

Children as Linguistic Rights Holders in the Swedish Welfare System

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This paper investigates an encounter in a multilingual welfare setting where a child with migration experiences is the rights holder. The empirical basis is a story told by the interpreter Nour, about an encounter at a youth clinic. The analysis is guided by the concept of linguistic (in)justice. Findings show that linguistic injustices are a result of the reproduction of monolingual mindsets and linguistic paternalism in the intersection of layers of power asymmetries when welfare professionals do not let the child client talk, when adults talk on the child's behalf, and the speakers give priority to the majority language on behalf of the language that the child speak. These findings suggest that professionals and policymakers must recognise the special conditions of a multilingual setting and children as a particular group of language rights holders.

Keywords: Child rights holders, linguistic rights, linguistic justice, multilingual settings, social welfare.

Introduction and aim

Nour's story

'I introduced myself as the interpreter. After a while, the purpose of the meeting becomes clear to me. The girl lives in a foster home. Two women accompany her: the foster mother and a social worker. The reason for the meeting is to advise on contraceptives. Initially, the foster mother explained that the girl speaks good Swedish and will only use the interpreter when needed. I turn to the girl, make sure that we make eye contact and say in Arabic: "I am ready to assist whenever you need me. Just look at me, and I will understand that you need help with interpreting. Is this okay with you?". The girl nods. The conversation unravelled faster than I had ever imagined. The foster mother speaks as if the girl is not even in the room. She explains why the girl needs contraceptives and what sort would be favourable. She describes her experiences and the possible side effects of birth control pills compared with IUD (intrauterine device). The social worker joins her and gives her opinion. The nurse fills in with advice, her view about the whole thing, telling about different contraceptives' side effects, what would be suitable, and so on. The foster mother moves on like a train, but at this point, I have since long stopped listening to what she has to say. I can hear her voice in the background and look at the girl sitting on her chair

behind the foster mother and social worker. She has sunk into her chair; her eyes are empty, and the sight is lost. She looks at me; we make eye contact. I can never forget the anxiety I saw in her eyes. She panicked. There she was, but no one asked her a single question. There were four adults with her in the room. Still, even though the meeting had been booked because of her needs, where she was the one who should talk about her concerns, get advice, give answers, ask questions, and pay attention to her worries, no one spoke to her or asked any questions. I could not control my thoughts or make them slow down. I was overwhelmed with irritation, only vaguely hearing the foster mother in the background, still talking. I woke up, and the girl looked at me, so I had to interrupt, join the conversation, and interpret as I had promised her at the beginning of the meeting – anything to give the girl attention. I interrupt the foster mother with a smile and say: “Excuse me, I believe that I have to interpret for Linn.” While I interpret, I can hear how the conversation in the room resumes without any questions for Linn about whether she has understood or not if she had any questions or something on her mind that she wanted to share.’ (Nour March 2022, authors’ translation)

The story above is written by Nour, an interpreter and co-author of this paper. She wrote it while attending a course for public service interpreters at Linnaeus University in the spring of 2022. During the course, the interpreters worked to make their tacit and situational knowledge of welfare encounters comprehensible.¹ This paper focuses on encounters in welfare settings where children do not master the majority language, like the one in Nour’s story. These meetings are defined as multilingual, including different languages such as mother tongue, official majority languages, vernaculars in everyday situations, specialist languages in various welfare environments and social jargon, and styles related to people’s background, gender, or age.

Such encounters where children and adults interact are always asymmetric, reinforced by the dominance of an official language and the fact that one person is a professional, and one is a private person (Young, 1997; Herz and Johansson, 2019). Chambon (2013) adds that social welfare professionals, especially in English-speaking countries in the northern hemisphere, see themselves as part of the majority self and the client as the Other. This perception is strengthened when the Other does not master the majority language and has a migrant background (Eliassi 2015; Gustafsson, 2020).

