada #2

Do we even know why we can understand each other?

I just knew what the word was but I don't know why I knew what the word was.

-Julian, Charrada #1

These quotes stem from four of the many wonderful multilingual individuals I collaborated with to produce this work. Playing a multilingual version of charades called *Charrada*, we experienced language in its many facets. In the gameplay, we conveyed meanings through drawing, pantomime, noises and different languages, sometimes using those we could all understand and sometimes ones the others weren't familiar with. Through verbal and non-verbal means, we managed to express concepts as concrete as 'windshield' and as vague as 'an exclamation which expresses appreciation by promising you would give your life for another person'. Alongside our playful explorations of communication we had conversations about our relationships with language, how it interlinks with our identities and lives, and the joys and challenges of being a communicating human in this world. We pondered philosophical questions, laughed about surprisingly expressive stick figure drawings, translated allegedly untranslatable words and found what unites us throughout our differences.

The phenomenon of language reveals something essential we all have in common: the desire to connect with others. No matter when or where you are born, you will try to and almost definitely succeed at communicating with the humans around you. In encounters with others this connection can take endless different forms. One might rightfully ask: "Why is it that all people have languages, but all so different?" (Haugen, 2012, p. 1).

It might seem contradictory that language could reveal both our differences and our similarities. This contradiction is the core of my passion for linguistics. My love, not only for language, but humanity in general, exists in a field of tension between the unique and the universal, the separating and the uniting. This love inspires my work as a scientist, an artist and a human.

Discourse about different languages often conjures the image of the "language barrier" (see chapter 3.3). I personally do not view language through this lens. I believe that communication is always an opportunity for connection, not separation. *Charrada* is a way of demonstrating and exploring the creative social interactions which arise not *in spite of* but *with* and *through* linguistic differences. How exactly humans do this is the question that drives my research.

The paradoxical seeming motif of language as a basis both for separation and unity will make frequent appearances throughout the presented text. I hope to take the reader on a journey which starts with curiosity about differences and culminates in the discovery of the potential to connect we all possess. In essence, this hope is my underlying philosophy as well as my plea to society.

I try to reflect upon and make transparent my personal motivations for my artistic and scientific work. This is how I embark on the journey ahead:

As a scientist, I want to observe, describe and understand, and critically engage with other scientists.

As an artist, I want to create aesthetic experiences to share my view on the world with others.

As an artistic researcher I take the liberty to use unconventional or unexpected (creative) ways to investigate the topics I'm interested in. I want to find out which traditional scientific standards matter to me, which don't, and experiment freely.

As a human, I want to know, love and play with other humans.

Outline of thesis

The question I want to answer in this thesis is, what is really important for successful communication in a multilingual, diverse world? The theoretical part of the work will flesh out these factors. These elements of communication are implemented in the game I developed called *Charrada*. In the second part of this text I will detail my vision of this game as a collaborative artistic research method to explore questions about language and communication and acquire linguistic data. I will give insight into two sessions of Charrada which took place parallel to the writing of this text and reflect on the approaches aptness for critical engagement with language. The work is structured as follows:

Chapter 1; Definitions establishes the most important terminology the reader needs to be aware of to understand the following text.

Chapter 2; Multilingual Lives delves into what discourse about language in academic and everyday contexts reveals about underlying attitudes. These attitudes, especially negative evaluations of multilingual practices, have to be deconstructed to make room for a more liberated view of communication to arise. This is important for scientists and non-scientists alike - the ways we discuss language use are not neutral and can have real-life repercussions. We often project notions about inherent differences between humans onto language. This chapter takes a clear stance against these divisive tendencies.

Chapter 3; Language Things discusses the multifaceted, collaborative, practical, amusing and beautiful ways in which humans actually communicate. It sets up all the aspects which the empirical artistic part of my research aims at encompassing: compassion, collaboration, commonalities, creativity and courage.

Subchapter 3.1; Many Modes of Collaboration explores the relation between iconic and symbolic communication which involves our whole bodies and demonstrates how the prerequisite for mutual understanding is simply the wish to understand each other.

Subchapter 3.2; Transnational and Translational Meanings recognizes the significance of common languages and translation as resources for intercultural interactions and as possible foundations for genuine connection.

Subchapter 3.3; Which barrier? presents literary examples of writers writing in their second languages, showing the enriching potential of artistic self expression.

Chapter 4; Conclusion of Theoretical Part is a summary reminding the reader of the most important takeaways from the previous chapters.

Chapter 5; The Charrada Method introduces a version of charades, *Bauernscharade*, which I adapted to a multilingual setting in which different languages are present alongside

other non-verbal modes of communication. The features of this version, called *Charrada*, are further discussed.

Chapter 6 The Charrada Sessions describes two trials of the Charrada game. It includes summaries of and reflections about the proceedings and takeaways from the two sessions for future application. Throughout the chapter I refer to the aspects in which Charrada exhibits traits of communication discussed in the theoretical part of the text.

1 Definitions

This section gives an introduction to the most important terminology appearing in this thesis. The following definitions aim to ease a reader who might not be familiar with any linguistic theory into the topics at hand. The different dimensions of meanings are discussed at multiple points in this work and will be explored in more depth in later chapters.

Language and language users

Defining what exactly constitutes a language is a very complex and multi-layered endeavor. There exist a huge range of terms that indicate the social, historical or political context of a way of communication, for example *dialect*, *variety*, *patois*, *vernacular* and many, many more. For the purpose of this work, I use *language* as a blanket term for different communication forms.

A person who communicates through arbitrary symbols is a *language user*. *Arbitrary symbols* or *arbitrary signs* indicate that there is no direct relation from the symbol to its meaning and the convention of how it may be used must be learned. Arbitrariness is a defining feature of language (Brown & Miller, 2013, entry 'Arbitrary Sign'). An *iconic sign* is its counterpart: "a sign whose form has some connection with its meaning" (Brown & Miller, 2013, entry 'Iconic Sign'). Further discussion of arbitrariness and iconicity will take place in chapter 3.1.

Someone part of a conversation is an *interlocutor* (Richards & Schmidt, 2013, p. 294). More specific terms will appear rarely and only in the appropriate context, for example a *speaker* referring to someone using spoken language and *signer* being someone using sign language.

Semiotic repertoire

The term was first introduced by Gumperz (1964) as *verbal repertoire*. Also sometimes labelled *speech repertoire*, the concept traditionally denotes all the languages and varieties a person uses within their community in their daily life (eg. Richards & Schmidt, 2013, p. 545). Expanding on the above illustrated, expansive and fluid definition of language, the term *semiotic repertoire* refers to the entirety of semiotic resources available to a communicating person, including speech, image, text, gesture, sign, gaze, facial expression, posture, objects and more (Kusters, 2021, p. 183). The notion emphasizes that languages aren't confined systems and that repertoires are multimodal and embodied (Kusters et. al, 2017, p. 228).

First Language aka L1

First language, abbreviated to L1, refers to the language acquired first in one's life (Richards & Schmidt, 2013, p. 221). While most definitions list this term in the singular, it is particularly important for the research at hand to stress that a person can have multiple first languages. The L1 is also often referred to as *native language*, or *mother tongue*, terms I deliberately do not use in my work because of their implication that language is hereditary akin to genetic traits.

Second Language aka L2

Second language, abbreviated to L2, refers to any language learned after a persons' first language(s). The term designates not only the language which is learned succeeding the first language, but any languages acquired later in life, regardless of the chronological order. Depending on the research interest, literature might also use L3, L4, L5, etc. to sequentially order the languages learned by an individual (Pavlenko, 2005, p. 7). Here, I streamline the terminology to keep it as simple as possible. L1 refers to the language(s) through which a persons' language skills are first developed in life. L2 denotes all other languages learned after the first, no matter the chronological order or skill level.

Monolingualism

Monolingual refers to individuals or communities who actively use only one language - their first language (Nguyen, 2015, p. 5; Richards & Schmidt, 2013, p. 374). True cases of monolingualism, for example isolated tribes, are very rare. Linguistic diversity is present in, and impacts most lives. Under closer scrutiny it becomes evident that the semiotic repertoires and experiences of presumed monolinguals are multifaceted (cf. Castro et. al, 2022).

Bilingualism

Bilingualism as a cover term refers to the practice of using two or more languages (Nguyen, 2015, p. 7). Most of the time, *bilingual* appears in relation to individuals, however, a community or larger society can also be described as bilingual (Haugen, 2012, pp. 13-14; Tavakoli, 2013, p. 45). The term is significant in many areas of linguistics; Language development focuses on how children acquire multiple first languages at the same time, often contrasting this acquisition with second language learning. Sociolinguistic inquiries are concerned with social aspects of bilingualism like language choice, identity, language policies or education. Neuroscientific and psycholinguistic perspectives consider the processing and use of multiple languages by one person and cognitive impacts of using multiple languages. The definition of bilingualism is further discussed in chapter 2.1.

Multilingualism

Multilingualism refers to the knowledge and use of three or more languages by an individual or group. The term is commonly employed to describe different speech communities living within a common geographical and/or political space, their day-to-day life and language policies (Richards & Schmidt, 2013, pp. 379-380). The definitions of *bilingual* and *multilingual* overlap in almost all respects, differing only in the number of languages that are implied. In addition to the more common *bilingual*, I use *multilingual*, because I associate with it a fluidity and numberlessness, which I feel reflects the complex lived realities of most humans in their individual and in our shared lives (cf. Pavlenko, 2005, p.9). To consolidate the interchanging use the reader may consider bilingualism as a form of multilingualism.

Language attitudes

Attitudes are a combination of assumptions, emotions and behaviours formed towards specific matters. These positions help humans orient themselves in a complex social world (Garrett et al., 2003, p.3). "Linguistic forms, varieties and styles can set off beliefs about a speaker [language user], their group membership, and can lead to assumptions about attributes of those members" (Garrett et al., 2003, p. 3).

Language ideologies

Language ideologies are an „(...) ubiquitous set of diverse beliefs, however implicit or explicit they may be, used by speakers [language users] of all types as models for constructing linguistic evaluations and engaging in communicative activity. They are beliefs about the superiority/inferiority of specific languages (...)“ (Kroskrity, 2004, 497).

2 Multilingual Lives - Theory and Practice

In this chapter I will examine theories of multilingualism in contrast to lived realities of multilingual individuals. Linguistic concepts like *bi-/multilingualism*, *language proficiency* and what it means to *know a language* will be scrutinized. I will investigate the sources of these ideas and bring to light appraisals they implicitly carry. These theories are contrasted with the life of multilinguals, analyzing the consequences discourse about language has on humans coexisting in linguistically diverse environments.

Chapter 2.1; What does it mean to be bilingual? asks what it really means to be bilingual and what expectations come with this label.

Chapter 2.2; Multilingual Practices and Language Attitudes probes attitudes towards multilingual communicative practices like code switching and gives a contemporary example from 2025 Viennese election campaigns to show how language attitudes are exploited for political goals.

Chapter 2.3; Proper Language challenges the conceptions of what correct language use means by questioning the concept of *language proficiency* and which groups of people are naturally assumed to have mastery over “proper language”.

Chapter 2.4; To know a language considers the meaning of *knowing a language* by exploring an alternate perspective on knowledge and scrutinizing language labels and categories.

2.1 What does it mean to be bilingual?

This chapter explores the expectations and biases connected with the label *bilingual*. What do we mean when we describe someone as *bilingual* and how do we expect them to behave?

It is very likely that the term *bilingual* evokes in you the image of someone who is equally proficient in two languages, both of which they use in balance in all areas of their life (Richards & Schmidt, 2013, p. 54; Grosjean, 1989). In reality, however, this is rarely the case and there exist a plethora of labels to characterize a bilinguals' experience more closely in many aspects. For example, one can describe in which stage of their life the person became bilingual: *the simultaneous bilingual* uses two languages since the inception of their language skills, *the early bilingual* acquired two languages throughout childhood, *the late bilingual* or *achieved bilingual* is someone who learned a second language in their youth or adulthood (Tavakoli, 2013, pp. 46-47). There is a range of names for the model bilingual that might have appeared in your mind reading the first sentence of this chapter; The *equilingual*, *balanced bilingual*, *symmetrical bilingual* stands in opposition to other, imperfect bilinguals like the *functional bilingual* who operates regardless of proficiency, or the *passive* or *receptive bilingual*, who understands but does not produce the language (Tavakoli, 2013, pp. 46-47). In scientific communities the idealized concept of a balanced bilingual has been mostly deconstructed. In the seminal, charmingly named paper *Neurolinguists, Beware! The Bilingual Is Not Two Monolinguals in One Person* (1989), François Grosjean dismantles the monolingual bias present in academic discussions of bilingualism. He identifies a tendency of expecting bilinguals' repertoire to consist of two separate and balanced skill sets, as if combining those of two monolingual language users. Under this lens, all "other" bilinguals, who actually represent the overwhelming majority, are demoted to a status of anomaly and incompleteness. Outside of academia, these notions also affect how multilinguals perceive their own linguistic competencies. In a study on bi- and multilingual self perception Zubrzycki (2019) found that for most laypersons "(...) an equal command of two languages is not sufficient to label oneself a bilingual – it has to be the result of having been born and raised in a bilingual family or of a prolonged exposure to the second language" (p. 469). These harsh evaluations unveil how multilinguals' language use is often viewed from a perspective of incompleteness and deficiency.

"Being bilingual is not as epic as it used to be", said Julian, a participant in the first installment of my artistic experimental research, the game Charrada (see Chapter 5-6). This person even by very narrow definitions would fit the mold of the idealized bilingual as described above. Julian's utterance was made in reference to the pride he felt in his

bilingualism as a child, as compared to now, as an adult. He was not the only multilingual feeling insecure during Charrada. In fact, all participants sometimes experience moments of self-doubt concerning their language use, as became clear over the course of the game and the group discussions afterwards. Be it their accent, sophistication of their vocabulary or the social status associated with a language, most multilinguals will readily find flaws within their own semiotic repertoire.

Grosjean argues that bilinguals must be studied as complete linguistic entities whose repertoires are uniquely configured based on their lived realities. This includes using the two languages separately or together in different situations (Grosjean, 1989, p. 6). This applies to multilinguals in general. A common example is that of migration, which results in migrants and/or their descendants using the local official or majority language in public, at work or school, but a different one in their domestic or familiar context.

Describing someone as bilingual brings expectations of linguistic skill sets that do not represent the actual communicative habits of most multilinguals. The diverse semiotic repertoires and language experiences of multilinguals can not easily be summarized by such labels, limiting their usefulness in academic discourse.

2.2 Multilingual Practices and Language Attitudes

The following chapter examines attitudes towards multilingual language practices and what they may imply on a societal level. First, code switching will be discussed as an example of language mixing. Second, two campaigns for the Viennese municipal elections exemplify how the depiction of certain linguistic practices as inadequate is weaponized to single out specific communities.

