Sports Translation in the Community: Migration, Multilingualism and Inclusion

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on an ethnographic methodology, this article explores community settings to understand the interaction between sport, multilingualism and translation in local, non-professional contexts. It reports on observations of sports sites and interviews with organisers, coaches, volunteers, and players across a variety of disciplines, conducted in Galway (Republic of Ireland) and Belfast (Northern Ireland, UK), as part of a North-South research project Multilingual Island: Sites of Translation and Encounter in 2023–2025. This work contributes to existing research on sports translation – and in translation in general – by identifying and discussing three different types of translation present in community settings (translation by volunteers, translation with the body, and the use of translation technologies), and by illustrating how these modes of translational engagement enable individuals and groups to participate in sporting activities and overcome language barriers. The article argues for the importance of the study of settings such as amateur, community sports sites for understandings of ad hoc, non-professional translation activities. It concludes that the types of translation that occur in these sports settings have enabling functions which allow sports organisations and groups to cater for diverse communities, and migrants to become involved in sporting activities which afford them a sense of inclusion and agency.

KEYWORDS

Sport, multilingualism, migrant, Galway, Belfast, community, non-professional translation and interpreting

1. Introduction

This article examines community settings to understand the interaction between sport, multilingualism and translation in local, non-professional contexts. It demonstrates that community and local sport grounds are an ideal setting for studying impromptu practices of translation and interpreting that exist in spaces where professional translation services are not available. It contributes to existing research on translation in general (by querying its scope, forms, and functions) as well as sports translation, especially in community settings and in the context of migration. While there are some parallels between the dynamics of non-professional translation in sport and in other areas of social life, such as education, healthcare, the media, or crisis response (e.g. Antonini & Bucaria 2015; Antonini et al. 2017; Federici & O'Brien 2019), it may be argued that sports grounds, when considered as translation sites, are unique. In contradistinction to some other formal and semi-formal settings encountered by migrants, participation in sport is entirely voluntary, and linked to leisure activities, resulting in a generally positive psychological and social attitudes. Indeed, "amid increasingly polarized political and public debate about migration, there remains a broad consensus that sports can transcend social tensions and facilitate integration" (De Martini Ugolotti & Eskandari 2025).

Using an ethnographic methodology, this study draws on observations of sports sites as well as interviews with organisers, coaches, volunteers, and players. Zooming in on two cities on the island of Ireland, but in two different jurisdictions, Galway and Belfast, it

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discusses three main forms of translation found in community settings (translation by volunteers; translation with the body; the use of translation technologies). By illustrating how these translational approaches enable individuals and groups who lack linguistic proficiency to participate meaningfully in sporting activities, it shows how non-professional sports sites promote interaction between different linguistic, social, and cultural groups. The article argues that the types of translation that exist in non-professional sports settings have enabling functions which allow sports organisations and groups to cater for diverse communities, and for migrants to become involved in sporting activities which afford them a sense of inclusion, agency, and dignity.

Recent sociolinguistic research on multilingual and multicultural environments has focused on the ways in which individuals grow and expand their linguistic repertoire as a response to encounters with the world around them (Blommaert and Backus, 2013), what some have dubbed the "lived experience of language" (Busch, 2017). Furthermore, in sites of multilingual encounters, translation (however narrowly or broadly understood) has been observed as a matter of great societal relevance (Simon 2012, 2019; Creese, Blackledge and Hu, 2018). Our research into multilingual encounters in sports settings aims to show that these, heretofore largely ignored venues, are important sites of encounter and lived experiences of translation. We argue that not only are various forms of translation essential in facilitating participation and inclusive practices, but viewing migration, multilingualism, and inclusion through a translational lens allow us to interrogate these complex concepts to understand them more fully. The significance of sports clubs as opportunities for social inclusion for migrant and refugee groups is widely recognised in literature in the field (Ehnold et al., 2024; Mickelsson, 2024; De Martini Ugolotti & Eskandari 2025). There has also been much discussion on the limitations of sports in delivering social cohesion and integration, and it has been acknowledged that there are many constraining factors which need to be taken into consideration, such as transportation, reaching women and girls, turnover and mobility of migrant communities, volunteer availability and training, bureaucracy, and difficulties in reaching target groups (Sibson and Stanway 2022; Anderson et al., 2019; Ricatti et al., 2022). However, in examining the success of integration in sporting settings and the constraints encountered, the question of language is rarely discussed in depth. Consequently, various translation modes in multilingual, community sporting contexts are not generally considered and their role in the success or failure of integration efforts remains largely unacknowledged, a gap which this article seeks to address.