An additional critical aspect of the meeting is that according to Swedish legislation, a child is subordinate to guardians (often parents). They must be involved in the care of and decisions about the child (Parent Code 1949: 381, ch. 6, § 2). In contrast to adults, children are thus not independent welfare subjects. This difference between the status of a responsible adult and a dependent child is reflected in international conventions on protecting children, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, CRC (Collins, 2017). At the same time, according to CRC, Article 12, children are independent rights holders with the right to participate, be heard and be listened to.

This article aims to analyse intersections and layers of asymmetries in multilingual environments in relationships between professionals – clients, adults – children, majority language – minority language and how these asymmetries affect children’s rights and access to social justice in contact with welfare services. The empirical basis for the analysis is Nour’s story. The article begins with previous research on children as rights holders and interpreter users, followed by a theoretical discussion of linguistic justice in general and for children in particular. Material and method are then described, followed by an analysis divided into two sections: (1) Nour’s insider’s perspective, and (2) an

analysis of the other actors' situation and interactions in the multilingual setting. In the final section, we draw conclusions and discuss the results, possible implications and learning outcomes.

Previous research

To analyse Nour's story, we concentrate on relevant research on children's rights in social service settings. The status of children began to change after the Second World War when global cooperation in the development of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) put children's rights issues high on the agenda (Schiratzki, 2003; Collins, 2017). With the international adoption of the CRC in 1989, it was established that children have the right to participate in activities that involve them. The paradigm in the social sciences that recognises children as competent social actors (sociology of childhood) and the increased market logic in the welfare sector, where clients are perceived as consumers, contributed to the adoption of the CRC (Corsaro, 1997; James *et al.*, 1998; Sinclair, 2004).

Many countries worldwide have recognised the child's position through a portal clause that the national law must be interpreted based on the principle of the child's best interests (CRC Article 3). Authorities must have particular policies for the work with child impact assessment and clarify how this pervades their actions (Sandin and Halldén, 2003). These efforts were strengthened when the CRC became law, for example, in Norway in 2003 and Sweden in 2020. Although this has been an obvious step in many countries, research shows it has been complicated in practice (Collins, 2017).

Extensive research focusing on how children's voices and perspectives are represented (or not) and respected in various welfare environments shows that children are rarely talked to or involved and that professionals find it challenging to decide how and when a child should and can be involved (Rasmussen *et al.*, 2004; Holland and O'Neill, 2006; Lundberg, 2011; Healy, 2012). In many cases, professionals neglect the principle of the best interests of the child by avoiding hearing and talking to children. The arguments for this are that the child lacks competence at a young age or is in vulnerable or dangerous situations that hinder their involvement (Schiratzki, 2003; 2019; Andrén and Zetterqvist, 2022). In a comprehensive research review, Collins (2017) examines how the failure to recognise children's participation plays out in an internationally widespread and historically entrenched division between child protection and child participation where protection is practised based on a paternalistic perspective on children.

Other studies confirm the importance of distinguishing between being part of (passive) and participating (active) by identifying stages of involvement (Sinclair, 2004). An influential study by Shiers (2001) posits a five-stage model of commitment to children's participation: (1) children are listened to, (2) children are supported in expressing their views, (3) children's views are considered, (4) children are involved in decision-making processes, and (5) children share power and responsibility for decision-making. The first three stages are about fundamental rights and recognising children's ability to express themselves and understand. The other two are about participation in the conversation and decision-making (CRC Article 12; Archard and Skivenes, 2009; Dillon *et al.*, 2016).

A main focus of research on children's participation, at least in Sweden, has been on children with intellectual and communicative disabilities. This research supports children's active voice in communication decision-making (Piškur *et al.*, 2014; Strandberg

and Tideman, 2018; Molin, 2020; Björquist and Tryggvason, 2022). Studies show that digital technology and cognitive tools can facilitate communication and ensure the child's participation (Söderström and Ytterhus, 2010; Ramsten *et al.*, 2016). Another research area is the social childcare and protection systems for case meetings and decision-making. These studies show that trust and good relationships with the child are created better in one-to-one communication than in meetings with several professionals present simultaneously (Cossar *et al.*, 2016; Bolin, 2016; Dillon *et al.*, 2016). Bolin (2016) shows that multi-professional teams listening to a child may result in the child not being heard. She argues that problems with children's participation can be explained by adults' reluctance to involve children rather than children's (in)ability to participate in decision-making.