The possible constellations of where, how and with whom to use which communicative tools are as diverse as human experiences are. When people who share multiple languages communicate, code switching commonly occurs. This practice entails switching from one language to another for different durations; a word, a phrase, a sentence or longer (Nguyen, 2015, p. 13). Patterns of code switching are highly diverse but not random, making them the subject of great interest to linguists. Consider for example English and Farsi, languages with at times contrasting grammatical structures. This concerns the order of verbs and objects in a sentence. English is a *VO-language* that means, objects usually follow verbs. Farsi is an *OV-language*, meaning the verb follows the object. *She ate* (Verb) *an apple* (Object) in Farsi is *Oon sib* (Object) *khord* (Verb). Even if they aren't consciously aware of these syntactic

patterns, an English speaker would usually frown at the utterance *She an apple ate* just like a Farsi speaker would shake their head at *Oon khord sib*. So what happens when an English-Farsi bilingual mixes these differently structured languages? Mahootian (1993) shows that when a Farsi verb is used with an English object, the OV-sentence structure of Farsi remains: *Ten dollars dad-e*, “ten dollars give-PERFECT”, ‘she gave ten dollars’ (p.150). When an English verb is used with a Farsi object, the VO-sentence structure mirrors that of English: *I love xormalu*, ‘I love persimmon’ (p. 152). This is a pattern that can consistently be observed. *Dad-e ten dollars* or *I xormalu love* would simply sound incorrect to an English-Farsi bilingual’s ears. The bilingual adheres to the grammatical rules of both respective languages, but code switches between the two also follow a specific structure. This begs the question, how the internal linguistic knowledge of bilinguals is organized. MacSwan (2017) for example suggests an *integrated multilingual perspective* which entails that individuals’ multilingual language systems involve both shared and discrete resources (p. 180).

Without delving further into grammatical theories, I hope this example gives an idea of the significance of studying practices such as code switching. These phenomena give an insight into the psychological reality of multilingualism, which is not defective or deficient, but highly intriguing in its own right (cf. MacSwan, 2017, p. 191).

While curiosity might prevail in academic contexts, others’ reactions to and attitudes towards mixing languages are often strongly negative. It should be mentioned that the magnitude of these reactions also depends on the specific languages involved, as do language attitudes by and large. Social and political status of languages markedly influence how language users are treated and how they perceive themselves. Especially in the case of small linguistic groups who lack an official status, community members often have a self deprecating mindset towards their own language (cf. Promitzer, 2009, pp. 166-168).

To return to overarching tendencies, code switching is commonly seen as careless, lazy and generally undesirable (Grosjean, 2010, pp. 52-53). This is, as exemplified above, not only wrong from a linguistic perspective, but often a sign of bigotry. Of course language is a constituent of an individual’s identities and part of a culture and the general interest to preserve it is not necessarily a sign of intolerance. However, these judgments are frequently accompanied by the subliminal or overt wish to separate languages, usually to keep a language which is connected to national identity “intact” and “pristine”. A society which actively fosters these kinds of sentiments is usually xenophobic and in the worst case, on its way to a type of language policy characteristic of totalitarian regimes (cf. Klein, 1989). Views like these are not new phenomena. Language academies dedicated to “purifying” the romance languages that descended from Latin were already established as early as the

1600s in Italy (MacSwan, 2017, p. 173). Unfortunately these “traditions” persist in modern times. Language attitudes are very telling of underlying views and values and language policies and education should counteract dogmatic tendencies.



1. Viennese Election Campaign by the ÖVP party. Photograph taken by Valentin "Pitti" Bandera.



2. Viennese Election Campaign by the NEOS party. Photograph taken by the author.

At the time of writing, spring 2025, elections for municipal and district council are approaching Vienna. Two specific advertisements of Austrian political parties are current examples of how language ideologies already prevalent within a society can be weaponized to further politicians' interests to raise these dogmas to the level of policy. Without delving deep into the current Austrian political landscape, I want to briefly reference those advertisements and their implications. One poster by the centre-liberal party NEOS shows three small children, two of which are visibly not white, and the slogan: *Ganz ehrlich - Deutsch ist kein Wahlfach* ('Let's be honest; German is not an elective'). Another poster by the conservative party ÖVP states: *Deutsch ist Pflicht, Habibi* with the subtitle *Wien wieder schlau machen* ('German is mandatory, Habibi - Make Vienna smart again'). Both of these advertisements reference the current state in schools and kindergartens, where many children's knowledge of German does not match the standard expected of them. These children have family histories of migration or are even refugees themselves. However, the political agendas of NEOS and ÖVP are clearly not to enable communication or intercultural exchange between children of different linguistic backgrounds. These two advertisements assert the priority of German as a language of national identity which needs to be adhered to in order to not be excluded. An education system which is truly interested in fostering language skills and integration, might instead consider the presence of large immigrant communities as a reason for these communities' languages to be offered as school languages to everyone (Clyne, 2004, p. 27).

The ÖVP-poster's handling of *habibi* is especially heinous. The Arabic *habibi* (حَبِيبِي) meaning 'my darling', a common term of endearment to address friends, is insidiously used here by the party to single out exactly the group of people whose language usage they characterize as deviant. Using *habibi* in an exchange otherwise mostly in German is common, especially amongst younger generations, where it has become a loanword. Examples like this are natural in a multilingual world. Bilinguals, in this case Arabic-German bilinguals, bring a borrowed word into their majority German speaking speech community where the word eventually becomes part of even the non-Arabic speakers' repertoires. These processes of linguistic integration happen despite the resistance of those interested in conserving a language (Grosjean, 2010, pp. 61-62). The Austrian ÖVP and similarly inclined persons might be too ignorant to see it, but outside the bounds of their small world, the rest of us humans of different linguistic backgrounds are mingling and mixing without regard to the rules of any policy maker. We are getting to know each other, becoming friends and learning new ways of calling each other *my darling*. Contrastingly to the ÖVP's PR team, we aren't using languages to make fun of each other, we are *having fun with language*.

To conclude, while multilingual language practices such as code switching pose compelling fields of research for linguists, there also exist unfavourable attitudes towards language mixing. When exploited for political goals, these tendencies can incite aversion against groups of people like migrants and lead to policies which further marginalize them. Multilingualism poses a threat towards the puristic idea of one cohesive national language and identity. In times of political leanings shifting to the right, it is especially important to stay vigilant as to how language is being policed.

2.3 Proper Language

This chapter challenges the assumptions often implicit in evaluations of individuals' language skills.

Even though they are culturally linked with national identity, languages themselves have no inherent connection to any group of humans. Terms like *mother tongue* or *native speaker* are quite misleading - language is not passed on through genes at all. Every child has to learn it from scratch. As children grow older, they discover differences and learn to stigmatize them. As adults, we automatically identify which group an individual belongs to due to their mannerisms and we treat them accordingly (Haugen, 2012, pp. 2-3). If someone's language is perceived as incorrect or deficient, they are looked down upon and excluded. But what qualifies as "proper language"? Richards & Schmidt (2013) define *language proficiency* as "the degree of skill with which a person can use a language, such as how well a person can read, write, speak, or understand language" (p. 321). In education and linguistic research this is assessed through tests. However, there are certain groups who are assumed to naturally be proficient, like the above mentioned *native speaker*. Presumably a person of "ideal" and "normal" upbringing will by adulthood have perfect command over a language (Cheng et al., 2021, p. 2). This singular language is standardized, named and possesses a written form. Those whose language use does not match this mold, in the worst case might be perceived as not really having language at all. This particularly affects racialized people whose multilingual practices include code switching or other non-normative communicative habits. Rosa (2016) examines how "racialized ideologies of *languagelessness* [emphasis added] call into question linguistic competence—and, by extension, legitimate personhood—altogether" (p. 163). Even in some academic linguistic research, for example neurolinguistics, the standard subject, chosen to be representative of all humans, is almost always a member of Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) populations (cf. Henrich et al., 2010). Whoever does not belong to this group might be included as a "special case" at best. "Ironically, even efforts toward diversity are based on

presumed shared norms. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts and identity politics assume that certain groups or activities deserve recognition as ‘diverse’ in relation to dominant norms” (Canagarajah, 2023, pp. 11-12).

It seems the modern multilingual person is in a difficult place. Prejudiced language attitudes lead to the marginalization of those whose communicative practices deviate from a fabricated ideal. Rampant unrealistic standards of linguistic perfection lead to harsh policing of the self and others. The language use of racialized and otherwise marginalized people are deemed a threat to the national identity of the society they are supposedly a part of.

The perceived lack of proficiency in a national or official language, code switching and language mixing are unwelcome signs of cultures intermingling to politically conservative parts of the population. Beyond political and social context, on a deeply human level, language is for most an essential and intimate part of their identity. Feeling like one’s way of expression is wrong, inadequate or inferior can evoke a range of emotions from mild aggravation to profound distress.

In light of the many antagonistic language attitudes outlined in the above chapters, I appeal to the validity and merit of all multilingual identities. In the face of conservatism and oppression, living an unabashedly multilingual life is a sign of courage. The persisting presence of tenacious code switchers and audacious language mixers confirms my belief that the joy found in unrestrained communication will always exceed the repressive urge of bigotry.

2.4 To know a language

Until now I have analyzed some common attitudes towards multilinguals and their language habits. This includes questioning the underlying assumptions associated with certain terms like *bilingual* or *language proficiency*. To answer the question, what it really means to be a multilingual communicator in a linguistically diverse world, there is another question that has yet to be tackled: What does it mean to *know a language*? I will approach this question in two steps. First, I will question *knowing*, then *language*. Herein I will probe into philosophical realms that cannot within the scope of this thesis be discussed in depth. Rather, this chapter gives an impetus to further critical questioning of prevalent conceptions of language in academia and in everyday life.

2.4.1 Knowing?

The concept of what it means to *know* a language in linguistic research is often related to the traditional division of *competence* and *performance*. The highly influential linguist Noam Chomsky defined these terms in 1965 as distinguishing between the theoretical abilities a person has - their competence - and how they actually use language in a real situation - their performance. This distinction is used to indicate that not every communicative situation will reflect the internal knowledge of the interlocutors. To give an extreme example, if someone is tired, drunk or distracted, they might not be able to express themselves, but it is assumed that, internally, they have the tools to do so, even if they cannot access them at the time. Chomsky sees the object of linguistic theory in “discovering a mental reality underlying actual behaviour” (Chomsky, 2014, p. 2). This quest is rooted within a classical European philosophical tradition that sees mind and body as separate entities. Some more recent approaches in cognitive sciences have moved away from this view. They consider cognition as being embedded in the world and the mind expanding beyond the brain, to the body and into the environment. From these perspectives, knowledge is not a construct residing in our brains that represents the world around us in an abstract way, but a dynamic interaction with the world (Damasio, 2011, p. 103; Peschl, 2023, p. 233; Varela et al., 1991). Adopting this perspective shifts focus away from language as systems of abstract and arbitrary rules. It allows us to see communication as something tangible happening between humans, something that is ever changing, adaptable and fluid. This opens up room for diversity, for the real range of humans’ experiences including those who are often ignored or labelled “exceptions” by researchers. If we additionally acknowledge that cognition extends beyond the organic body we can expand our understanding of communication even further (cf. Clark & Chalmers, 2010). Consider the devices many of us use daily, like phones and computers. Consider translation apps, prosthetics, glasses, hearing aids. These and many other tools are meaningful parts of our interactions with the world.

All this does not mean that the classical distinction between linguistic competence and performance is not meaningful or helpful. It is clear that one’s behaviour in a concrete situation never mirrors the full range of potential a person possesses. However, opening up our understanding of what it means to know, illuminates nuances in the complex and fascinating image of what it means to be human.

2.4.2 A Language?

In the previous chapters I have extensively discussed the arbitrariness of linguistic norms and the stigmatization of practices deviating from these norms. I have also alluded to the fact that what is considered a language is not a matter of neutral properties. This section delves deeper into the deconstruction of language labels from a critical, political and historical perspective, and deliberates if and how language categories are valuable in linguistic research.

Translanguaging is a concept that comes from bilingual education and originated as a teaching concept that invites children to use language in the classroom as they do in their life outside of school. Cen Williams (1994) first used the original Welsh *trawsieithu* to refer to bilingual Welsh/English classrooms in which students were encouraged to use both languages. The term translanguaging has since gone beyond describing educational practices and developed into a conceptual framework which encourages and upholds the naturally fluid language use of multilinguals (MacSwan, 2017, p. 171). Recall the view of François Grosjean as summarized in chapter 2.1, that bilinguals' language systems should be viewed holistically, not by splitting their semiotic repertoires into two separate codes (cf. Grosjean 1989; 1998; 2010). Translanguaging standpoints oppose prescriptivist ideologies - that is, those who prescribe rules and idealize one "correct" way of language over others (MacSwan, 2017, p. 172). Some scholars go one step further and call into question the use of language names. Makoni & Pennycook (2006) argue that "languages do not exist as real entities in the world and neither do they emerge from or represent real environments; they are, by contrast, the inventions of social, cultural and political movements" (p. 2). The authors call for a critical reevaluation of named languages that considers their construction within a historical context, for example colonial and nationalist ideologies implementing literacy programs (Makoni & Pennycook, 2006, p. 1). This also applies to the description of language systems in grammars and dictionaries, a process which is far from impartial.

I personally first realized this when writing a seminar paper on the origins of Chewa/Nyanja, a Bantu language spoken in Malawi (cf. Eberhard et. al, 2025). During my research I realized that all recorded early "field work" I had access to, was accounts written by Christian missionaries, slave traders and colonizers. Scholars of historical linguistics integrate these recordings into their descriptions of a language, implicitly preserving this data for the next generation of scientists to use it. This use of highly dubious and unreliable documentations are an example of European academic traditions being applied uncritically. Such practices are careless and unscientific (cf. Gal & Irvine 1995 for similar examples concerning Senegalese languages and Macedonian.)

While deconstructing and recontextualizing language labels and divisions between languages is definitely a fruitful and important endeavour, it leaves some questions open. What about phenomena like multilingualism or code switching? How can we analyze them in a framework without distinct languages? MacSwan (2017) suggests that the meaningful use of language categories depends on their analytic utility. Linguistic labels can point to political, social or structural differences. For example, while the distinction between Romanian and Moldovan is politically motivated, the distinction between academic English and gamer English depends on social context. Some structural generalizations described by linguists, for example phonological features of AAVE (African American Vernacular English) cannot be sorted into either category (MacSwan, 2017, p. 177).

Returning to the concept *translanguaging*, I want to offer the *multilingual perspective on translanguaging* described by MacSwan (2017): “We are all multilinguals in the sense that we each use different ways of talking in different social contexts. But for some, these social languages are enacted through more dramatic structural differences, broadly described with labels” (p. 188). Adopting this framework also allows the integration of presumed monolinguals, acknowledging that they too are multilingual in important ways (MacSwan, p. 172). Additionally, no matter how effortfully linguists deconstruct and reconstruct categories, people use common language labels to describe the nuances of their multilingual realities in everyday discourse (cf. Pennycook & Otsuji, 2016). Whoever is interested in everyday metalinguistic discourse will encounter all kinds of labels with which laypersons describe their communicative practices. In the case of my own research, I value the experiences people choose to share with me and I acknowledge the importance of the labels they use in doing so. This is part of what I see as a mindful scientific practice. Cheng et al. (2021) elegantly summarize this goal:

All conceptual categories used for research are inherently simplifications and cannot capture the complexity of social life, but are necessary because there is no way to conduct meaningful research without them. However, a sensible scientific aim can be to ensure that the terms we use both describe the phenomenon of interest as accurately as possible and do not harm the communities we study (p. 4).