Research carried out in Northern Ireland (Cabral & Martin-Jones, 2017) testifies how migrant-operated football teams competing in local, amateur leagues can perform national and cultural identities – Timorese in this case – by using linguistic resources in different languages (Tetum, Portuguese, English) as well as semiotic resources such as shapes, colours, and national symbols in their "branding" (Cabral & Martin-Jones, 2017, p. 20). Therefore, to study translation in sports sites in the community, is also to study the cultural and identity exchanges taking place and the levels of interaction and cultural awareness that are enabled.

In this study, we understand translation not just as a linguistic or textual act but view it broadly as related to processes of transformation and reformulation of meaning, and the idea of negotiating meaning across physical or cultural distances. Translation therefore

permeates all aspects of meaning-making: verbal messages (spoken, signed, or written), behavioural patterns, material and symbolic arrangements, human and non-human agents, and so on. Not only may verbal utterances be translated, but so may physical sites (when configured and occupied by multilingual and multicultural users), and participants themselves (who often report that cross-linguistic and cross-cultural interaction both requires and results in "translating themselves").

Consequently, when discussing language barriers that might be overcome by translation, we do not just mean linguistic issues, but also wider questions of intercultural communication, understanding, and collaboration. Our research seeks to investigate the function (or need) for translation in sport against a common perception that sport has a common language (or, conversely, that it does not really need one) and that participation is not significantly constrained by any linguistic or cultural issues. Another widespread perception to address is that sport is a social leveller and that sports activities are not hindered by cultural backgrounds. In highlighting the translation activities that are taking place on the ground, we are consequently identifying how translation is both meeting a need and signalling the existence of constraints and barriers which might not otherwise be overcome without translation.

2. Research aims and methods

The research on which this article is based is part of the "Multilingual Island: Sites of Translation and Encounter" (MISTE) project, an ethnographic study of linguistically diverse sports, religious, and cultural settings in Galway and Belfast, funded by the Higher Education Authority in the Republic of Ireland under the North-South Research Programme. As a result of inward migration patterns, the population on the island of Ireland has become increasingly diverse and multilingual over the last twenty years. The 2021 census found that 3.4 percent of Northern Ireland's population belongs to minority ethnic groups – around double the 2011 figure and four times the 2001 figure. Northern Ireland's capital, Belfast, is the most ethnically diverse government district, and in 2021 the most prevalent main languages other than English in Belfast were Polish, Irish, Romanian, Arabic, and Chinese (NISRA 2023). Meanwhile, in the 2016 census, Galway was the most multilingual city in Ireland with 20% of the population speaking a language other than Irish or English at home (compared to a national figure of 13%). The most spoken foreign languages in Galway city were Polish, French, Romanian, Lithuanian, Spanish, German, Russian and Portuguese, and overall there were more than 66 different languages listed as being spoken in the city.[i] In the 2022 census, although the most spoken languages remain similar, they are on different trajectories: Polish, French, Lithuanian and Russian are decreasing, while Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic and Malayalam are increasing (CSO 2023). It must be added that the most recent census in the Republic of Ireland was taken on April 2022, at the early stage of the arrival of Ukrainian citizens seeking refuge from the war with Russia; therefore, it is to be expected that the current situation in Galway is even more multilingual, and that Ukrainian would now feature in the above figures.

Within this context, the researchers in Belfast (Blumczynski) and Galway (Andrusiak and O'Connor) set out to investigate the practice, availability and experience of translation in

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sites where culturally and linguistically diverse populations emerge and interact with local communities. The project concentrated especially on sites where the presence of an interpreter or translator is *not* common, or mandated by law (as it would be, for example, in a hospital or at a police station). The hypothesis was that in the absence of professional, trained translators and interpreters, the multilingual communities of practice in these sites would recur to alternative means, possibly including non-professional ad hoc translation (Antonini et al., 2017) and/or the use of technology, as well as attempts to communicate through non-verbal channels. When focusing on non-professional sports settings in Galway and Belfast, we set out to explore:

- What is the level of linguistic and cultural diversity in local sports organisations?
- To what extent are the community organisers and coaches aware of this diversity and engaged in actively negotiating it?
- What types of translation approaches do non-professionals such as organisers, coaches and players follow in their activities, and what sort of enabling functions do these perform?