An observation is that, although many welfare meetings involve parties who partially or entirely lack a common language, the studies reviewed above do not consider multilingualism as a factor that affects mutual understanding and the possibility to involve and engage the child.

Thus, to understand the impact of language, we have therefore turned to another area of research: children as users of interpreting and translation services in welfare settings. Within public service interpreting, interpreting for children is considered more complicated than for adults (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2012; 2013; Fioretos *et al.*, 2014, 2020). Yet, beside our own research, there are only a few examples of research on this: Keselman's (2009) study on children in the asylum process, Nilsen's (2013, 2015) and Salaets and Balogh's (2019) experimental studies on children using interpreters and a few studies of pediatric interpretation (Olen *et al.*, 2022; Lim *et al.*, 2022). A result of these and our own studies is that it becomes complicated because children tend to perceive the interpreter as the primary interlocutor. The conclusion is that there is a need for interprofessional collaboration between social care professionals and interpreters to build trust and ensure that the child's rights are met. This is even more prominent in multi-professional meetings (Salaets and Baloghs, 2019), as in Nour's story.

In sum, there is extensive research on children as rights holders in welfare settings. However, this research does not acknowledge the impact of multilingualism, and there is almost no research about children as interpreter-users. In conclusion, the research does not include children's linguistic rights in multilingual welfare settings. The following section will see how this is reflected in contemporary social policy theories.

Children as language rights holders and linguistic justice

Literature on language rights distinguishes how states deal with the majority and minority language rights and language rights for migrants (Alcalde, 2015; May, 2017; Bonotti *et al.*, 2021). For example, Kymlicka and Patten (2003) and van Parijs (2011) have discussed arguments for minority language rights based on identity politics and the need to recognise historically oppressed minorities and protect their languages. Simultaneously, based on theories of democracy and inclusion, they have argued a need to promote a common language ideology and use of a lingua franca that all members of society can learn (*ibid.*). Although these are prominent discussions in contemporary theories of inclusion, recognition, and power relations, critical writers point to a problematic lack of theories about the language rights that come from global migration (May, 2017; Bonotti *et al.*, 2021).

One reason that can explain the almost non-existent debate about the linguistic rights of migrants is that host countries deal with linguistic diversity arising from global migration

as a temporary condition. In a sense, it is true that the linguistic landscape varies depending on where the migrants come from, and that linguistic diversity is constantly changing over time. However, global migration is a constant factor, that contributes to societies becoming increasingly linguistically diverse, and this state of so-called super-diversity must be managed through long-term solutions (Meissner and Vertovec, 2015; Piller, 2017; Gustafsson et al., 2023).

Another reason for the lack of language rights for migrants is that these are closely linked to integration theories, where the focus is primarily on migrants' obligation to integrate by learning the host country's official majority language (Sabaté-Dalmau et al., 2017; Bonotti et al., 2021). In many countries, access to welfare benefits, education, and the labour market is conditional, e.g., the migrant must participate in the majority-language courses to gain access to education, the labour market, and social services (Davidsson, 2016; Buzungu, 2023). Furthermore, the goal of learning the majority language and joining a collective and shared national identity is linked to social integration rather than being perceived as an emancipatory endeavour that would benefit the individual migrant (Fioretos et al., 2020; Bonotti et al., 2021).