The critical interrogation of language labels does not negate their usefulness. A vigilant examination of the historical and political context of these labels may be multilayered and complex, but can eventually deepen scientific insight. In comparison to other fields, linguistics is a very young science that is still developing the fundamental understanding of its subject. Due to the volatility and expansive nature of language, linguists have to navigate complexly interacting factors in order to grasp the phenomena they study. Examining the

scope and definitions of concepts is especially important to finding footing in the fluidity of the field.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has elaborated on what discourse about language implies for multilingual lives in a linguistically diverse world. To this end, I have scrutinized categories commonly used to discuss language in general, and multilingualism in particular. Terms such as *bilingual*, *proficiency* or *knowledge* carry with them implicit expectations of abilities and behaviours that are rarely found in reality and do not cover the wide range of human experience. Historical and sociopolitical circumstances are tightly entwined with labels. To a scientist looking for suitable terminology to carry out their research, it might seem like tedious work to interrogate this nomenclature. However, this process should be indispensable to anyone aiming to gain deeper insight into a topic.

Beyond scholarly interests, deconstructing common (mis)conceptions about language is important for an array of social issues. Since communication is such a fundamental part of being human, the impacts of judgements and actions based on a misunderstanding of what language is, are profound and far reaching. Much could be achieved, for example in school education, by establishing approaches that encourage diversity and collaboration instead of prescribing rules and punishing deviations.

To study language means to study humans. That means embracing the inherent humanness of language, its capricious, multifaceted, whimsical qualities, which are difficult to neatly measure. “And so we move out of the laboratory into the real world where languages are living, changing, fluctuating processes of communication” (Branson & Miller, 2006, p. 117).

3 Language Things

Wait, I think this is a language thing, honestly.

-Sepehr, Charrada #1

The previous chapter has described how terminology used to denote differences encompass a complex interplay of descriptiveness and prejudice. In it I have established that no type of language use is inherently superior to any other. Having revoked the need for judgements and rules from a conception of language, the following chapter answers the question how humans really communicate. It explores how humans communicate not in spite of, but through and with differences. I postulate that an interplay of the following factors enables mutual understanding in all situations: Compassion, collaboration, commonalities, creativity and courage. All of these factors are also present in my experimental artistic research, the game *Charrada* which will be described and discussed in Chapters 5-6.

Chapter 3.1; Many Modes of Collaboration is about how symbolic language emerges and how we communicate even without a predetermined code, exhibiting the uniting power of collaboration and community.

Chapter 3.2; Transnational and Translational Meanings lays out how we navigate linguistic differences in intercultural encounters in a globalized world. It includes two examples for communicative tools, which will also appear in the discussion of Charrada in Chapter 5-6: shared languages - lingua francas - and translation.

Chapter 3.3; Which barrier? presents the liberating qualities of artistic self expression. Literary examples, two of which stem from authors writing in their second languages, pose as inspiration and invitation to multilinguals to share their perspectives in whatever language they please.

3.1 Many Modes of Collaboration

Chapter 2 has indicated that language is not predetermined, definite and controlled, but fluid, ever changing and dynamic - it's alive. However, there is some truth in the notion of language as conventionalized code: Human language is symbolic. This chapter proposes that symbolic language emerges from non-linguistic communication, shared goals and collaboration. This is how codes develop on an evolutionary and individual level. It further suggests that compassion and creativity enable mutual understanding and connection even in non-normative communication.

3.1.1 Of Gestures and Symbols

In "The Origins of Human Communication" Tomasello (2010) summarizes the natural, non-linguistic ways of human communication which, he theorizes, have led to the evolution of language: the use of pointing gestures to direct someone's gaze, and iconic gestures - *pantomiming*. These simple actions effectively communicate even in complex ways because of the shared, collaborative interpersonal situations in which they are used. Not only do we share a context but also a common goal - we *want* to understand each other. Tomasello goes on to explain how arbitrary conventions of communication like the use of symbols "rely on the same cooperative infrastructure as 'natural' human gestures, and indeed they derive originally from these natural gestures through a 'drift to the arbitrary'" (Tomasello & Roeper, 2010, p. 322).

Theories about the origins of language are debated amongst scholars (cf. Kenneally, 2008). The shift from gestural to symbolic communication is one very likely explanation of how language evolved on a large scale. This can be seen in action when children acquire language. Infants' linguistic skills advance gradually through different stages before a complete set of symbols is established. This includes a variety of modalities. In early infancy, one of the first modes of communication between seeing children and their caregivers is mutual gaze. Eye contact remains a very important part of social interaction throughout life (cf. D'Odorico & Levorato, 1994). Many will know how profoundly expressive eye contact can be. Especially when the persons involved know each other well, a look as short as the "blink of an eye" will often be enough to convey a message. Another behaviour used throughout life are deictic gestures; pointing at objects and locations. How infants' use of pointing transforms during early language acquisition is an example for the drift to the arbitrary Tomasello writes of. Deaf children begin to creatively use pointing gestures at the age of around 9 months but they only start to use them as pronouns to refer to 'you' and 'me' at around 17-20 months, the same timeframe that hearing children begin to systematically use

pronouns (Petitto, 1994, p. 157). During that time, children also make errors that relate to them starting to use language symbolically. Petitto (1994) describes how a deaf child growing up with ASL (American Sign Language) began mistakenly using the sign for 'you' as referring to herself - as if it was her name - because of course, in interactions, interlocutors would refer to her with the 'you'-sign. Pronouns are always context dependent - whoever one is conversing with, is 'you' in that moment. The child's error coincided with her using less pointing gestures as intuitively referring to her immediate surroundings and instead utilizing an increasing number of noun-signs. During this process, she started to understand the symbolic relationship between a sign and its referent and over-symbolized the 'you'-sign which she interpreted as having a static referent - herself (Petitto, 1994, p. 159).

Examples like this show how the transformation from spontaneously used gestures to arbitrary symbols is not necessarily smooth. However, it seems to be a human disposition to interact in this way. Symbolic communication develops even when a child is not exposed to a conventional language system. An example for this are *homesign systems*. Deaf children that grow up without the presence of an established sign language in their surroundings manage to communicate successfully nonetheless. Even though no pre-established language is passed on to them, through interacting with family and other interlocutors in their environment, a new gestural communication system emerges (Brentari & Goldin-Meadow, 2017, p. 364). Homesign systems are complex in the same way that formalized languages are (Goldin-Meadow, 2005, p. 225) and most importantly, they are effective. Homesigners narrate stories about real and imagined, comment on present and non-present events, they converse with others and talk to themselves (cf. Brentari & Goldin-Meadow, 2017, p.366). Homesigners have an instinctive drive to communicate, regardless of formalized language input. They also utilize collaborative strategies that all conversations require to allow for mutual understanding. Most of us are not aware of how turbulent human conversations actually are, with interruptions, misunderstandings and all kinds of chaotic behaviour being commonplace. The reason we frequently don't take notice of these tumultuous moments is that we resolve most of them immediately, integrating them in the flow of our interaction. One example is what in conversation analysis is called *other initiated repair*, a strategy which comes into play when a person who is unsure about the message they received signals their confusion to the one who formulated this message so they might clarify it. A study on Balinese homesign by Safar & de Vos (2022) shows how homesigners use other initiated repair strategies to cooperate with interlocutors, clearly showing the capacity to identify with the other and jointly restore mutual understanding (pp. 119-120). This is yet another example of how humans naturally strive to communicate and how we collaborate to reach that goal.

The preceding section discussed humans' tendency to develop systems of arbitrary symbols to communicate. Throughout evolution as well as in individuals' language acquisition, these

symbols emerge from spontaneous natural gestures like pointing and pantomimes (cf. Tomasello, 2010). However, iconic ways of expression are still very much present in our interactions even after we have established a common set of symbols. Everyday interactions are a complex interplay of different modalities including gesture, gaze, body postures, movements, manipulations of objects and symbolic language (Mondada, 2019, p. 47). I would encourage anyone who has never engaged with Conversation Analysis before, to at least once observe the details of how a social interaction unfolds. You will quickly find that even what you would have thought the most mundane situation, is actually highly intricate and multifaceted. Looks, noises and movements you have never before acknowledged will appear. You will hear sighs, snuffles and grunts, you will see shrugs, fluttering eyes and shifting hips and you will notice muddled sentences, stuttering, interruptions, repetitions and many other behaviours you would never learn about in a language class. You might feel surprised at the magnitude of the chaos that humans manage to communicate in spite of. Until eventually, you will realize that this chaos itself is communication.

3.1.2 Idiosyncrasies and Empathy

I have established how, even though humans tend to communicate with symbols, a shared code is by far not the only method of connecting. In fact, a common language does not guarantee mutual understanding between interlocutors. Hanks (1996) states that “What they must share, to a variable degree, is the ability to verbally, perceptually, and physically orient themselves to each other and their social world (p. 229). This statement might seem vague, but Hanks’ approach offers a framework to meaningfully analyse non-normative communication. Canagarajah (2023) recounts his experience with a student, “Jane”, in his graduate course. Among other disabilities, Jane had been diagnosed with Tourette Syndrome and frequently produced tics and stims during class, some of which were quite disorienting for the group. For example, Jane would involuntarily exclaim “I hate Dr. C, I hate Dr. C, I hate Dr. C!”, referring to their teacher while he was “making a profound philosophical point” (Canagarajah, 2023, p. 17). While he and other students did not know how to deal with this in the beginning, their interactions developed over the course of the semester. The professor tried different strategies of meaningfully integrating Jane’s tics and stims into the discourse. Jane’s verbal tics included sometimes repeating keywords that the professor would often use, like “translingual, translingual, translingual”, which he came to see as reinforcements for the learning process. He further explains how, when Jane uttered these keywords in seemingly unrelated contexts, the class tried considering the current topic from their perspective, adding another layer of contemplation (p. 18). Jane would sometimes belatedly modify their stims, such as “I hate Dr. C, I hate Dr. C—but I like the point he’s

making”, using the delayed control they had to indicate that the insult was not deliberate (p. 17). This could be classified as a form of repair sequence, comparable to what was referenced in the previous chapter (cf. Safar & de Vos, 2022), although this would be a case of *self initiated repair*. Canagarajah’s (2023) example shows how even initially bewildering utterances can be integrated and how anomalies can be generative instead of an inconvenience. These situations call for patience, sacrifice and understanding. Reflecting on his experience with Jane, Canagarajah writes:

We have to also learn to give enough time and space for new understandings and moral dispositions to evolve. Waiting patiently for meanings to emerge is part of crip communication. Though such communicative interactions are not efficient, quick, clear, or easy, they were certainly educational and community-building for everyone (pp. 18-19).

The framework this author operates in is called crip linguistics, an approach which “embraces linguistic variation while rejecting normative expectations of language use by adopting an activist stance rooted in critical disability politics” (Henner & Robinson, 2023, p. 1). In my opinion insights from this field can be a significant tool for understanding and integrating many kinds of non-normative communication. I am reminded of my own interactions with people I know very intimately, for example my younger sister who I live with. In our interactions, meaning is sometimes conveyed through an array of noises, grimaces or other non-verbal behaviours. Some of these over time become emblematic of a certain emotion or reference and thereby develop into an inside-joke that no bystander could immediately decipher. I am sure that others can relate to these experiences, as idiosyncratic expressions are prevalent in many close relationships, with some individuals having a particular inclination towards them. The people we are close to, like family and friends, we understand even if they do not or cannot speak to us in a conventional way. This willingness to engage can be expanded to other humans and will help us connect.

As beautifully depicted in Canagarajah’s (2023) paper, patience, empathy, tolerance and selflessness are to some point required in every social interaction. Becoming aware of vulnerability can lead to appreciating these values as integral to communication. Some, like disabled communities in the Global South, are especially aware of vulnerability due to their traumatic colonial history. However, this vulnerability is not considered disabling, but resourceful. As opposed to movements in the Western world, these communities do not center individualism but rather work together for communal well being. (Canagarajah, 2022, pp. 7-8). This mindset is conducive to appreciating and fostering linguistic diversity.

Populations like current-day Austria would surely profit from integrating these attitudes on a societal level.

When there is a shared intention, and a collaborative effort to connect, mutual understanding is possible under various circumstances (cf. Brennan & Hanna, 2009; Liu et al., 2023; Tomasello, 2010, Ch. 3). Collaborating while respecting differences helps reach this goal. Put simply and boldly; If we *want* to understand, we *will*.

3.1.3 Conclusion

This chapter discussed how humans interact using symbols and codes but also through many other, uncodified modalities. Gesture, gaze and movement also create meaning. Language systems emerge in humans, even without formal language input, as shown by the example of homesign. “Natural” behaviours are a precursor for symbolic language in infants’ acquisition. This, as Tomasello (2010) calls it, drift to the arbitrary is also an evolutionary explanation for the development of language. The basic requirement for language to evolve was collaboration between humans with shared goals. This still applies and can be experienced, for example, in social interactions in which we are confronted with idiosyncratic utterances and nonnormative communication which might not be immediately interpretable. Even in exceptional situations, the desire to understand, compassion and reaching out to one another in a joint effort for connection will be the foundation for communication to emerge. Situations of “not-understanding-but-wanting-to”, become the ground for creativity to blossom.

3.2 Transnational and Translational Meanings

In the modern globalized world, encounters between people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds are commonplace. To establish mutual understanding, reach a common goal and exchange information, differences sometimes need to be mitigated or otherwise bridged. The previous chapter has delved into the importance of collaboration, compassion and curiosity in communicative situations. This chapter will present two more modes through which we navigate linguistic differences. The first is using a shared language, the second one is translation. I will argue that using L2s or translating does not lead to a loss of meaning, but are valuable means of establishing profound connections and enabling intercultural and interpersonal exchange.

3.2.1 Lingua Franca

When individuals from different linguistic backgrounds interact, they often use a common or shared language to communicate. A diverse environment creates a practical need to learn languages, which becomes a great asset in the daily life of many. For example, 59% of Europeans are proficient in at least one L2 to a degree at which they can comfortably lead a conversation, 28% know two or more, and 11% three or more L2s to that level. In Luxemburg as much as 76% of the population are able to converse in three L2s (European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture & Verian, 2024, pp. 14-15).

A *lingua franca* is a language that is used by groups of people whose languages are different from each other (Richards & Schmidt, 2013, p. 340). Lingua francas develop and spread in different ways. They can grow out of trade languages, like in the case of Kiswahili in east Africa, start off as instruments of religious conversion, like Nahuatl in colonial Mexico, appear with an invading army, like Arabic in north Africa, or spread because of cultural prestige, like Greek in the Roman empire and beyond (Marr & English, 2019, p. 47). The advancement of a lingua franca is intricately entangled with its historical context, with the driving force often being military and political power. Different definitions of the term in literature lead to critiques of it being imprecise (Marr & English, 2019, p. 46). It is for example often unclear if the term applies in a case where one of the involved parties' L1 is the lingua franca or only when the lingua franca is everyone's L2. In practice however, a lingua franca is "(...) generally first of all a language of *convenience*" (Marr & English, 2019, p. 48, accentuation by the authors). In this spirit I will personally use lingua franca as denoting a language which people of different linguistic backgrounds have in common and communicate with for conveniently establishing mutual understanding. For the purpose of this thesis and the practical research I want to briefly address the status of one specific language.