The researchers concentrated on sporting organisations operating in the community at amateur level, and as such, lacking professional translation and interpreting provision. There was no focus on a specific sport, but rather the organisations were selected on the basis of their geographic location (with preference for organisations based in highly diverse neighbourhoods) and/or their relevance in the community. Organisations were invited to take part in the research via email and phone call, leveraging pre-existing contacts of the researchers as well as snowball sampling. Researchers wished to contact as wide a variety of sporting contexts as possible and the organisations that accepted to take part in the study were active in a variety of sports: football, street soccer, futsal, gaelic football, basketball, tennis, running, and swimming. The nature of the interaction with migrant communities varied between sporting organisations: some groups were not explicitly migrant-oriented, but nevertheless aimed to recruit migrants into local sports and retain them as members of the club; for others, migrant integration and support was the main focus, rather than sporting achievement.

Researchers were based both in Galway and in Belfast and came from Polish, Ukrainian, and Irish backgrounds. The ethnographic research with these organisations took place between March 2023 and May 2025, consisting of observations of sporting activities (e.g. matches, training, running) and note taking on linguistic interactions. Observations were mainly non-participatory, except for the running club where running with the group was essential to observe interactions (in this case, notes were compiled immediately after the session). Research objectives were disclosed to the organisations, coaches and participants, and observations were carried out by one researcher in Galway and another one in Belfast.

The observational work was complemented by semi-structured interviews (in English, Polish, and Ukrainian, depending on the preference of the interviewees). The aim was to understand the linguistic interchange and the role of translation in these contexts and to capture the perspectives of volunteers on the challenges/opportunities relating to multilingualism in sporting settings and these issues constituted the main topics, questions and prompts for the semi-structured interviews (See Appendix).

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In Belfast, the main sports focus was on football, futsal, and street soccer. Interviews were conducted with coaches, players (including volunteer players-interpreters), referees, volunteers, supporters, managers, and chairmen of several local organisations. Multiple observations of futsal practice sessions and matches were conducted. In Galway observations took place in sports grounds, such as GAA (Gaelic football) pitches, basketball courts, fitness centres and tennis courts, as well as in more informal locations such as public parks, beaches, forest trails, riverside pathways or promenades. Linguistic and cultural diversity varied according to the primary goals of the sports organisations. Clubs and organisations with a focus on the promotion and practice of a specific sport tended to attract more locally rooted participants and displayed lower levels of linguistic and cultural diversity. In contrast, organisations whose primary aim was community building and inclusion through sport – such as Sanctuary Runners, SheMoves, and a range of local outreach health and well-being programmes – were significantly more diverse, engaging both locals and migrants who come from a wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Ethics approval for the research was obtained from both the University of Galway and Queen's University Belfast and all respondents were assured of the anonymity of their responses. We use identifiers to protect the participants' anonymity: GI and a number for Galway-based interviews; BI and a number for Belfast-based interviews, and GN with a number for Galway fieldnotes and BN for Belfast fieldnotes from observations. All interview respondents were adults and from a diverse range of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds including native and non-native English speakers. Between Galway and Belfast a total of 18 interviews were conducted (around seven hours of recordings), and 14 observations took place. For data privacy reasons, we do not identify the languages or any other personal information of the interviewees, or name the organisation they come from in our discussions, instead the table below summarises the research interactions:

Location	Nature of Interaction	Type of Sport	Languages appearing in observations or mentioned by participants
Galway	Observation	Walking and exercise programme	English, Polish, Urdu
Galway	Multiple observations	Walking	English, Ukrainian, Russian
Galway	Observation	Basketball	English, Spanish African languages (Hausa, Yoruba), Malay, Indonesian, Arabic, Russian, Ukrainian
Galway	Multiple observations	Walking, running	English, Arabic, Chichewa, African languages (Xhosa, Tswana, Hausa, Yoruba, etc.), Ukrainian
Galway	Observation	Walking, running, swimming	English, Somali, Spanish, Arabic
Galway	Observation	Tennis	English, Ukrainian, Russian
Galway	Observation	Gaelic football	English, Polish, Italian
Galway	Interview (coordinator)	Health and well-being programs	English, Ukrainian
Galway	Interview (coordinator)	Health and well-being programs	English, Ukrainian, Polish, Congolese languages, Urdu, French
Galway	Interview (coordinator)	Health and well-being programs	English, African languages, Portuguese, Spanish, Ukrainian, Polish, Lithuanian, Urdu, Latvian
Galway	Interview (coach)	Gaelic football	English, Irish, Italian, French, Polish
Galway	Interview (coach)	Gaelic football	Irish, English, Portuguese, Chinese, Polish, African languages, Arabic, Spanish
Galway	Interview (coordinator)	Health and well-being programs	English, Portuguese, Cantonese, Urdu
Galway	Interview (organiser)	Walking, running, swimming	English, Arabic, Ukrainian, African languages, Spanish, Portuguese,

Galway	Interview (player/organiser)	Badminton, cricket	English, Irish, Hindi, Chinese, Korean, Ukrainian, Sanskrit, Rajasthani, Portuguese, Japanese
Galway	Interview (player/organiser)	Football, jogging	English, Somali, Arabic, Xhosa, Hausa, Yoruba
Belfast	Interview (coach/organiser)	Football, basketball	English, Yoruba, Arabic, Somali, Slovak, Polish, Urdu, Farsi/Persian, Portuguese, a range of African languages [unspecified]
Belfast	Multiple observations and interviews (coach, referee, players)	Futsal	English, Lithuanian, Russian, Portuguese, Spanish, Ukrainian, German, Italian, Slovak, Romanian
Belfast	Interview (coach, organiser)	Street soccer	English, Farsi/Persian, Arabic, Tigrinya
Belfast	Interview (coach, organiser)	Football	English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Albanian, Chinese, Polish, a range of African languages [unspecified]

Table 1. Research interactions summary

Following the completion of the interviews and observations, the interviews were transcribed and anonymised, and the observation notes from both sites were shared between researchers. The Galway and Belfast teams then gathered in person to identify and analyse the recurrent themes that emerged from both sites. As the research was conducted with shared research questions, but in sites in different jurisdictions, the aim at this point was to identify which common forms of translation emerged, regardless of location or sporting activity. All of the collected data was analysed by the researchers who manually tagged recurrent collective thematic strands emerging from the ethnographic work. These were then collated for further qualitative analysis and the findings are presented below.

3. Findings from the research

In our research, we found that three main translation approaches emerge in local sports settings which we will now discuss in more detail.

3.1. Volunteers and non-professional translation

The first widely adopted approach is the use of volunteers with the necessary linguistic skills to interpret and provide translation when needed. We found in sports settings that volunteers regularly rely on their linguistic and cultural skills to enable interactions, and that their skills are employed in different scenarios. They can for example be involved in bringing in new members and encouraging people to join:

> So say, we had someone from Georgia who is involved in the run and we noticed that in one centre there's lots of Georgians and a lot of them don't speak English that maybe we would use a […] runner who's Georgian and go into that context and tell them about [our organisation]. […] To have local heroes kind of who speak the same language as the people. And yeah, it's just about building those relationships. (GI08)

They can also help with translation of materials for the sporting organisation:

> And then because we're voluntary we have used less formal translation methods as well. So, if there are people who are fluent in Polish, maybe we would just use somebody that we know rather than a paid translation service. (GI05)

Those with high degrees of competency in multiple languages are valuable assets to sporting organisations. One coach in particular – who the players referred to as "a polyglot" and indicated a high level of respect for – emphasised the value of his own command of several languages:

> This is a mixed culture, so I hear […] probably all languages which (one) can hear in this country, so I can communicate in Polish, in English, in Russian and Lithuanian, and in the (other) Slavic languages – maybe can't speak but I can understand what they mean. So for me, to know more languages it's a very big tool for your life, you know. (BI06)