The above discussions are relevant for understanding the status of migrants' language rights on a philosophical and political level. This article looks at language rights and how social welfare institutions handle them. Here, Patten (2009) has defined so-called Accommodation rights designed for people who lack sufficient proficiency in the dominant language and that this might imply the provision of interpreting and translation services. Shorten (2022) discusses in similar ways the provision of interpreters in contact with public service institutions, translation of administrative forms and official written information, and web platforms to handle language diversity and support non-majority language-speaking migrants. Hence, rather than focusing on the language rights of the migrants, these provisions focus on the duty and responsibility of the state and public services to provide clients with equal services. In this intersection between language rights and rights to fair and transparent treatment of authorities and equal access to social services, the combination of language rights and social justice becomes relevant to label in terms of *linguistic justice* (Piller, 2016, 2017).

Based on this there is reason to take a closer look at *children as language rights holders* and *linguistic justice*. Despite the above-described asymmetric conditions of the multilingual welfare setting and the robust policies and rules about children as rights holders based on the implementation of the CRC, we can conclude that the arguments about language rights and social justice for migrants described above do not include the aspect of age and the particular situation of minors.

Looking closer at the situation in many countries, one reason could be that migrant and refugee children are involved in learning the majority language from the day they arrive since they have the right to (and are obliged to) go to school also while waiting for a decision on residence permits. There, they are taught and offered training in the majority language. Hence, in these aspects, children have stronger language rights than adult migrants with accommodation rights (Patten, 2009).

These language rights are an advantage compared to adults. Yet, these rights might also lead to disadvantages, such as children's position as language brokers. Research in this field shows how migrant children often take on huge responsibilities in their families for better or worse (Weisskirch, 2017; Gustafsson, 2021). Children's language rights may also be a hidden problem in the research due to a general perception that children learn a

new language quickly, and this obscures the view of those children who do not master the majority language, are in transition between languages, or master two or more languages but uses them in different contexts. This perspective is based on an assumption that there are clear boundaries between when someone master's a language and when they don't (Nilsen, 2013, 2015).

Material and methods

The empirical basis for this article is Nour Kaisso's (co-author and interpreter) story presented in the introduction. In several studies, we (Kristina, Linnéa and Eva) have claimed that interpreters have a unique insight into multilingual welfare meetings (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2022; 2024). They attend meetings between patients and doctors, clients and social workers, suspects and police officers. They are the only ones handling all languages at such meetings. The position of the interpreter thus carries a certain power. At the same time, the possibility of using power is limited due to ethical rules prohibiting the interpreter from interfering in the conversation and because the responsibility for the meeting rests with the public employee. We have shown that the interpreter's position in the public discussion is often silenced, and their insights about welfare meetings are rarely considered (*ibid.*).

Nour's story was written down and used for pedagogical purposes in a course titled *Dialogue Lectures for Equal Encounters for Public Service Interpreters* at Linnaeus University, Sweden (2022). In the course, the participants were asked to write a draft about a situation from an interpreted meeting that they found engaging and relevant to their profession. The drafts were then discussed in a seminar. All eighteen participants chose strikingly challenging situations for their stories. A similar dilemma in each story was the client's vulnerability and the interpreters' uncertainty about what to do and how to act and react in the re-told situation.

This experience of finding similar dilemmas and situations taking place despite different and unique situations made us select Nour's story for this article. In many aspects, it is not a unique or single event. Based on experience from the course in combination with many years of extensive fieldwork among public service interpreters as well as Nour's many years of experience, we have chosen this event because it represents a type of situation that constantly recurs in interpreted encounters (Fioretos *et al.*, 2020; Gustafsson *et al.*, 2022b).

From an ethical research perspective, focusing on one case can cause problems considering integrity. It is important to note that crucial facts that would make it possible to identify those involved in the story, like where it took place or personal names, are not mentioned, or they are changed. Furthermore, there is no information that goes beyond the narrated situation in the story, for example, details on why the foster mother wants contraceptives for Linn. The way we use the story, the integrity problem is most apparent in relation to Nour, and that is one reason why she is included as a co-author, to own and interpret her own experience.