The global spread and status of English in modern day is studied under the term ELF (English as lingua franca) with scholars approaching the phenomenon from different perspectives like globalization, colonialism or language teaching. García (2012) calls attention to the fact that not only has English spread across the world, but that cultures and languages have vice versa "spread across English" (p. 409), appropriating it to their wants and needs. Besides the global identity of ELF, it also plays an important role on an individual scale, being spoken as a common language in cross-cultural interpersonal relationships. Even if English is not the L1 of anyone involved in the relationship, many couples and friends can attest to the utility of ELF for successful communication (cf. Pietikäinen, 2014; Höller, 2021).

Language is often seen as both representing and creating culture, a notion which leads some to believe that language determines our perspective on reality. English is of course not culturally neutral. All communication is embedded in a larger social context and influenced by a multitude of factors that are far from neutral. However, the use of ELF for intercultural communication in global contexts demonstrates that a language can be used without it being associated with a specific culture (Baker, 2011, pp. 198-199). While language can certainly influence our perception, it does not restrict it (Baker, 2011, p. 198).

3.2.2 Translation

Clearly it is possible to establish meaningful connections across different languages. However, there are frequent concerns about authenticity when expressing oneself in a language other than the L1. Scholars from fields ranging from neuroscience to the humanities are concerned with sincerity and emotionality in first and second languages (eg. Panicacci & Dewaele, 2023; Pavlenko, 2005; Hsu et al., 2015; Costa et al., 2014; Driver, 2022; Zeybek, 2024). These topics arise very often when discussion comes to linguistic diversity and interacting in a multilingual world. The underlying anxiety seems to be that meanings, personalities and cultural nuances might get lost in translation. In the following section I want to add to these discussions by offering an alternative perspective on translation as a means of entering into exchange with others and finding meaning in our linguistic differences.

Simona Bertacco, Professor of Postcolonial and Translation Studies merges the disciplines to discuss how postcolonial literature vibrantly and inventively uses colonial languages (Bertacco, 2016, p. 178). In reference to Salman Rushdie's (1991) imagery of migrants as "translated men", Bertacco argues that the existence of postcolonial literature proves that our cultural identity is in fact not intrinsically connected with our language. Translation is a continuous presence in the life of members of minority language cultures, but the facets of their (linguistic) identity are not necessarily lost. The scholar explains how presenting "translatables" and "untranslatables" (cf. Apter, 2013, p. 17) in literary texts can highlight the plurality of languages as well as the process of transferral itself (Bertacco, 2016, p. 182). Playing and struggling with "ambiguity in the space between languages" (Bertacco, 2016, p. 178) is a common experience for everyone existing in multilingual spaces.

This applies beyond literary contexts. In my experience, anytime someone mentions a so-called untranslatable term from any language in casual conversation, what follows is a deeply interesting and enriching discussion about meaning and intercultural encounters. Linguistic diversity becomes the grounds for a collective investigation and negotiation of

what it means to understand each other. In this effort, translation reveals itself as more than a tool of transference, “as an essential aspect of the human experience and as a way to better understand the world in which we live” (Bertacco, 2016, p. 179). Issues of authenticity and of finding equivalent meanings fade into the background when we regard translation as our common ground.

The quote at the beginning of this chapter “Wait, I think this is a language thing, honestly” stems from a discussion had by the participants in my empirical research, the Charrada. During this conversation they questioned the ambiguities that arose in the translation of swear words that appeared in the game. They realized that literal translations of swear words do not sufficiently cover how they are used in a context but when translated figuratively, the source becomes somewhat intransparent. They concluded that the origin of this vagueness was “a language thing”, something that grew from the spaces in between the participants’ 6 first languages. Thus they made peace with these ambiguities not by completely resolving them, but by acknowledging the effects of translation itself.

Using their lingua francas English and German, the participants in Charrada #1 were able to deliberate translational nuances of many terms in the game, comparing differing meaning associations in their respective first languages. Their conversations were nuanced, insightful, and philosophical while the tone of their discourse stayed playful and lighthearted. Terms which could be coined untranslatable evoked curiosity while misunderstandings excited lively dialogue instead of posing barriers.

Accessing a shared code such as a lingua franca and translating between languages enables exchanges ranging from the practical to the profound. Every social interaction is embedded in a larger cultural and social context, but language is not a limiting factor to communication. In an environment that values collaboration, empathy and creativity, linguistic diversity enriches mutual understanding.

3.3 Which barrier?

At the beginning of Chapter 3, I set forth a number of factors I think are important for successful communication. This chapter highlights two of these aspects: creativity and courage. Artistic self expression is a natural human behaviour entwined with the need for interpersonal connection. Revealing one's intimate fantasies, thoughts and feelings in such a way is always a daring endeavour, just like earnestly connecting with another human requires one to let go of all apprehensions and trust the other will understand and accept us. This section is the last before I delve into my own empirical artistic research. I want to take this opportunity to depart from citing linguistic research and instead use three literary examples to exemplify the creative potential that lies in using languages other than an L1 for art.

Outline - Rachel Cusk

In the novel *Outline* by Rachel Cusk the main character, a writer, spends the summer in Athens teaching creative writing courses in English to a classroom of Greeks. Near the end of the story, she converses with another English writer who has just arrived in Athens and is next in line to teach the class.

She wasn't quite sure how the language barrier was going to work: it was a funny idea, writing in a language not your own. It almost makes you feel guilty, she said, the way people feel forced to use English, how much of themselves must get left behind in that transition, like people being told to leave their homes and take only a few essential items with them. Yet there was also a purity to that image that attracted her, filled as it was with possibilities for self-reinvention. To be freed from clutter, both mental and verbal, was in some ways an appealing prospect; until you remember something you needed that you left behind (Cusk, 2018, pp. 230-231).

I think this passage exemplifies the way a lot of people feel about using second languages. The image of the language barrier is commonly invoked to describe the feeling of lacking communicative tools and not being able to truly express oneself. The above quote is also reminiscent of some of the sentiments described in chapter 2.1 where I exhibited perspectives considering bilingualism as deficitious. The imagery of using an L2 being akin to leaving your home behind evokes associations of migration, an experience which many multilinguals share.

In the thesis so far, I have described my view of language as a connecting, not a separating force, a bridge instead of a wall. Now I want to further exemplify the creative potential that lies in using second languages in art.

On A Book Entitled *Lolita* - Vladimir Nabokov

The notoriously multilingual author Vladimir Nabokov's life was marked by migration. Nabokov was born in 1899 in St. Petersburg to an old aristocratic family known for its liberalism and progressive views. After graduating from Cambridge university in 1922, he, like many other Russians escaping from the aftermath of the Socialist revolution, settled in Berlin. The advent of Fascism led him and his Jewish wife Véra Nabokov to flee to Paris in 1937. By 1940 they were no longer safe there either and the family left for the United States only a few weeks before the Nazis invaded France (Yablokova, 2012, pp. 210-212). Vladimir Nabokov's passion for American culture is omnipresent in his most well known novel *Lolita*. The work, originally published in 1955, was his first novel written in English. In the epilogue to the book Nabokov describes the many misguided interpretations of his story as a romance which he faced after publishing. One American critic proposed that *Lolita* exhibits a love story between Nabokov and the romance genre itself. The author reacts like this:

After Olympia Press, in Paris, published the book, an American critic suggested that *Lolita* was the record of my love affair with the romantic novel. The substitution “English language” for “romantic novel” would make this elegant formula more correct. But here I feel my voice rising to a much too strident pitch. None of my American friends have read my Russian books and thus every appraisal on the strength of my English ones is bound to be out of focus. My private tragedy, which cannot, and indeed should not, be anybody's concern, is that I had to abandon my natural idiom, my untrammelled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English, devoid of any of those apparatuses - the baffling mirror, the black velvet backdrop, the implied associations and traditions - which the native illusionist, frac-tails flying, can magically use to transcend the heritage in his own way (Nabokov, 2006, pp. 360-361).

This quote marks the very end of the epilogue of *Lolita*. It is the last thing the reader reads before closing the book and this has fascinated me ever since I first read *Lolita*. Nabokov seemed to taunt me by bemoaning the quality of his writing in the epilogue while using exquisite English. I'm sure the irony of him conjuring up the image of an L1 English speaker as a superior magician, a “native illusionist”, while himself clearly using this language to create spellbinding art, was not lost on Nabokov. His feelings of missing Russian however,

seem sincere. Nonetheless his “own private tragedy” brings great pleasure to readers of English. Wepler (2011) even claims that Nabokov's perspective as a nomadic outsider to American culture and language generates his humorous wordplay.

Notably, Nabokov's novels are filled with wordplay that brings to light unexpected associations and cleverly exploits homonyms or other linguistic parallels to reveal previously hidden meanings. Sometimes this wordplay even transcends language boundaries, as for example in *Ada or Ardor: A family chronicle*, his 1959 novel which includes puns that only someone with knowledge of Russian, French, English and German can interpret (cf. Nabokov, 2015).

Whatever the factors determining his skill may be, from his privileged upbringing to his migratory lifestyle, Vladimir Nabokov certainly shared his multilingual perspective beautifully through his art.

Eine runde Sache - Tomer Gardi

“Ich hab mal gelesen, ich weiß nicht wer es war, irgend eine von diese französische Philosophen, der hat mal geschrieben, ein Schriftsteller ist jemand, der Schwierigkeiten hat mit die Sprache” (Gardi, 2021, p. 57).

‘I read somewhere, I don't know who said it, a random french philosopher, he wrote once, a writer is someone, that has a difficulty with the language’ (Gardi, 2021, p. 57).

Translation by Sofia Alexei and Rimon Alyagon Darr.

Tomer Gardi is an author born in Israel and currently living in Germany, where he writes novels in German that are deliberately not corrected to represent the Standard German Variety, but instead left in Gardi's own, natural L2. At the 2016 award show *Bachmannpreis*, one of the most prestigious awards for German language literature, Gardi read from his book entitled *Broken German*. The jury's discussions focussed almost solely on the question if Gardi is “really not able to speak German” (Lühmann, 2016). His work alarmed and confused them. Can a work like this even receive accolades meant to reward outstanding German language literature? Moreover, is this even art?

In 2022, Gardi won the *Leipziger Buchpreis*, a similarly prominent award, for his novel *Eine Runde Sache* (‘A well-rounded affair’). The novel consists of two distinct stories: the first is written in Gardi's natural L2 German, the second part was written in his L1 Hebrew and then translated into Standard German by translator Anne Birkenhauer. The first story in *Eine runde Sache* details an absurd odyssey that includes the self-named protagonist Tomer Gardi going on a journey accompanied by a talking dog who can only pronounce the vowel ‘ü’ after Tomer ties his snout shut. Naturally, ludicrous wordplay and bizarre

misunderstandings flourish in the characters' interactions. In an Interview in the podcast *Lesart*, the host points out that reading Gardi's story disproves what teachers try to impress upon children about the need to use grammatically correct language in order to be understood by others (Gerk, 2021, 5:35). Gardi himself says that to him, interesting literature conveys a meeting point of life experiences, language and imagination. His German is a product of these factors and standardizing his language would eradicate the most interesting aspects of his work (Bürger, 2019, 8:04). When asked if his identity varies depending on the language he writes in, the author replies that, as he sees it, his Hebrew and his German identities don't differ that much, they just lead to different stories (Gerk, 2021, 4:53).

What Gardi and other authors writing in unstandardized second languages are doing is artistic in my favourite ways: it's creative, bold and playful, it's political and personal. Plainly, it's punk.

These literary examples have shown examples of how multilingual individuals process their language experience through artistic means. I used Rachel Cusk's quote from *Outline* as a starting point. In it, she describes sentiments of writing in a second language as both a lack and a fresh start akin to moving away from home. The later two examples taken from the epilogue of Nabokov's *Lolita* and from Gardi's *Eine Runde Sache*, present two very distinct texts by individuals writing in their second languages. Nabokov, known as one of the most influential writers of the 20th century, was a nomadic writer versed in complex wordplay, Gardi is a migrant challenging conceptions of art with his texts written in nonstandardized L2 German. This chapter is a plea to all multilinguals, artists or not, to use whatever language they please to express themselves. Many situations, like involuntary exile, don't allow the liberty of choosing to learn a new language and rather thrust the obligation to learn it upon someone who is already in a traumatizing situation. Finding inspiration in foreignness, embracing one's individual perspective outside of the restrictive standards of linguistic perfection and joyfully playing with language will make any language one's own.

Multilinguals; Have courage! Liberate yourself from rules! Express yourself! Play! In the wonderfully chaotic universe that is social interaction, your creativity will cultivate communication and your bravery will bring bliss.

4 Conclusion of Theoretical Part

To end the theoretical part of this thesis I want to revert back to the initial question I posed: What is really important for communication in a multilingual world?

To answer this question, I first inspected theories and language attitudes pertaining to multilingualism, particularly pointing out the social impact of restrictive language ideologies on the lives of multilinguals. Insisting on rules, the perfection of skills or strict divisions of languages are not the key to social interaction. Instead humans strive for communication with others out of the desire and necessity for connection. Building upon this basis, chapter 3 discussed the elements enabling successful communication. These could be summarized in many ways. I chose to name them as such: Compassion, collaboration, commonalities, creativity and courage. These factors are closely interrelated. I will give a brief synopsis of their meanings for and influence on communication:

Compassion means having empathy, patience and curiosity towards interlocutors. It means putting oneself in another's place to understand their perspective.

Collaboration means being aware of a common communicative goal driving the interaction. It means wanting to understand each other and reaching this objective by working together.

Commonalities means discovering or establishing common ground for communication. This can be a language but also encompasses common goals, being part of a community or simply sharing the present context and moment with other interlocutors.

Creativity means finding spontaneous solutions. Having an open mind and the willingness to engage spontaneously in non-normative and novel manners will lead to mutual understanding emerging in unexpected ways.

Courage means communicating freely and without fear. It means sharing one's perspective regardless of one's own insecurities, standards of perfection and even when faced with hostility. A failed attempt at mutual understanding is guaranteed only if communication is not attempted at all.

With the awareness of these facets of communication, I will now move forward to the discussion of my empirical practice, Charrada.

5 The Charrada Method

This chapter explains the potential of a modified charades version, called *Charrada*, for usage as an experimental research method. This idea developed from the observation that charade games bear both verbal and non-verbal language and foster the qualities of communication I outlined in chapter 3. Upon realizing this, I speculated that such a game might be a valuable source for acquiring data and conducting linguistic experiments. I devised two renditions of language-focussed charades with different themes in the field of language and communication. I did not approach these instances with specific questions but with the goal of testing Charrada's aptitude for research. Hence, the following chapters present the exploration of a method, not concrete experiments trying to prove a specific hypothesis. The engagement with language in a playful and creative manner can prompt introspection about language habits and identity. Additionally Charrada provides a setting which stimulates curiosity about multilingualism that may be explored through exchange with other players. As such, Charrada would be well suited for many purposes outside of research, for example to enable a critical engagement with linguistic diversity in education. Overall, Charrada is an entertaining game with promising research value.