In observations we could see interpreting happening during sports activities, where volunteers (often themselves team members or players) helped with communication efforts:

> She [a participant with good English] starts translating only when one of the coaches asks her to help. [...] When the time for the game comes and the coach needs to give a long instruction, he asks her to translate and demonstrate. (GN10)

> You can see that sometimes people nod their heads and say "I understand", but when I see what's happening on the court, for example, during a training session, I must stop and ask the coach to translate into Portuguese because I see some people don't understand others. I can't explain it in Portuguese, and they will not get me if I will explain in English, so sometimes we have to translate or interpret it to players. (BI06)

Translation by these volunteers is not always at a sentence level, with advanced linguistic ability. It can also be just simple words and phrases that have been learned by administrators, coaches and referees. In interviews, they stressed the importance of learning and deploying expressions and phrases in other languages:

> Myself, I've been trying to learn Arabic and Farsi so we can communicate with the Iranians and all the African Arabic speakers […] I'm always trying to pick up words, because I'm sick of relying on [other] people, and I want to learn certain phrases. (BI03)

> I know a few words in Lithuanian, the words I hear from the guys. These are maybe not words we can use here but I [sometimes] use them when there is a tension on the pitch, I used that to make them feel like […], to take the bad things away [to dissipate the tension]. (BI08)

Translation of short words or phrases can often be for reasons of comprehension or explanation during a sports activity but it can also be deployed as a way of signalling inclusion and welcome. One volunteer coach mentioned the importance of sending messages to parents including translated words in other languages to make different language groups feel included. These actions mean that the onus is not just on players or participants in sport to translate but also on other members of the sports organisations, for example referees, coaches, and administrators. However, players were also motivated in multilingual sports contexts to acquire phrases and negotiate a vocabulary which could be deployed during a match:

> I would say in sport […] make sure you've got words that you want to use, typical in sports like "left shoulder", "right shoulder", and all that. You can talk about that ahead of the game and then […] your team will know what you want to say and then you just get along. (BI07)

In this scenario, players are also volunteers and facilitators, making an effort to enable communication using different linguistic and translational strategies. It was stressed several times that "getting along" and being effective as a team depends on successful communication, on understanding each other. To achieve this effect, translation was often employed, as was reducing the need for it – either by developing foreign language skills or by using the shared language (English).

Having a fellow participant in a sports activity who is willing to translate makes the participation much more successful. We even observed that participants preferred volunteer interpreters in situations where hired interpreters were present. While the organisers had availed of their services, participants used other ways of deriving and producing meaning:

> The translator translates everything the walking leaders say, but every time someone from the participants wants to ask a question or give a comment, they do it by themselves using as much English as they have. When they find it difficult to get themselves across, they use gestures, try a different word, or ask the Ukrainian with more English to help – but don't ask the translator to help them. (GN5)

Volunteer work can extend from informal interpreting to being an ambassador to a local community. This role, discussed in a sporting context by Nesse and Hovden (2023), uses the skills of members of a migrant community to make connections between communities and sporting organisations. In our study of sports sites, we observed this role expand

beyond establishing relations between communities and sporting organisations to helping different ethnic groups of migrants who tended to be isolated to connect with each other.

> There's one lady on the committee who's in Direct Provision[ii] herself, who is – she's an incredible one. She's just recently moved to Ireland and she is from [*anonymised*], I think. But she's a real natural sort of leader and […] she's really trying to use walking and sport and games […] in the Direct Provision centres to integrate people and to stop this kind of congregation of people with the same cultures and the same languages because she's like "We can learn from each other and we can integrate". (GI08)

The importance of facilitators and volunteers in sport for integration is regularly reiterated (Nowy et al., 2020; Michelini et al., 2018) and in one study (Anderson et al., 2019, p. 86) language and culture are identified as key dimensions of the skills that would help facilitators enable integration through sport. Our research shows that volunteers and their translation skills are crucial in enabling interactions and in fostering an inclusive environment in the sports setting.