To include Nour, the first-hand storyteller, as an author in the paper raises not only ethical but also methodological considerations. In line with feminist and self-reflexive ethnography, we must problematise our different positions concerning the empirical data we analyse (Davies, 2008). Nour is part of the event, who remembers and gives the event meaning by creating a narrative. She thus provides us with a first-hand source that we

could handle as a narrative from a research subject. Here, it is different – Nour is part of the article's writing and can tell and interpret her story. In other words, it is a starting point for our analysis that the interpreter is a first-hand witness in such situations and that her position as a bilingual and impartial interpreter puts her in a negotiating posture that is important to understand. Therefore, we have emphasised letting Nour alone analyse and discuss her first-hand perspective in the results section.

Another methodological consideration is that Nour's story is an example of when things don't go well from a legal security and rights point of view. There is a point in analysing such situations as they provide a basis for important lessons about how things could be different (Gatta, 2014; Gillies, 2016; Gustafsson et al., 2022b).

In the next section, we will analyse Nour's story, already presented in the introduction, by putting the three categories of actors in the centre. Firstly, the role and position of the interpreter are analysed more thoroughly as Nour shares her first-hand perspective on how she understood and interpreted the situation and her position and responsibilities. Secondly, we leave the first-hand perspective of the interpreter and analyse the child's situation from an outside perspective with a special focus on her position as a rights holder and participant in an asymmetric situation. In this part, we are also focusing on the welfare professionals, the nurse, the social worker, and the foster mother, and their roles and responsibilities concerning the concept and framework of linguistic justice.

Analysis of Nour's story

From the inside

As an observer of interpreted conversations, I am usually the one party in these conversations that holds the contextual knowledge from both sides. My insights are often made in silence and seldom shared with other professionals. Usually operating in both directions of the conversation, I detect and am aware of contextual circumstances that may complicate or simplify a situation. As interpreters, we learn to remain neutral in relation to the matter at hand, and impartial in regard to the conversation parties, meaning we neither side with any party, nor do we give our opinions of the matter discussed. We are to remain as invisible as possible, in order to allow for an uninterrupted flow between the conversation parties. This is my point of departure in every meeting, including the one analysed in this article. I neither took part in the discussion nor took anyone's party. This means that the prerequisites of neutrality and impartiality have been categorically fulfilled. With this introduction in mind, I underline that an interpreter must acknowledge her own biases, subjectivity and position in a conversation. Here, I must make a distinction between the interpreter's (my) role in the present moment, during the conversation, and the interpreter's (my) remarks and recollections of a meeting, in writing this article.

That is not to say that I didn't make observations during the meeting, which I relayed in the narrated story. Therefore, the story comes interlaced with my observations of the meeting and is inevitably from my point of view. So, where does this re-visiting of my experience lead us, and what can be said about the impact of power asymmetries in the multilingual setting from my perspective?

There is often the notion that an interpreter is present for the sake of the rights-holder, as they are the part who can't speak the majority language. This is a misconception that we, as interpreters, often clarify; my role is to enable two-way communication between

the welfare professional and the clients. This means that I am there to assist the welfare professional as much as the client, as my role serves the welfare professional's ability to make legally sound decisions and enable communication between the two parties. This same misconception inadvertently establishes a hierarchy which is to the disadvantage of the clients, as it places them in the linguistically deviant category.

Drawing on this conclusion, it is necessary to discuss language as an element of inclusion/exclusion, which is how I, as an interpreter, see my role in the encounter described above. My presence could be used as a clear marker of inclusion in the conversation, in the cases where I am allowed space to perform the task adequately. Whenever that is not the case, it may be a marker of the opposite, exclusion from the conversation, which appears starker in my presence since the act of exclusion is performed on both the child and me. Although the act of inclusion/exclusion is directed at the child, it also reflects on the welfare professional and their ability to realise their duties towards the child entirely.

Upon further reflection, I find that my proposed method of communication, for the minor to signal her need for interpretation by looking at me, creates an uncertainty in the technical sense, as well as another queue to silence the minor, as I eliminate the need for verbal communication with me. As the conversation unfolded, I realised this meeting was not serving its purpose. However, as an interpreter, I cannot step in or react. The most I can do is interrupt to translate, which eventually happened, signalled by the child herself.