5.1 Bauernscharade

This section introduces the game which I adapted to use in my own research. I explain the rules, as they were introduced to me, and then discuss the appeal of remodelling this game into my own version.

The game that serves as inspiration was first presented to me as *Bauernscharade* (“peasant’s charade”), also known as *Hutspiel* (“hat game”). In the following I will refer to it as the former. It is a game of charades in which players have to communicate terms to their teammates in four successive rounds, employing four different modalities. The game as I learned it usually progresses as follows:

Everyone writes down words and phrases on little pieces of paper, folds them, and places them in a hat or other vessel. Two teams, here for convenience called team A and team B, are formed. The starting team can be determined by a game of rock-paper-scissors or a coin toss. Let us assume team A starts. One player from team A picks pieces of paper from the vessel and communicates the meanings to their teammates. A timer, operated and monitored by team B, is set to one minute. Team A tries to correctly guess as many terms as possible. When the timer rings, it is team B’s turn to guess in the same manner, while team A supervises the timer. The players rotate one after the other. The amount of terms one team can guess correctly within one minute, yields an equal number of points. There are four rounds which each last until all terms have been guessed correctly. That means, that once all terms have been guessed during one round, the pieces of paper are collected in the vessel and the successive round starts once again with the full collection of words/phrases present.

Round 1: Paraphrasing/Explaining. The word/phrase is explained through spoken/signed language, while the target word/phrase itself may not be mentioned.

Round 2: Pantomime. Iconic gestures and movements are used to express meanings. If played with signers, they may not use signs. (To clarify; I personally have never played this game with signers, but I am told by more knowledgeable persons that this rule would apply in that case).

Round 3: Drawing. The meanings are transmitted through drawing. In an alternate version of the game, Round 3 is the “one word” round, which is, like round 1, executed in symbolic language, but just one keyword may be used.

Round 4: One Noise. For the last round the meanings of the terms may be communicated only using one noise. The noise may be repeated but not changed.

During each round slips of paper with correctly guessed terms may be collected by the respective teams. The end of each round is an opportune time to count and make note of the points each team has collected.

If a player finishes the round before one minute has passed, the timer is intermittently stopped to refill the vessel and the current player uses the remaining time to start off the next round.

The game ends with a summing up of points and declaration of the winning team.

5.2 What is interesting about Bauernscharade?

This section will point out what makes the above described game a compelling point of departure for an artistic research method concerning language. The factors already discussed in Chapter 3 as foundational for communication are integral constituents of charade-games such as Bauernscharade.

1. Establishing meanings: symbols, icons and beyond

Bauernscharade encompasses a variety of symbolic and iconic forms of communication.

The setup of Bauernscharade means that over the course of the game, each term appears 4 times. This repetition coincides with increasing abstraction of modalities. That means that in round 2 - 4 players enjoy the advantage of having already encountered the repertoire of terms before, they also rely less on conventional linguistic communication. One might be led to believe that guessing correctly gets much easier as the game unfolds, this is however not the case. Of course it depends on the number of players and terms, but a game of Bauernscharade can take quite long, making it difficult to concentrate throughout. It is also often played at social gatherings in which recreational drugs like alcohol are consumed which further decreases concentration and the ability to memorize. Apart from these factors, the repetition of terms is valuable because it serves to establish a kind of common "lexicon" in which the meanings expand with every passing round. Frequently, inside jokes and context dependent references emerge during Bauernscharade. Some turns are particularly memorable due to some aspect of the player's performance or a chance occurrence that coincides with the game, thus generating a previously unrelated connection to the target meaning. These new associations often culminate in round 4, because this round requires a high level of abstraction. Of course, if the target is for example the word *trumpet*, it will likely be easy for the players to find a singular, fitting sound, but if the target is more abstract (eg. *conscience*), or something concrete that does not usually make a sound (eg. *parallelogram*), the contextual knowledge of the whole group will be required to make the correct guess (examples taken from Charrada #1, see Appendix 1).

2. Individuality & Creativity

Bauernscharade lends itself to individual, creative expression without particular expectations thereof.

This already manifests before round 1 commences, when the linguistic elements are accumulated. There are usually no rules to what qualifies as a fitting term for Bauernscharade. Of course, players may consider what might make for a particularly amusing, difficult or surprising performance but that does not have to be the focus of their selection. Their choices of words and phrases can be topical, complicated, deceitfully simple, crude, funny, enigmatic, poetic - there are no limits. During the game, the turns offer a stage for the players to showcase their personality in their performances. No two players will describe, pantomime, draw or vocalize a target meaning in the same way. The players' inclinations towards the behaviours in question differ, some people for example particularly enjoy drawing, movement or are musically inclined. However, most often, it is not the dancer who is the most successful at pantomiming or the illustrator who excels at drawing. The time limit of one minute generates pressure to be swift and act intuitively instead of deliberating one's actions. This elicits spontaneous performances which showcase the players' individuality in unexpected ways. Someone might have striking facial expressions while another draws astonishingly vivid stick figures. Ideally everyone feels comfortable during the game so they are not compelled to perfectionism or stage fright and their creativity can flow freely.

3. Community & Empathy

The collaborative effort of communication takes center stage in Bauernscharade.

The target meaning can only be guessed correctly through teamwork. A poignant performance might ease guessing, but mutual empathy is just as, if not more significant. If the guessers are able to put themselves in the place of the performer and vice versa, it will facilitate understanding immensely. The performer can ask themselves what action could be a useful indicator for their team by referring to knowledge they know to have in common with one or more of their teammates. Conversely, a guesser's awareness of the performer's interests or mannerisms might help decipher their behaviour. It is not uncommon to observe that individuals with an intimate relationship seem to "get each other" effortlessly during this game. Closeness is however no requirement for building a well coordinated team. The game can also strengthen or establish interpersonal bonds, as do many games which require collaboration in the pursuit of a common goal. During Bauernscharade, the moment of *understanding* one another results from a moment of connection in a challenging communicative situation. The arrangement of the game reveals an inherent vulnerability in

all communication. We all have to trust that our interaction is based on the mutual wish to understand and be understood by the other.

4. Fun, Easy, Adaptable

Bauernscharade and other charade varieties are very accessible, highly adaptable and have a great potential to be entertaining.

The materials necessary to prepare the game are paper, pens, a vessel and a stopwatch. The number of participants is variable, as are other factors like difficulty or modalities which can easily be adjusted to the needs and wishes of the group. For example, the words and phrases might be restricted to include just concrete objects to simplify performability. The collection could also follow a specific theme or topic. The modes of the different rounds can also be changed or re-invented according to the situation. For example, round 4, which I came to know as the “one sound-round”, could become a “one-gesture-round”. Accommodating the game to the players and circumstances can actually be another impetus for creativity. Above all, playing charades can be very fun.

All of these factors conveniently lend themselves to the researcher interested in observing communication. The variability means the game can be designed to fit the researcher’s interest. The game’s aptness for friendly social settings increases the likeliness of participants being relaxed, authentic and enjoying taking part in the experience.

Conclusion

Bauernscharade fosters and demonstrates many of the important traits of communication I have discussed in this thesis. The game promotes a variety of symbolic and iconic expressions and shows how meanings are co-created in dynamic social settings. It showcases the participant’s individuality and community, as it centers the collaborative effort of establishing mutual understanding. The game is also easily adaptable to context and the needs and interests of participants. Creativity is required and cultivated in all stages of the game. Therefore, it serves perfectly as the foundation for an artistic experiment.

5.3 The Charrada

(The) Charrada is a multilingual game of charades. It is played in multiple rounds and inspired by Bauernscharade, with the distinct difference that linguistic diversity is encouraged and the group playing is deliberately assembled with linguistic diversity in mind. The exact arrangement of Charrada varies through different trials.

As mentioned in chapter 5.2., Charrada as a method can be adapted to the exact questions and interests of the artist-researcher and to the needs and desires of the players. For example, the first trial, Charrada #1, put a focus on the first language(s) of the participants, thus including a round played solely in everyone's respective L1 while the second trial, Charrada #2 centered on translation and lingua francas (see Chapter 6). This game could be applied to many other purposes. In my summary and discussion of the two Charrada sessions in Chapter 6, I will mention some ideas for possible applications. In the following chapter 5.4 I will describe how I interpreted a modified version of Bauernscharade as an experimental artistic research method and what that means to me in the context of my work for this thesis.

First, I would like to elaborate on the name I gave this method, *Charrada*. The title came about by analogy to other names for charades. The root of the word is the Romance language onomatopoeic verb *charrar* [tʃa'rar] meaning 'to chat, chatter' (compare eg. Italian *ciarlare* or Spanish *charlar*). Through the Occitan *charrado*, the French *charade* arose, meaning 'conversation' or 'riddle'. From this source follows the German *Scharade*, Spanish/Portuguese *charada*, Russian *шарáда*, Catalan *xarada*, Italian *sciarada* and English *charades* (Meyer-Lübke, 1935, p. 227).

Charades was originally a type of written riddle. The spread of newspapers facilitated by the Industrial Revolution popularized these riddles which became a beloved literary genre in their own right throughout the 18th and 19th century. In early 19th century France, charades evolved into a party game also known as *mime* or *acted charade* (Danesi, 2020, pp. 64-67). Other related meanings of *charades* include 'deception' or 'farce'. The English *charlatan* comes from the same linguistic root. It originates from the Italian *ciarlatano*, a word formed through combining the above explained *ciarlare* 'to chatter' with *cerretano* 'an inhabitant of Cerretan' which came to mean 'market crier' (Meyer-Lübke, 1935, p. 117).

Anytime one delves into the etymology of words, a fascinating mosaic of past and current meanings emerges, emphasizing the fluid and sometimes unexpected way language changes merely by using it. While first preparing my game, I researched the etymology of *charades*. I intended to use *Charrada* merely as a working title, hoping to come upon

something more inventive later on. Now however, I have grown fond of the name and think it fits well within patterns of subtle ways words evolve: the linguistic source is still very visible, the meaning has just slightly expanded. According to my research *Charrada* does not currently mean 'charades' in any natural language but this association is easily accessible when first encountering the name.

Me: Is this art, are we making art?

Luí: YES.

Sofia: It feels like science to me.

Sepehr: It feels more scientific, but it's like doing science with 'Doctor Bob', you know?

(laughter from the group, repeating the phrase 'Doctor Bob')

Matea: Who's Doctor Bob??

Me: Me, I guess!

Sepehr: It's like a fun way to do science, but it feels more scientific than artistic.

Luí: I think it's funny you say that because we've just been performing! Drawing, explaining, pantomime, movement, sounds...but it's for a scientific *raison!* *(Luí pronounces the last word in a french accent, making it sound fancy).*

Matea: When you say it like that, it totally makes sense - it's art. Because it's such a common game, you don't realize it's actually so artsy.

Sofia: Actually, I changed my mind, I have to agree with Luí. I think it's about how you're looking to find out truth and since we're not going to do, like, a statistical analysis of everything, it's more an artistic pursuit of the truth and not necessarily strictly scientific.

Sepehr: I'm with that, I second that.

Sofia: Both art and science!!!

-Charrada #1, Debriefing

5.4 The Charrada as an Artistic Experiment

5.4.1 Introduction

In the following section, I detail my conception of the game Charrada as an artistic experiment and describe what that means to me on a philosophical and practical level. The foundational infrastructure of the Charrada as an artistic experiment is an everyday setting where the game is co-created by the artist-researcher and all participants who play and prepare it. Additionally, the artist-researcher observes, records and guides the game.

To attain data for linguistic analysis, there are generally two distinct possibilities. The first is observing behaviours in their natural setting and analysing them, for example by recording conversations and later studying these recordings. The second is conducting experiments where a situation is designed specifically to provoke a certain behaviour in order to examine it. Both methods have advantages and disadvantages. A natural everyday setting might represent how language is actually used, however, it is also volatile and unpredictable. A controlled experiment enables researchers to define exactly what they want to study and gather only the relevant data, but it also places individuals in an artificial environment that is unlike any realistic communicative situation. This predicament is especially conspicuous in linguistics because the field includes both social- and natural scientific research. A linguist's choice of method therefore strongly depends on their research goal and scholastic background. Although most would agree that both approaches are necessary to study the phenomenon language to the full extent, combining them is difficult within prevalent scientific traditions.

Serendipitously, in addition to being a linguist, I am also an artist. As such I can take liberties which my esteemed fellow linguists and other cognitive and social scientists do not usually have. Such is my motivation for creating Charrada. On one hand, a game gives a framework to a social behaviour that humans are naturally inclined to, that of play. On the other hand, games can have specific goals which motivate the players' behaviour, as well as limiting factors which manifest in rules. When I refer to the Charrada as an experiment I am slightly misusing the usual definition of the term. The terminology should indicate the game's potential to attain linguistic data and study communicative behaviour, while doing it in a manner that is both purposeful and open to spontaneity. Charrada could certainly also be played for other purposes, for example in a school environment, where it could enable intercultural exchange and/or playful language learning, or in multilingual groups, purely for entertainment.

Another aspect important to me as an artist-researcher conducting the Charrada as an experiment is that I do not want to separate myself from the subject of my research as it is usual in traditional experimental settings. I make no claim to complete objectivity, nor do I want the participants of Charrada to be clueless test subjects under my all knowing leadership. This has both moral and social reasons that I value both personally and professionally. The following is a summary of my underlying principles as an artist, researcher and human in this project.

Charrada is an opportunity to study language in a natural environment. The aim is not recreating the sterility or detachment of a laboratory. To study the creative communications that arise in dynamic social interactions, a balance of plannability and spontaneity is necessary. This implies that perfect reproducibility is not possible. There is no claim that the participants in Charrada will act completely authentic. This experiment demands the artist-researcher have a special awareness of their point of view, the situatedness of their knowledge and their limits (cf. Haraway, 1989).

Charrada is artistic. Charades always requires creativity and performance. As outlined in section 5.2, creative self expression is an integral part of this type of game. As such, every occasion of playing Charrada will be a collaborative artistic experience, even if no artwork in the classical sense remains after the session.

Charrada is a collaboration based on informed consent. The artist-researcher and the participants who prepare and play the Charrada are co-creating an experience. This does not imply that everyone's role is equal in all aspects. It does mean transparency, mutual respect and appreciation are pillars of the collective work and play. The artist-researcher does not deceitfully elicit certain behaviours from the participants.

Charrada acknowledges and provides space for the needs of the participants at all times. The game can at any point be derailed, delayed, changed or stopped altogether. The wellbeing of all participants is the highest priority. No one should be pressured into any behaviour and if someone wants to pause or end the game, this is enabled by the others. The Charrada setting should always offer the participants a safe and considerate space for expressing themselves. The Charrada setting recognizes the intimate connection of the participants' identity and their semiotic repertoires and they are encouraged to share any emotional reactions or associations that might come up, if they wish to do so.

The Charrada as an experiment aims to offer an authentic setting for exploring and observing communication. While the artist-researcher partakes in the preparations and acts as a guide throughout the game, Charrada is conceptualized as a collaboration between all

participating parties. The roles at this point are: The artist-researcher, the players, and optionally the preparators (translators).

The following sections will elaborate on all of the participants' roles and discuss more aspects of the Charrada as a method to study language and communication.