Because of the complicated nature of interpreted encounters, research shows that children often experience difficulties recognising each participant's role, usually choosing to trust and refer to the interpreter (Nilsen, 2013, 2015; Salaets and Balogh, 2019). Although problematic in regard to the interpreter's ethical guidelines, in this particular situation, trusting the interpreter could have afforded the child's protection. However, by omitting my role and therefore rendering the rapport between the child and me obsolete, there was no such possibility.

Structurally and from my point of view, this meeting reveals the limited role that an interpreter may have in an encounter and the limitations in the cooperation between interpreters and other professional groups we are in frequent contact with; however, as much insight we as interpreters might have into the dynamics, it remains entirely up to the welfare professional to manage these asymmetries. A position which, as an interpreter, I seldom see seized and used to manage an asymmetry.

From the outside

Starting with Linn, we (all four authors of the article) will now switch the perspective to the other actors' situations and interactions. From Nour's story, we learned that Linn is at the youth clinic with her foster mother. In this meeting, in line with accommodation rights (Patten, 2009; Shorten, 2022), the legal framework in the *Administrative Procedure Act* (SSB 2017:900) and *Health and Medical Care Act* (1982:30), Linn, the foster mother, and the social worker, as well as the nurse, are supported by interpreting services. Hence, some strong incentives are in place for protecting Linn's linguistic rights following the legal frameworks and procedures for encounters with minors and non-majority-speaking clients. But Nour witnesses something else; despite the presence of a legal caregiver and three other professionals (including the interpreter), Linn is not heard or listened to. She remains silent throughout the encounter.

There are many possible factors behind Linn's silence. For example, we do not know if Linn was as proficient in Swedish as the foster mother said and thus understood most of the conversation but had reason not to interrupt or engage in it. Or, if she had confidence in the work of the foster mother, the social worker, the nurse, and the interpreter (Fioretos et al., 2020). Or if she remained silent because the topic was about her intimate and private life, and talking about that in this environment, with these women, although professional, was awkward, embarrassing, or even taboo. There is also the question of whether the foster mother is accurately estimating Linn's language capabilities. Considering the appointment was at a youth clinic, and the topic was contraceptives, it would not be a far-fetched assumption that a fourteen-year-old child is not well-versed in this kind of terminology, whether in Arabic or Swedish.

Regarding Nour's story, however, a more salient aspect of Linn's silence is that she was not voluntarily silent but silenced. She was silenced several times during the meeting, most explicitly and abruptly, when the foster mother, before the conversation started, explained that Linn spoke good Swedish and that the interpreter was not needed. At this moment, speaking Arabic became deviant, and Linn was defined as the one causing potential language barriers (Hall and Valdiviezo, 2020). In this situation was both Linn and Nour excluded, but also the use and sound of Arabic language itself, and that meant that a monolingual mindset came into play. This was not questioned by any of the participants but was taken as a self-evident norm for this meeting (cf. Piller, 2017, 2016; Buzungu, 2023).

Furthermore, Linn, no matter her eventual competencies in the Swedish language, as pointed out by Nour above, is completely excluded from the conversation since none of the other parties invited her to talk about her situation and her needs, nor was she asked any questions. This is even though Linn is the welfare subject and target for the meeting, and there are two professionals, trained in leading conversations with clients.

Turning the perspective from Linn's silence to the actions of the welfare professionals, again, a crucial point is the foster mother's initial announcement to the room that Linn already speaks Swedish and does not need interpreting. This initial statement by the foster mother is a key to why the meeting failed to uphold Linn's rights. As discussed above, her statement marginalises not only Linn but also the Arabic language and the interpreter's role. Furthermore, she clarified that she perceived the interpreter as support for Linn and not herself or the other parties. At this moment, she cut off the possibility for herself, the nurse, and the social worker to fulfil their duties and responsibilities for the dependent welfare subject's situation (Patten, 2009; Shorten, 2022; the *Administrative Procedure Act* 2017: 900).

The nurse has the overall responsibilities for the encounter since the encounter takes place in her office. In the end, she is the one who will approve the decision on contraceptives and give expert support. In line with the above-referred research on children's involvement and right to participate in their cases, the nurse, on the one hand, does fulfil her obligations, having Linn there and having arranged interpreting services (cf. Shier, 2001). On the other hand, she fails to include Linn according to her rights in the same way as previous research has shown, since she does not talk to nor listen to Linn (cf. Schiratzki, 2003; 2019; Collins, 2017). Hence, Linn's rights to advice and support are cut off due to the nurse's submission to the actions of the foster mother. The social worker approves as she does not complain but instead reinforces the exclusion and silencing of Linn by adding her perspectives on contraceptives.

The nurse, the social worker and the foster mother are complicit in undermining the rights of Linn, exposing her to linguistic injustices. Also, they thereby undermine their situation and role as professionals and legal guardians. Even Nour is included in this silence, underlined when she tells the girl that she only has to give her a look and Nour will know that she needs interpreting. Upon this, Linn stays silent and nods instead of confirming verbally. As pointed out in previous research, lack of exchange and collaboration between the four professionals thus became silencing factors for the child (cf. Bolin, 2016; Salaets and Balogh, 2019).

Discussion and conclusion

What do we learn from Nour's story about intersections of asymmetries, i.e. between professionals – clients, adults – children, official majority language speakers – speakers of other languages, in multilingual settings and how they impact children's rights and access to social justice in their contact with welfare services? Based on methodological considerations about how a single situation contains recurrent and generic dilemmas, Nour's story presents opportunities to visit a particular situation both from her inside perspective and from an outside perspective and to learn about different layers of power asymmetries, ethnocentric mindsets, and diverging professional responsibilities (Young, 1997; Gatta, 2014; Gillies, 2016; Gustafsson *et al.*, 2022a).

The meeting with Linn complies formally with the legislative requirements for a meeting with children. The employees are professional, the foster mother is a legal and committed guardian, and a well-trained interpreter is present. Technically, the meeting is planned to address legal requirements and responsibilities (Patten, 2009; the *Administrative Procedure Act* 2017: 900; Shorten, 2022). However, Linn's rights to participate and share her thoughts and questions were not executed, and when we added the dimension of linguistic justice, we found that the multilingual environment turned out to be an additional disadvantage for the child even though there was an interpreter available.

The initial statement that Linn did not need interpreting as she understood and mastered Swedish was the first step in a row of exclusionary practices that took place during the meeting. The statement positioned Linn as the cause for possible language barriers and the interpreter as support exclusively for her. Nour emphasised this first exclusion by accepting it and asking Linn to give a silent sign (eye contact) if she wanted Nour to interpret rather than speak out. In this way, a linguistic hierarchy was established, making the Arabic language deviant and Swedish the self-evident way of communication. Neither Linn nor Nour were given the opportunity to express themselves and create space for the Arabic language. Hence, a monolingual mindset was reproduced, and the power asymmetries of the encounter were reinforced by the linguistic hierarchy and exclusion of the non-majority language (Piller, 2016).

Based on Nour's story alone, we do not know if Linn mastered Swedish. However, we know that the other participants accepted the foster mother's statement since no one tried to determine whether she understood what they were discussing. Linn was thus in a position that have been extensively researched, namely how children, despite a solid commitment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, are not invited to participate, be heard and be spoken to (Collins, 2017). Her opportunity to participate in her own case was disqualified, which was supported by the disadvantages she faced in the linguistic situation.

From the story, we learn how language is not only a tool for communication but linked to identity, cultural and social backgrounds, and, as described above, to power. In Linn's case, we have, among other things, the intersection of power asymmetries between national languages (Swedish/Arabic), professional terminology, everyday jargon and cultural perceptions of sexuality and age at hand. These layers form a structure that distinguishes communication in a multilingual setting from a simple interpretation of what is being said. Furthermore, a fourteen-year-old girl cannot be expected to take power in a meeting with three adult professionals. On the contrary, one can expect that she feels alienated and powerless and that her trust in the adults is low. Her taking and using power is, in this case, impossible, and it must be seen as the responsibility of the adults to create space for and allow her to take power and speak for herself (cf. Tew, 2006).