5.4.2 Translation

The linguistic diversity present in the Charrada makes translation an important feature of different steps of the game, ranging from the preparations to its presence in the gameplay itself. How this expresses itself is discussed further in Chapter 6 where the two sessions of Charrada are described. Translation is always present in one way or another in Charrada. In every step of the game, from planning to playing, translating is seen as a creative means itself and as a highly valued ground for reflection, discussion and engaging with each other's experiences.

Translators may be consulted in preparation of the game. They are considered participants of the project and to be treated with utmost respect. Most points discussed in the next section, 5.4.3., also apply to the translators. However, their involvement differs in that they do not have to be physically present when playing the game and thus do not become part of the group dynamic in the same way as the players and the artist-researcher.

5.4.3 The players

Charrada can be played with willing participants of any kind. The constellation of the group may depend on possible research questions. If the goal for example is to assess how mutual understanding can be established between complete strangers, participants should be recruited accordingly. Communication happens in social contexts of all kinds, meaning relationships between participants are merely a feature and not a limit to the significance of the research. For the curious linguist, all communicative situations are equally interesting ground for observation. Every Charrada session will lead to different outcomes which are partially dependent on and partially independent of the individuals participating and their interpersonal connections.

For my two sessions of Charrada I chose to work with people who are close to me because I enjoy creating with and within my community and I see my personal relationships as a strength. As I did not pursue a specific research question but merely explored the potential of Charrada through two different themes, the exact assembly of the groups was not crucial. My main goal was to gather a linguistically diverse group. The specific languages of the

individuals partaking in Charrada #1 and #2 were also not crucial and not meant to be representative of demographic facts.

My two Charrada sessions include the participation of my friends, loved ones, and other cherished acquaintances. Amongst them, many know each other and some even share close relationships. Most of them are based in Vienna, Austria and have a history of immigration, either in their family or their own life. They all possess multilingual repertoires which in part represent their family histories, interests, and past and present life conditions. They pursue different jobs and hobbies and language does not have to be a special interest of theirs to participate in Charrada. They are asked to take part based on their linguistic experience and enthusiasm to participate.

The individuals playing together will, as any group, form an internal social dynamic within the situation and beyond, as many are already acquainted before they play Charrada. There will be affinities, disagreements, uniting moments and misunderstandings. It bears repeating that emotional reactions of the participants are accepted and valued as a natural part of social interactions and the Charrada process.

5.4.4 My role

My role in this project is multifaceted. I am the artist-researcher; linguist, game-designer, co-translator and leader of the experiment. While the game is played, however, I try to concentrate on acting in three (or four) functions: host, game master and observer. Because of my close relationship to many of the players I am also, at all points, a friend.

As host my aim is to fulfill the wishes and needs of my guests - the participants. I want to make them feel comfortable and facilitate their enjoyment of the experience. I may offer drinks, food and a cozy atmosphere.

As game master, a term borrowed from tabletop role-playing games, I maintain an overview of the advancement of the game, keep track of what is happening, moderate, and offer clarifications in case of confusion. I try to limit my role as arbitrator of rules as much as possible, as this is in conflict with my role as observer. I will intervene if absolutely necessary. As noted above, the whole group will develop their own dynamic which I am inevitably part of, albeit in a different way than the players amongst themselves. Learning how to balance my roles is a critical experience for me in developing this method.

As an observer, I take notes and make recordings. Part of the mindful scientific practice I aim for includes observing myself alongside the participants. In my work diary I diligently record my thoughts, feelings and associations, to be able to reflect upon them and eventually offer a nuanced perspective that considers my personal experiences and does not claim objectivity.

Because I hold up transparency and informed consent, the players who I observe during the game are allowed insight into my notes and access to all recordings if they wish. During the game, this excludes the notes which would render impossible the course of the game as intended, i.e. the overview of all items present in the game. I recognize the trust the participants offer me and want to reciprocate this as best I can.

As a friend to the individuals who participate in my game and experiment, I realize that my emotional entanglement will influence the experience both for me and the others. This is a component of the setting that does not lessen the outcome but is indeed an advantage. The fact that I value care and kindness and can provide this to others, making them feel comfortable, is a personal strength and an asset to the project at hand. A situation in which participants feel relaxed will evoke authentic behaviour. Respect, curiosity and enthusiasm for others is also essential to approach linguistic diversity and beyond that, to encountering other humans in general.

Altogether my role in the project is complex, but in the context of the Charrada experiment can be broken down to host, game master, observer and friend. My tasks are to provide comfort, assistance to the course of the game, to observe the players and myself and reflect upon the experiences in a critical and nuanced way.

5.4.5 Recording, Reflecting

Charrada may be recorded through different media and entail reflections, collective or individual interviews with the participants. As always, the informed consent of everyone involved is prioritized. Reflecting on the experience of the game is regarded as necessary and beneficial for all participants including the artist-researcher, who should enable a debriefing and discussion amongst the group. The retrospective ideas, impressions and contemplations of everyone involved are gladly welcomed. As such, the Charrada setting also lends itself to follow up interviews.

5.4.6 Summary

The Charrada method as an experiment is an artistic-scientific approach in which a multilingual game of charades provides the object of research. It is conceptualized as a collaborative experience between artist-researcher and participants, who consist of players and translators. The choice of participants is not generally limited and may vary according to the specific research interest. Informed consent, transparency, and a safe space for expression which upholds mutual respect are prerequisites for the Charrada experiments. Collectively translating between different languages is a vital part of the process before and

during the game. The leader of the Charrada experiment consciously fulfills roles that range from observing the events to guiding the gameplay, while also being part of the social structure of the group. If permitted by all participants, the game can be recorded and followed up with common or individual discussion or interviews. The data acquired through observation and recording may be used for further research, inspiration for art pieces, texts or whatever else suits the individuals involved.

6 The Charrada Sessions

This Chapter will discuss the two sessions of Charrada that took place alongside the writing of this thesis. I will first describe Charrada #1 and Charrada #2 respectively, pointing out the themes and processes of each session. I will summarize my main takeaways from both instances, partly comparing the two approaches. Finally, I will outline my personal recommendations for others who might want to utilize Charrada for entertainment, research or other purposes.

6.1. Charrada #1 - 8.2.2025 - The L1 Session

6.1.1 Foundation

Charrada #1 was decided to be *first language* themed. I invited friends with distinctive first languages to play. Out of the four rounds, one was executed in the players' respective L1s. The other rounds were non-verbal (pantomime, drawing, one sound). An important factor was that I wanted to provide each player with their own pool of words in their corresponding L1s. That means that in every round they would read the L1 when performing their turns.

As this session was the very first trial of the game to take place, a priority was also to simply test the waters. For this I chose an intimate setting, a small group and tried to enter into the experience with little expectations about the outcome or the possibility to collect data. My aim was to make the first trial an enjoyable experience for everyone involved, I thus decided on a casual setting, meeting up in the evening as if for any other night of games with friends. The players were invited to my apartment, where I first greeted them with dinner and drinks before we moved on to playing Charrada.

The session was documented in audio recordings.

6.1.2 The players

Five individuals took part in this trial. I will briefly introduce them here. All the players are based in Vienna, all had met each other before at least once. All of them speak multiple languages, including English and German, which they used to converse over the course of the evening. L1 here refers to the language(s) they learned before the age of 5.

Matea: This player's first languages are Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian (BCS) and German. She grew up in Vienna with Bosnian parents.

Julian: This player's first languages are English and German. He grew up in Vienna with one English and one German parent. He spent 7 years up to 2024 living in the UK.

Sepehr: This player's first language is Farsi. He grew up in Iran, the Emirates, and has been living in Vienna for 15 years.

Luí: This player's first language is Portuguese. He grew up in Brazil and Germany and has been living in Vienna for over 20 years.

Sofia: This player's first language is Romanian. She grew up in Romania, Canada and has been living in Austria for 18 years.

To summarize, the 6 languages of the 5 players are: German, Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian (BCS), English, Farsi, Brazilian Portuguese and Romanian.

Notable relationships between the players present that night include **Julian and Sepehr**, who have been friends for many years.

6.1.3 Preparations

All players knew the content of my research before we met to play Charrada. Two weeks before the agreed upon date, I asked all players to send me at least 3 words/phrases in their L1s. As I was going to provide each player with their own pool of words, I translated all the input they gave me into their 6 first languages. This triggered a very stimulating exchange with translators who helped me. I also spent a lot of time deliberating and researching on my own.

The players were asked to send me just the words in their L1(s) and not to provide any of their own translations in this first step. Later on I did inquire if I correctly understood them in some cases.

I received 24 tokens in total. That means that there were about 20 words to translate from different source languages into each other language. The resulting list consists of 144 words. There was a considerable amount of "midway-translations" because unfortunately, at this point I did not have the help of someone who could, for example, translate directly between Portuguese and Farsi. The in-between translations were all into German and English, a fact which I would like to modify in future trials. I was in contact with multiple different people knowledgeable in the languages present in this trial, who helped me translate or translated for me. Unfortunately, I could not find a Romanian-translator, which meant that I had to resort to (intensive) use of online resources. In some cases, I contacted

the player who had sent me a certain phrase to clarify if I had correctly grasped its meaning. In this manner I constructed the multilingual corpus for Charrada #1 in the shape of a multicolumn list. When the list was completed, I had 24 tokens in 6 different languages - 144 words. Each of the 24 tokens was randomly assigned a number. This would allow us to keep track of which words had already appeared in a round. Eg. if during Matea's turn the tokens 4, 8, 19 and 22 had been guessed correctly, each player could remove the paper slips 4, 8, 19 and 22 from their hats before the game continued. Because Julian and Matea played as bilinguals, their hats contained a mix of two languages. I randomly assigned them the tokens according to the proportions of their own input to me. Eg. Matea provided me with 3 terms, 2 in BCS, 1 in German, so I mixed her hat with $\frac{2}{3}$ BCS and $\frac{1}{3}$ German terms. Thus the final total included 24 tokens realized as 120 words in 6 languages, split up to 5 players (see Appendix 1).

The night before the game took place, I prepared 5 hats which I filled with 24 tokens each. For the Farsi-hat I had to print the words, since I can not write the script. The rest were handwritten. Each piece of paper was folded twice and had the corresponding number 1-24 on the back. I used 5 differently coloured pens to avoid mix ups. I also chose hats that reminded me of the individual players in some way.

6.1.4 Gameplay

The rules and procedure of gameplay were prepared by me and reviewed by the group before starting to play. I presented them with the remark that rules can be adapted anytime if needed, which happened at one point during the game. I generally tried to keep rules minimal to allow for spontaneous developments.

- We play without teams and without counting points.
- We play 4 rounds in the order of: 1) Pantomime; 2) Drawing; 3) Paraphrasing/Explaining in the respective L1s; 4) one sound.
- During round 3, the two bilinguals, meaning those who grew up with two languages, may use either or both languages however they please.
- Each turn is 1 minute long and will be timed. After the second round the players spontaneously decided they wanted extra time to experience each other's L1s, therefore requesting the time to be extended to 1:30 minutes during round 3. This was implemented as wished.
- Guessing may happen in any language. The person performing a term is the one to decide if and when it has been guessed correctly.

- The players are free to discuss the different translations between their turns and rounds.

6.1.5 Summary of Session #1

Charrada #1 was a special experience in part because it was the first trial of the game to take place. There was altogether a very intimate feeling due to the small size of the group and the session being set in my apartment in a very casual atmosphere. The players had all at least been acquainted with each other before, but their connections definitely seemed to deepen over the course of the evening.

The highlight of this session was round 3, where everyone spoke their first languages so most players could not understand each other in the classical sense. However, understanding could nonetheless be established. Often this was due to the players' consciously noticing a piece of vocabulary that they recognized in the performer's speech. A moment which stuck out as especially noteworthy was Sepehr's turn in the third round. He spoke Farsi, which none of the other players have any knowledge of, nor do they know closely related languages that could help identify what he was saying due to linguistic similarities. Sepehr was also sitting on his hands to avoid gestures giving away clues. Some players tried to randomly guess a few words, but there was one notable exception: Julian guessed two words after another correctly at the first try followed by Sofia guessing the third word correctly at the first try. In Julian's written reflection after the game he wrote: "[I] don't know why I knew what [Sepehr's] Farsi words were but I just suddenly could tell (or did I guess)?" My suspicion is that the close friendship Julian and Sepehr share facilitated an intuitive level of empathy between them. When one is used to the way someone explains things, their rhythm, tone and other expressions, this subconsciously influences understanding.

The documentation of this session was audio only and thus not very invasive. There was awareness of the recording device on the table, which was sometimes addressed with jokes, but since the process took a few hours and the general atmosphere was very friendly and relaxed, everyone seemed to get used to the device. Before we did a communal debriefing and discussion, I also let all the players write a short, individual reflection with some prompts I gave them. Summarizing these I can say that the players enjoyed the aesthetic experience of hearing different languages and noticed the ways in which they could nonetheless understand each other, which included recognition of individual words but also tone and facial expressions.

The first language theme evoked many conversations between the players about their personal relationships with their first languages. This included speaking about insecurities,

e.g. feeling like one's vocabulary is not sophisticated, migration, and the role of German in the life of a migrant living in Austria. In these conversations, the players showed a lot of empathy towards each other and a critical but open minded outlook on the topics at hand.

The following is an excerpt from a conversation that took place during our debriefing:

Julian: I wrote down that being bilingual is not as epic as it used to be, and I stand by that. I remember when I was younger, my parents and other people would tell me, 'It's so great that you speak two languages', because I always grew up with both [English and German] but then I went to university and other people would speak four languages.

Matea: But that's a bubble thing! Go to the US or Croatia and people don't know multiple languages! Maybe you say now 'Oh, that's not special' but that's still an elite thing.

(others agreeing)

Sofia: And maybe people speak four languages and German is one of them but they don't speak it at the same level as you do.

(...)

Luí: I wrote down that it was difficult for me to navigate the duality of German and English. Of course we're guessing as a group, so we're adapting to a language that everyone understands, but it was difficult for me to not question and bring up the history and colonial heritage of these two languages. (...) Whenever it was [Julian's] turn he would say, 'the other languages are more interesting', but I was thinking, 'mh, why is that?' -

Sepehr: *(interjecting)* But that's just because it's a common space.

Luí: - Exactly, it's the common space of it. And I was thinking, if I was playing the same game in Brazil and instead of English it was Portuguese, I would feel SO self-conscious. Here I can just say *bla-bla* and everyone is like 'OH SHIT, PORTUGUESE!!' and that is the interesting aspect of it.

Sofia: I would feel self-conscious as well because I have the vocabulary of a four-year-old in Romanian!

Matea: If you're a four year old, I'm a two year old! I'm learning to speak right now!

Me: Because you only speak it with your family?

Sofia: *(agreeing)* Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Matea: I really grew up bilingual with both languages from the start. By the time I went to Kindergarten and school, German was the main language. I just had this place at home [to speak BCS]. At home my parents started mixing the languages too, some words they would only say in German.

Sepehr: Like *Meldezettel*!

(everyone laughing and agreeing)

Sepehr: *Meldezettel*, man, in Austria, it's one of those words you gotta take on!

8.2.2025

Charrada #1

Ablauf

① - Abendessen & getting to know each other
- drinks

② - Grandrules!

Safe Space
niemand wird ausgelebt
alle machen, was sie wollen!
befreites Spielen ♥
inneres "Ja"

Alles darf - nix muss!

Platz für Emotionen & Identität

③ Spiel Erklärung & Rules

- Pantomime - Zeichnen - Erklären - Geräusch

- Runde 3 ist auf eigenen Sprachen

- Gehen wie ihr wollt - Spontan

- aussortierte Zettel dürfen angeschaut werden - müssen nicht

- Bilinguals - use what you want

- wir probieren mal mit 1 min, sondern nach 1 Durchgang unter
uns damit geht

- no points! alle gegen alle!

④ Check in - rules? Check in Dokv? Zoom?

⑤ Wir spielen!

⑥ 5 Min Reflektion individuell - Schreiben (free to share
after)

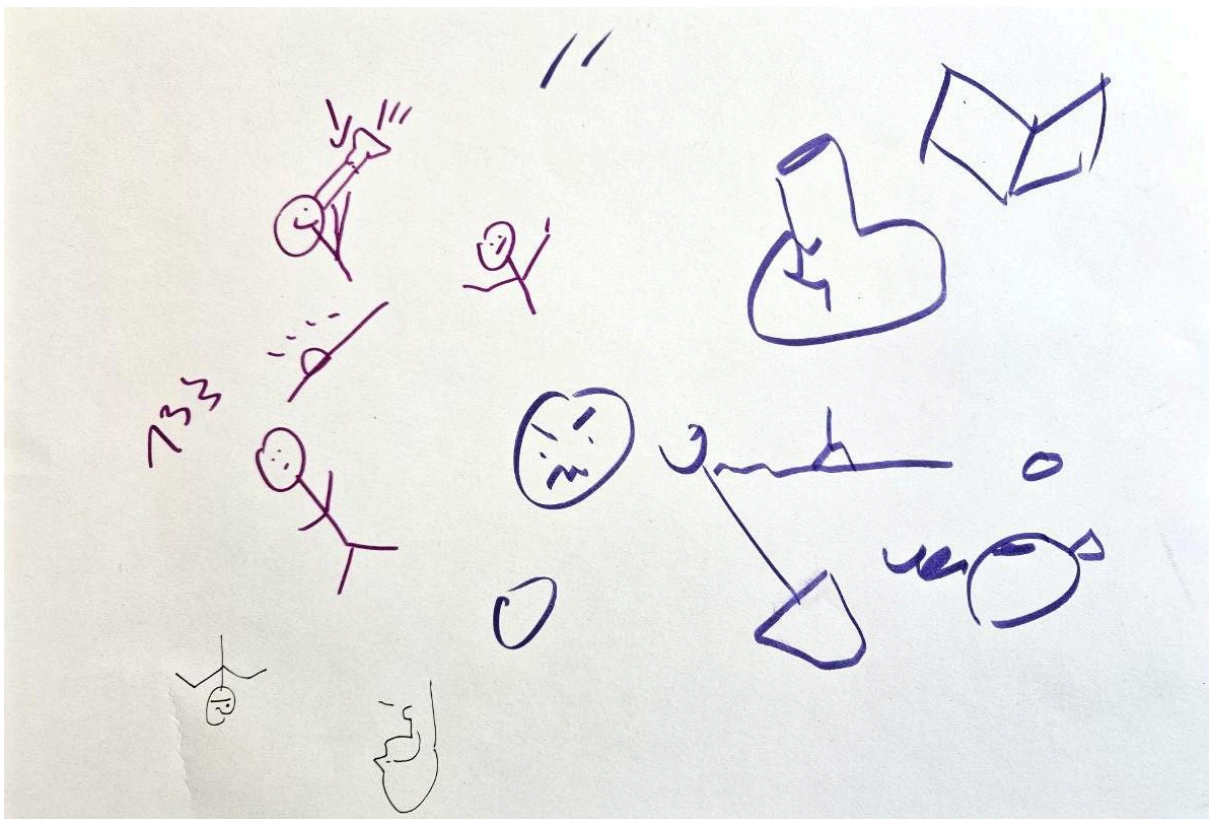
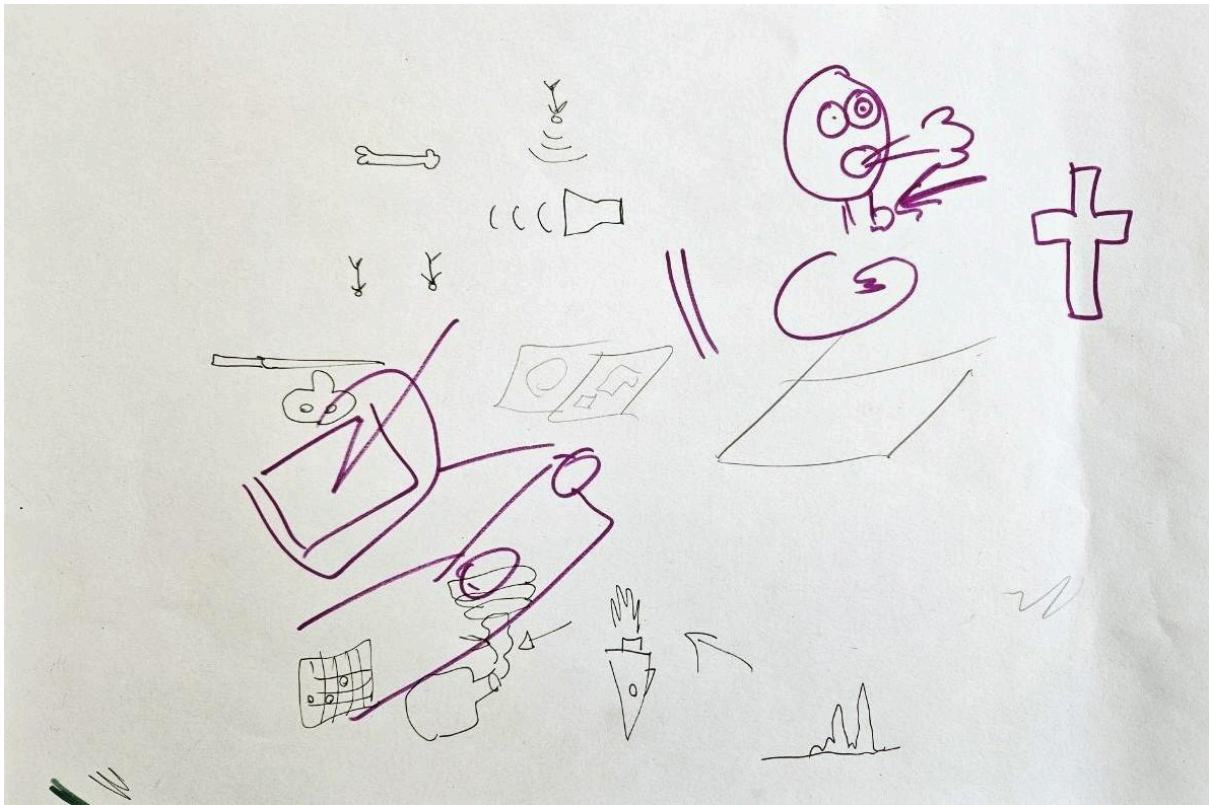
⑦ Debrief gemeinsam - "Group Interview" +
mood & vibe check

⑧ evtl: Runde 2
wildstyle
quick n dirty!



DRUŠTVO ZA PROIZVODNJU I TRGOVINU SREDSTAVA UNUTARNJEG TRANSPORTA
52420 BUZET, Mažinjska bb, Tel. 052/669 069, Fax. 052/669 210

3. The author's notes about the proceedings of the evening of Charrada #1.



4. Drawings from round 2 of Charrada #1. Drawn by Matea, Sepehr, Luí, Julian and Sofia.



5. The players of Charrada #1 writing their individual reflections while wearing their hats. Photograph taken by the author.

6.2 Charrada #2 - 1.5.2025 - The Translation Session

6.2.1. Foundation

I decided on Charrada #2 to be *translation* themed. I wanted to put more focus on translation as an active part of the game, inciting players to translate for each other during playing. This meant that the use of lingua francas was more prominent as a communicative tool. Instead of providing each player with their own pool of words written in/translated into their first or second languages, there was only one hat, which everyone picked the terms from. This was out of interest in this session's theme, translation (and common languages), and to try a mode of Charrada which requires less preliminary preparations.

For Charrada #2, the players were instructed to use any language in their repertoires they wanted. This applied both to the words and phrases submitted and the languages used during the game.

This second session also included more means of documentation, with one round being filmed, audio being recorded and photographs being taken at different points throughout the game. My friend and colleague Theresa was there to help with the technical devices. The session took place in a seminar room of the University.

6.2.2 The players

Charrada #2 involved 9 players, 4 of which had already participated in Charrada #1.

It was important to me to allow as many participants from Charrada #1 to join again. This decision was made based on different factors. Since I see the participants not strictly as test subjects but as my creative collaborators, I am interested in involving them in multiple steps of the project. I was also curious about how they would compare experiences from the first and second session.

Matea, Sepehr, Luí and Sofia participated a second time. I will introduce all players with the languages that were relevant in Charrada #2. These introductions are by no means comprehensive of the individual's life history and semiotic repertoires and should merely serve as an insight into their linguistic circumstances to contextualize their roles as Charrada players.

Matea: This player's L1s are German and Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian (BCS). L2s she uses frequently include English. At the time of writing, she has recently started learning Italian.

Sepehr: This player's L1 is Farsi. L2s he uses frequently include English and German.

Luí: This player's L1 is Brazilian Portuguese. L2s he uses frequently include English and German.

Sofia: This player's L1 is Rumanian. L2s she uses frequently include English and German. A relevant fact about Sofia is that she is a linguist. As many linguists do, she has learned an array of languages out of sheer curiosity. Her L2s include Spanish, French, Dutch, Estonian, Akkadian and Hebrew, to name a few.

Albi: This player's L1 is Italian. L2s he uses frequently include English and German.

Charlotte: This player's L1 is German. L2s she uses frequently include English and the Argentinian variety of Spanish. At the time of writing, she has recently started learning Portuguese.

Hoesé: This player's L1 is Peruvian Spanish. L2s they use frequently include English.

Laila: This player's L1s are Italian and German. L2s she uses frequently are English, but she also reports knowledge of Arabic, due to one of her parent's origins, and BCS.

Lu: This player's L1 is German. L2s he uses frequently include English. One of his parents is of Hungarian origin.

All players have knowledge of German, though some prefer not to use that language unless it is absolutely necessary. Thus the lingua francas accessible to all players in this session were English and German, with a preference for English.

There are some intimate relationships between the players to report which offer additional insight into their interpersonal dynamics. **Luí and Charlotte** are a romantic couple, as are **Laila and Lu**. **Sepehr and Lu** have been close friends for over a decade, as have **Charlotte and Matea** and **Charlotte and Sepehr**. **Luí, Hoesé and Albi** are roommates and friends and as such are quite familiar with each other's languages in addition to their first languages all being from the Romance language family, thus sharing a level of mutual intelligibility. **Luí and Hoesé** also work together as a musical duo, a project in which they write lyrics in Spanish, Portuguese, English and interspersed German.

6.2.3 Preparations

I asked the players to send me 3-4 words and phrases a few days before the session was to take place. My instruction was to send terms in any language(s) relevant in their lives, no matter the level of skill they possess in that language. This vagueness was deliberate to allow greater linguistic diversity to arise than what is typical when asking individuals about

the “languages they know” or “languages they have learned” (eg. Li et al., 2020). More than half the players submitted words/phrases in languages they don’t necessarily actively use, but are nonetheless part of their semiotic repertoire. This included languages that are spoken in the players’ region of origin, like Gilaki, a language spoken in Northern Iran, Quechua, a language family originated in Peru and spoken in the Central Andes, or Genoese which is officially a dialect of the Italic language Ligurian (cf. Eberhard et al., 2025). In total I received 34 different tokens in 15 different languages and varieties. I will name them without reference to the languages status as dialects or official standards, instead introducing them as the players named them to me. They are: German, Austrian (German), English, UK English, Italian, Genoese (Italian), Spanish, Argentinian (Spanish), Peruvian (Spanish), Quechua, Brazilian Portuguese, Hungarian, Farsi, Gilaki and Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian.

I then translated all 34 tokens into the lingua francas, English and German, with the help of other proficient friends and acquaintances. Some players already sent me their own translations in advance and for some terms I later consulted them to see if the translations I had acquired fit the meanings intended by the respective player.

I prepared 34 pieces of paper, each containing one word or phrase as they were sent to me. Beneath I wrote an abbreviation of the language the term stemmed from.

They were also numbered for easier orientation. These 34 pieces of paper were folded twice and put in a hat. For the two Farsi terms and one Gilaki term, I let Sepehr handwrite the letters in Arabic script above a Latin script transcription.

I additionally prepared a little booklet with 34 pages, each page containing the source word/phrase, the corresponding number, and a translation in German and English (see Appendix 2 for a list of all tokens and lingua franca translations).

6.2.4 Gameplay

The mode of playing was quite different in the second session, the most notable difference being the shared hat with all different language tokens. I also wanted to try how a slightly more competitive approach would affect the overall experience.

- During this session, the players were separated into 2 teams and points were counted.
- Round 1: Pantomime with translators: the player picks a piece of paper and reads the word/phrase. If they understand the term, they may start performing. If they don’t understand the term, they may show the ‘time-out’ gesture, and look for a person in the group to come up to them and give them a whispered translation. Then the timer is started again and the player can continue their turn. If the translator they chose is

on their team, the translator may not partake in guessing the term they just translated for their teammate.

- Round 2: Paraphrasing/Explaining. The mode of this round was similar to the first round, except the players would call me as the game master to translate for them. The players could use any language they wanted, but would receive extra points if: 1) They used a language that was out of their usual comfort zone for some reason (they are new at learning it, they usually use it in a different social context,...) and/or 2) they used a language that none of their other teammates knew.
- Since I expected this game mechanism to take up more time than a conventional charades game, I left the possibility open, to play a third round executed either in the drawing or one sound modality. We ended up playing a third round with mixed modalities. Every player chose either drawing or one sound for their turn

6.2.5 Summary of Session #2

Charrada #2 was different from Charrada #1 in many regards. Altogether it felt less intimate, which I trace back to the setting of a University room, the size of the group, the theme, and some aspects of the gameplay. It was very interesting to have four players return because they could compare both sessions and share their insight. They also seemed quite comfortable with and confident about the topic, positioning themselves as savvy Charrada players in moments of uncertainty amongst the new players.

In regards to the linguistic tokens I received, I observed that the players sent me particularly unconventional and in part even highly idiosyncratic words and phrases. I suppose that my prompt of using “any language/dialect/sociolect they have a connection to” made the players consider their semiotic repertoires in a different light. Additionally, some players who returned to play a second time might have been motivated to provide exceptional items to make the game more intriguing.

During the second round, some players used languages other than English but many reverted to the group’s lingua franca for paraphrasing/explaining. This was to be expected as instructions for the round did not call for the use of specific languages. The incentive to gain more points for the group did not pose a strong enough motivation to choose a more effortful, less straightforward way of communicating. Overall I have a hunch that Charrada works better when played without points. The returning players voiced that they missed the aesthetic experience of linguistic diversity. For example Luí said: “To have longer segments of not being able to understand each others’ languages was fascinating to me, because you could read energy and vibe.”