We can conclude that Linn faced disadvantages that resulted in linguistic injustices. Her rights were undermined the moment her foster mother took responsibility for her case, viewing her as a dependent welfare subject. The foster mother and the other adults in the room reproduced what Collins (2017: 24) discusses in terms of paternalism in the name of child protection. This is defined as a kind of protection that often becomes exclusive in relation to children's rights to participation (Tew, 2006; Collins, 2017). In this situation, Linn's position as a dependent welfare subject and target for protection and care was reinforced by the linguistic situation. She did not get access to consultation, not because she chose to stay silent (which she has the right to do and maybe did), but because she was never asked to participate in the conversation and was not offered the possibility to understand and express herself fully in her first language although there was an interpreter present (cf. Keselman, 2009). Inspired by theories about child participation (Collins, 2017) and studies on multilingualism (Piller, 2017), this can be described in terms of linguistic paternalism. It is a form of paternalism that appears in the intersection of all three layers of asymmetries, the welfare professionals who do not arrive at including the child/client by asking her any questions; the adults who takes on the role of protective and responsible adults for the minor by talking on her behalf; and the majority speakers who reproduce a monolingual mindset that excludes other languages from the room when both child and interpreter is silenced.

This analysis of the intersections of layers of power asymmetries sheds light on the fact that there are blind spots in the extensive research about children as rights holders in welfare settings, as it fails to recognise the challenges of multilingualism and children as interpreting users. Also, age and child perspectives are lacking in the political theories about language rights (Patten, 2009; Shorten, 2022). This leads to a problematic reproduction of linguistic injustice at all levels. In addition, it shows in situations where children's linguistic rights and access to social welfare are undermined. Turning to the professionals, they also become victims of the linguistic disadvantages they are responsible for creating. To deal with the multilingual and asymmetric situation, they must be equipped with linguistic competence to understand differences in language, social codes, and frames of reference (Hall and Valdiviezo, 2020).

Finally, what are the propositions for future social policies? We suggest combining research on child participation with studies on multilingualism and interpreting to create a workable policy. The aim is to create an understanding of power and language whereby welfare professionals are prepared to recognise their linguistic advantage and act to balance the occurring asymmetries, e.g. give space to the language the child is comfortable speaking and tune down the language of the welfare professional and the institution.

Decision-makers, for example the National Board of Health and Welfare in Sweden, often use the above-described five -stages model for children's participation (Shier, 2001) to implement working methods that lead to participation for children with intellectual disabilities. However, we propose five steps to improve the ladder with recognition of linguistic justice for children in multilingualistic welfare settings.

- Examine the types of language the authority uses compared to children's language use. Ensure that children's language use is articulated in institutional texts, pictures, and information, and create organisational rules and procedures for ordering an interpreter.
- Provide space for children's language use in professional-child interactions by, for example, using the interpreter as an opportunity and part of interprofessional collaborations.
- Formulate and promote ideas and suggestions on how children can express themselves in different languages they feel comfortable with in different situations and where they can switch between different types of language.
- Develop working practices so that the child's language uses becomes the majority language and the professional's language the minority language. This means, for example, creating more space for the child to speak than for the professionals.
- Implementing policy requirements calls for the child's language to be considered in all decisions.

These are suggestions that, if implemented, would provide working tools to manage the distribution of power in the encounter and make professionals sure of how they should work to secure trust and opportunity for children to employ their rights. This would counteract linguistic injustices and strengthen professionals in their faculty. It is essential to have time for reflection. As the analysis of Nour's story shows, it would be helpful to critically reflect on what happened and one's actions, both from an inside and outside position.

Note

1 The story was de-identified already at that stage by excluding names, specific places, or other details or characteristics that could reveal those involved.

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