The translation theme was very prominent and to my impression, the mode worked exactly as I had planned, but it impacted the feeling of the gameplay, which the players perceived as less smooth in comparison to Charrada #1. During the collective reflection, I asked the players how they felt about the aspect of translation. What stood out to me was that multiple players agreed that their focus on receiving the translations inhibited their engagement with the foreign language. During the reflection of Charrada #1, when asked the question if anyone had learned new words, not one player remembered a single word in a language foreign to them. When I asked the same question after Charrada #2, multiple players were able to recall words. Nonetheless some claimed, they didn't remember any of the words due to being distracted by the translations. This self assessment departed heavily from the fact that most players were evidently able to recognize terms by the second round of the game. Multiple times a player called me to translate for them and then exclaimed "Nevermind, I got it!" while I was approaching them.

I suspect that this dissonance might stem from the fact that a higher level of cognitive effort was involved in the gameplay of Charrada #2. Attention had to be focussed on trying to recognize a word or phrase, receiving and remembering a translation and only then doing the performance. This might have diverted the players attention away from the new vocabulary they were passively learning. Even if they could not recall it afterwards, they were clearly able to recognize new words and recall their meanings during the game.

For Charrada #1, a week-long process of translating with the help of 5 other people and extensive research was what allowed me to provide the players with personalized tokens in their first languages. This process was transferred to the game itself for Charrada #2. This aspect of fostering community and exchange did not go unnoticed. Matea ended our reflections with the words:

We need each other! We need each other to translate, we need community. If we're somewhere where we don't understand the language, we need translators. You need people to help you. Yes, we can somehow communicate, with body language or drawings, but at the end of the day, you're not going to survive on your own.



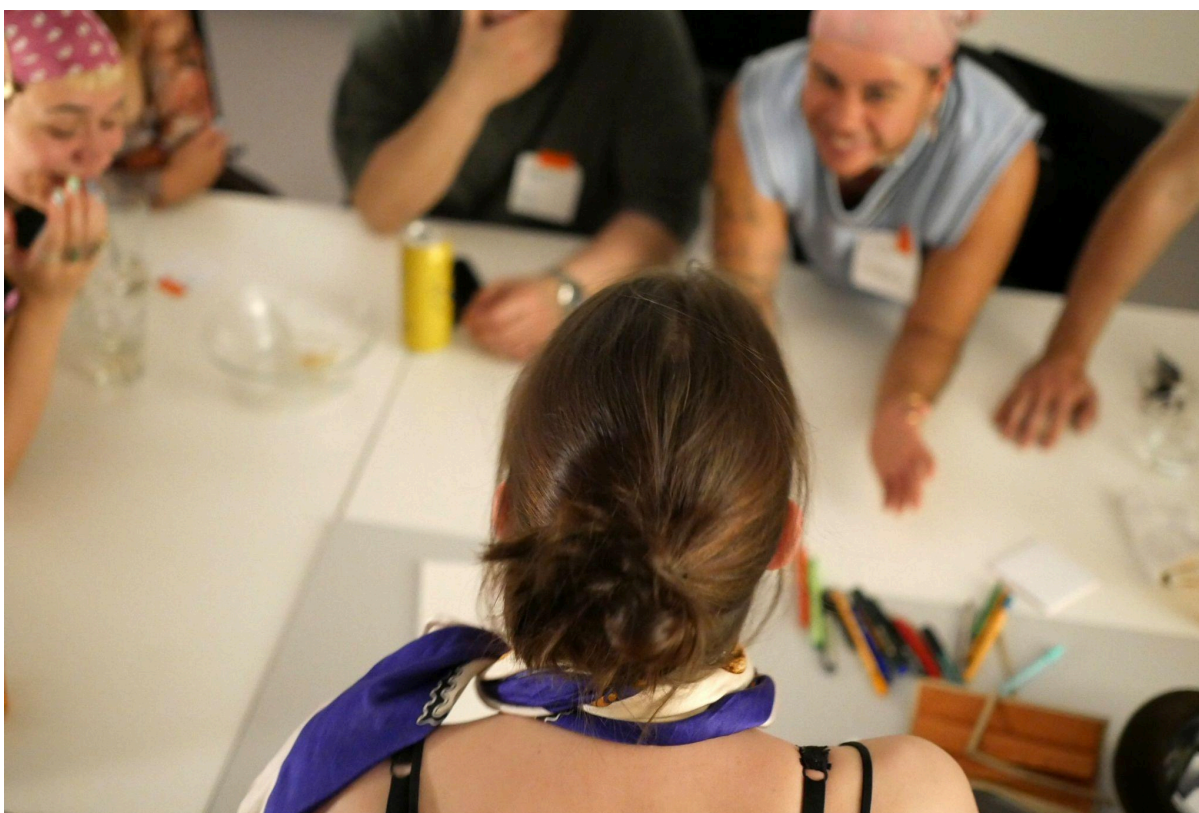
6. Albi translating for Luí during round 1 of Charrada #2. Video still taken by the author.



7. Charlotte and Sepehr wondering about the meaning of 'Petrichor' during round 1 of Charrada #2. Video still taken by the author.



8. Watching Sofia draw during round 3 of Charrada #2. Photograph taken by the author.



9. A moment of understanding during round 3 of Charrada #2. Photograph taken by the author.

6.3 Recommendations for other Charradistas

In this section I will briefly summarize my conclusions from comparing the Charrada #1 and #2 as to point out elements which should be considered before and during a session. This may serve as a possible guideline for future applications and suggestions to others who want to set up a session of Charrada. I reflect on what is crucial for Charrada's entertainment value as a game and what makes it valuable as a research method. Overall, I encourage new Charradistas to unleash their creativity, collaborate with others and indulge in the liberating act of playing.

Intimacy

The level of intimacy depends on many factors that can not fully be anticipated, but it should nonetheless be considered when preparing and playing Charrada. I personally experienced the intimacy of Charrada #1 to be very enjoyable. This might be particular to me, but I felt that having a small group meet in my personal space made both me and the players feel very comfortable and at ease. Although it did give me the responsibility to be an attentive hostess to my guests, it also strengthened my connection to the players. As language can be very personally charged, I recommend an intimate setting and a small group, particularly to anyone interested in individuals' relationships with language.

Competition

During Charrada #1, I got the impression that the players were somewhat disappointed in the lack of competitiveness. Therefore I designed Charrada #2 to be played in teams and for points. This turned out to be a miscalculation. In fact, the players of Charrada #2 independently decided to play the third round freely without points and teams. I also think a focus on competition might diminish the ability to concentrate on communicative aspects and the aesthetic experience of the game. For future trials and to other researchers, I would recommend not playing in teams or for points. A level of subliminal competition will nonetheless be present in the game and sufficiently motivate the players.

Documentation

Documenting the process can definitely be invasive, but it did not feel like it lessened the experience for the players. I had discussed the documentation with all of them beforehand so they were prepared. As the artist-researcher however, having technical devices to keep track of, does impair the ability to observe the moment. I would recommend having a helper and/or keeping documentation minimal. For closer analysis, it is extremely helpful to have

documentation that one can consult. This adds the possibility to approach the data with a retrospective research question.

Collaboration

From my experience so far, collaboration is the most valuable feature of Charrada. I strongly recommend anyone concerned with language and aiming for a similar experimental approach, to consider collaborating with others a crucial part of the process. This pertains to applications outside of artistic research as well. For example, when working with children, Charrada could be used in an educational or recreational setting to foster interlingual/intercultural exchange. In this situation, putting emphasis on community and the value of everyone's input is crucial.

Preparation

As detailed above, my two trials of Charrada involved very differing preparation efforts which heavily influenced the gameplay. The theme/goal of the respective session will influence the extent of the preparation effort. If Charrada is played for entertainment purposes or, as in the example above, when working with children, a great amount of spontaneity might be desired and necessary. An approach similar to Charrada #2 might thus be more appropriate.

In general I would encourage any educators/researchers/game masters and others interested in organizing sessions of Charrada, to make use of the adaptability of the game and stay flexible in regards to rules and procedures. There are countless possibilities of adjusting Charrada to specific contexts.

6.4 Conclusion of Charrada #1 and #2

The theoretical considerations presented in the theoretical part of my thesis are manifest in Charrada. The game fosters different modes of communication, ranging from verbal language to spontaneous, non-verbal behaviour such as iconic pantomime. Many situations that arose during these sessions portrayed the elements contributing to successful communication I pointed out in chapter 3. The multilingual, multimodal setting of the game yields qualities like creativity, for example exhibited in the players' performances of pantomime or drawing. The importance of social cohesion, empathy and the encouraging effect of a common goal are also accounted for in the Charrada. Alongside demonstrating these factors, the lighthearted and engaging atmosphere of a game promotes a receptive mindset in participants to consider language in a different light. All things considered, my experiences with this game confirm that communication is possible under various conditions and partaking in playful experiences of linguistic diversity enriches everyone involved.

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Appendix

	B	D	E	F	P	R
1	lopata	Schaufel	shovel	بیل	pá	lopată
2	šta koji kurac	was zur hölle	what the hell	یا خد	oxente	ce dracu?!
3	paralelogram	parallelogram	paralelogram	متوازی الاضلاع	Paralelepípedo	paralelogram
4	kosti	Knochen (plural)	bones	استخون	ossos	oasele
5	močvara	Sumpf	swamp	مرداب	charco	mlaștină
6	sirup	Sirup	syrup	سیروپ	xerope	sirop
7	atlas	Atlas	atlas	اطلس	atlas	atlas
8	knedla u grlu pre nego što zaplačeš	Der Knoten im Hals bevor man weint	the lump in your throat before you cry	بغض	o nó na garganta antes de chorar	nodul din gât înainte de a plânge
9	kasica prasica	Sparschwein	piggy bank	قلک	cofrinho	pușculiță
10	vera	Glaube	faith	ایمان	fé	credință
11	raketa	Rakete	rocket	موشک	fougete	rachetă
12	zvuk	Geräusch	sound	صدا	som	zgomot
13	jebiga!	Scheiße!	fuck!	لعنت!	porra!	pulă!
14	vetrobran	Windschutzscheibe	windshield	شیشه جلو	para-brisa	parbriz
15	ledenica	Eiszapfen	icicle	قندیل	estalactite de gelo	țurțure
16	šah	Schach	chess	شطرنج	chadrez	șah

17	olovka	Stift	pen	قلم	caneta	creion
18	comic strip	Comic	comic	کمیک	historia em quadrinhos	bandă desenată
19	dala bih ti krvi umrla bih za tebe (U figurativnom smislu!)	Ich würde für dich durchs Feuer gehen Ich würde für dich sterben (Im übertragenen Sinne!)	I'd go through hell and back for you I'd die for you (figuratively!)	فدات بشم	Por você, eu dançaria tango no teto Eu me sacrificaria por você (em sentido figurado!)	M-aş sacrifica pentru tine (În sens figurat!)
20	Štucanje	Schluckauf	hiccups	سکسکه	solução	sughiț
21	bez veze	unnedig	whatever	بیخیال	tanto faz	nu contează
22	savest	Gewissen	conscience	وجدان	consciência	conștiință
23	truba	Trompete	trumpet	ترومپت	trompete	trompetă
24	policijski revir	Polizeirevier	police station	کلانتری	posto policial	secție de poliție

Appendix 1: list of tokens from Charrada #1

Translators: Mehrta, Maria, Antonio "Pernambuco", Lucia & Nebo, the players of Charrada #1, the author

		English	German
1	Te dava teta carajo (SP)	I breastfed you, damnit!	Ich hab dich gestillt, verdammt!
2	elope (ENG)	to get married suddenly + in secret	spontan + heimlich heiraten
3	“Gholenj shekaskan” (FA) قولنج شکستن	to crack/pop your fingers/other joints	die Finger/andere Gelenke knacksen lassen
4	pasticciare (IT)	to mess around/make a mess	herumspielen/herumexperimentieren
5	“Raghse chagoo” (FA) رقص چاقو	knife dance - performed at parties after the cake is brought to the table	Messertanz - wird bei Partys getanzt, wenn die Torte gebracht wurde
6	poklon (BCS)	present/gift	Geschenk
7	gioia (IT)	joy	Freude
8	bobârnac (RUM)	flick (with pointer + middle finger)	mit Daumen + Zeige/Mittelfinger “wegkicken”
9	farmec (RUM)	enchantment, spell, charme	Zauber, Charme
10	Blitzin (UK Engl)	heavy rain	starker Regen
11	Liebesbrief (GER)	love letter	
12	Zeitlupe (GER)	slow-motion	
13	chamba (SP)	work/job	Arbeit
14	Come va? (IT)	How's it going?	Wie geht's?
15	mancino (IT)	left-handed/left-hander (Adj./Noun)	linkshändig/Linkshänder*in (Adj./Nomen)
16	Tojásos kenyér (HUNG)	bread with egg (similar to french toast but savory)	Brot mit Ei (wie salziger Frenchtoast)
17	¿Ima mihunacha kashan? (Quechua)	What's there to eat?	Was gibt's zu Essen?
18	Cuál es tu cau cau ? (SP Peru)	What's bothering you? (playful/ironic)	Was ist denn los?/Welche Laus ist dir über die Leber gelaufen?
19	cavatappi (IT)	corkscrew	Korkenzieher
20	Clapped (ENG UK)	ugly/unattractive (person)	hässlich (Bezug auf Person)

21	camallo (IT)	lit.: dockworker Connotation: Person that is not well-mannered, similar to “truck driver”	wörtlich: Hafenarbeiter Konnotation: eine Person mit schlechten Manieren, ähnl. wie “Bauer”
22	Gschisti Gschasti (GER Austria)	a fuss (unnecessary commotion)	unnötiges Getue
23	Fernbedienung (GER)	remote control	
24	juha (BCS)	soup	Suppe
25	versumpfern (GER Austria)	“get stuck”/wallow in a state of inactivity at a place - eg. unable to leave the pub	versacken, hängen bleiben, sich nicht losreißen können
26	"Bala Misar" (Gilaki) بالا می سر	lit.: “your worries on my head” → I’d like to take your worries away	wörtl.: “deine Sorgen auf meinen Kopf” → ich würd dir die Sorgen gerne abnehmen
27	năsărîmbă (RUM)	a mistake committed accidentally	ein Fehler, der ohne Absicht begangen wird
28	altalena (IT)	swing (noun)	Schaukel
29	Deixa pra lá (PT)	forget about it/whatever	Na egal/vergiss es
30	ya fue (SP Argentina)	oh well, whatever	auch schon egal
31	Sono orgogliosa/o di te ! (IT)	I’m proud of you!	Ich bin stolz auf dich!
32	O bicho vai pegar (PT)	things are going to get ugly/you’re going to be in trouble!	Unheil ist im Anmarsch/das Schlimmste steht noch bevor
33	Lechero (SP Peru)	a lucky person	Glückspilz
34	Petrichor (GER/ENG)	the smell of rain on dry soil	der Geruch von Regen auf trockener Erde

Appendix 2: list of tokens from Charrada #2 with translations to English and German

Translators: Maria, Célia & Silvia, Lucia, Inés, Caro, Julian, the players of Charrada #2, the author