3.2. Use of technology

The second approach we observed was the recourse to technology for translation to help overcome language barriers. These tools can be used for text translation, as well as for speech to text, and text for speech conversion to enable a basic conversation during the course of a sport activity, as demonstrated in the examples below:

> Google Translate would be the most common. And it's usually in the context of the conversation […] we'd be having a conversation, and the context has been lost and […] we can't understand each other. So, someone […] will put out Google Translate and Google the specific words that we're trying […] to locate. (GI08)

> We stayed in the same hotel with a team from Bosnia. I had no idea what their language is, they had no idea about mine, they had no English, and then how else could you communicate? Just use Google translation and that's it. You use it these days; that's all you need. (BI07)

When asked about the use of technology during sports events where there were different linguistic groups, one interviewee confirmed the use of technology saying, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. They [the players] always use Google translate" (G13). Translation technology, often accessed through phones, and most commonly Google Translate, is a frequent first step to resolve misunderstandings, enable conversation and prepare written communications. It is used by both coordinators and players in oral and in written contexts:

> Sometimes I use Google Translate when I need to work with documentation or paperwork, or if there are new words that someone is saying […] yes, Google translator helps me. (BI06)

Coaches also use Google Translate to send messages to parents in their own native language:

> So or even if I didn't [know the language], I would use Google Translate – just to say something in the other language […] more for fun in the WhatsApp group and in the messages or in a single sentence as training or in a welcome hello or goodbye. (GI04)

The coach here not only uses the translation tool to communicate information in another language, Google Translate is also used to make people feel welcome. It is, in the coach's words, a "gesture of inclusion". The affordances of the technology used for communication also allow for a reply from the parents whose reaction to the use of their native language is "always very positive and you know emojis and happy faces and thumbs up" (GI04). The technology enables both interaction in another language and responses translated into emojis.

Although some respondents noted that they prefaced Machine Translated (MT) messages with an acknowledgment of the tools, they felt at ease using MT to enable communication. Research explores the ethical implications of MT in the experience of end users, pointing out that real-life experience of MT is often "not a binary issue" exhausted by examining the quality of the translation output; and that MT use should be examined within "a broader picture that considers experience not only as a static and isolated event, but as part of a communicative process in the short and long term" (Guerberof-Arenas & Moorkens, 2023, p. 129). For the end users of MT in sports contexts, we can see how the speed and operability of MT far outweigh any sense of risk of potentially insufficient precision or even miscommunication. Respondents felt that sport was a low risk/safe context in which to employ MT:

> When I say Google Translate, […] I'd be careful with [it], but for something basic. (GI04)

Google Translate has also been helpful to sports administrators who use MT tools to publicise activities with migrant communities and for direct contact with migrants with whom they do not share a common language.

> I will, actually, have to say Google Translate has been such a lifesaver. I've used it in the past. And I think it's […] developed so much more. It's much more accurate and […] helpful. Or else the people I've been working with have been very polite (laugh) and haven't been telling me. Because […] if I'm sending out messages on the Telegram channel or I'm sending out emails, I always write them out in English. Then I would use Google Translate to translate them. And then I send them in both English and Ukrainian so that the people who are working on their English, they have it in English, but if they don't have English as a language written or spoken, then they still get the message. And, generally, there hasn't been any issues. Nobody's come back and been like "You're talking nonsense". And if they do respond in Ukrainian, I can use Google Translate to work [it] out. And I've never had any issues. So, the message is always there. It might not be perfect and some of the semantics might be lost. And […] if we have a little bit more time or if we're publishing something official – we do pay translators. So, we would send off our English to translators and they would have it. But for something where time is of the essence, and we need to get a message out to people for something that's on tomorrow, Google Translate has been really helpful. (GI01)

The administrator shows a level of trust in the MT process despite some initial reservations; this trust is based on the perceived efficacy of the tool and its ability to fulfil an immediate need. This interviewee showed us a screenshot of correspondence in which they wrote to participants in Ukrainian, opening with the sentence "I apologise for my Ukrainian language and mistakes I make, I'm using Google Translate!" The efforts made at communicating in Ukrainian, even with Google Translate were favourably received with members of the group putting a thumbs up in approval. These interactions show both the use of the tool by those involved in sporting activities and also an awareness of possible limitations of its efficacy. Those using the tools on the ground in sports sites demonstrate a level of trust in the technology and its ability to facilitate communication that is sufficient or fit for purpose:

> I remember that there was a session that so we had [*name*] who just spoke Georgian and she couldn't speak any English and nobody knows Georgian among us. So it was all Google translation that you put in and then she will put it back and you put in and just trusting that it's translating it correctly, yeah. (GI14)

3.3. Decentring language: translating with the body

The third form of translation we observed in sports sites was the use of the body to translate meaning and to enable communication. This often occurred on occasions when there were no volunteers or facilitators present who could interpret, and when the use of technology was not possible. Interviewees spoke of using this strategy to overcome language issues: one coach discussed how "you don't need a lot of language spoken" because "you can demonstrate by doing and showing" (GI04). Another interviewee explained:

> "I look at you and make sure that you understood. Sometimes you didn't understand. I think it's OK. And I'll do – for me it's easy because it's exercise. I'll just show it, I'll do it and then she knows what I'm trying to get her to do" (GI06).

One referee commented:

> "If I see the players don't get me, whatever I want to pass to them in English, I try to use [some] other tricks to show them what I want to do, what I expect from them, or whenever. I just try to use my body language, I try to show them what I want from them. […] I don't know if you can call that body language but it works, you know, somehow" (BI08).

A player noted that in sessions when the coach would give verbal instructions and players would not understand, it could be frustrating but that the way they overcame these challenges was by "doing things physically like body language" (GI14).

It is important that these interactions are also viewed as translational because it can be tempting to view sports as an environment that "does not need" translation, considering that once individuals can understand the rules, they may be able to carry out their role in the game without needing to translate across languages. This concept is discussed recently in the literature by Flynn (2023). He interviewed a social worker who organised

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cooking, music, and sports activities for homeless migrants in Ghent, Belgium, and who remarked that newcomers would not need translation to enjoy these activities. However, Flynn also notes that while such activities "are not predicated on a single historical (national standard) language and grammar", they nevertheless "bring with them genre perceptions and sets of discourses that shift across languages and cultures" (2023, p. 49). A sports ground is still a place where meaning is being made and translated, and as such needs to be managed as a translational ecosystem: failure to do so means that incomprehension – or, even more precariously, miscomprehension – is constantly around the corner.

Indeed, we observed issues with comprehension of this type in our study of sports sites. While there seemed to be no need for translation of a simple warming-up exercise before a community walk "because all the participants easily follow his [the organiser's] movements" (GN2) and even managed to make jokes in their languages (English, Ukrainian,Russian), the absence of translation undermined the participants ability to grasp all the elements the community walk involved. "None of the Ukrainians understands that there is a possibility to make another circle if they feel good and then come back to have tea or coffee" (GN2). However, this misunderstanding was resolved by using body language:

> When we come back I can hear a couple of Ukrainians talking about making another circle. They say that they are not tired and feel like walking. An older Irish man feels the same. Although he can't speak Ukrainian/Russian he shows using body language that he is going to make another circle. The Ukrainians happily join him. (GN2)

Individuals rarely use language as their only means of expression, and never in a vacuum: "people speak, point, gesture, sign, write, draw, handle objects and move their bodies, in a variety of combinations or aggregates, within diverse social and material contexts" (Kusters et al., 2017, p. 220). In culturally and linguistically diverse contexts, the body often functions as a communicative resource that can drive communication on its own, and mitigate communication breakdowns when the parties in an interaction do not have the necessary linguistic resources to carry on. Blackledge and Creese have made the important point that "in seeking to understand how people communicate when they come into each other's presence, we should pay close attention not only to speech, but also to the ritual deployment of the body as a resource for communication" (2020, p. 23). This interest has led to a small number of research studies on how the body is used as a communicative resource in sports activities performed by multilingual individuals. Callaghan and colleagues (2018) performed a visual ethnography of basketball training sessions in a highly diverse area of Leeds, UK. Cohesiveness and collaboration within a group of young men in a 'difficult' environment are achieved by a variety of gestures, movements, utterances, that unify them around a common goal and ultimately "contribute to constituting the cohesive cultural activity of the club itself" (Callaghan et al., 2018, p. 50).

It is important to acknowledge that sport can allow individuals to put aside perceived linguistic deficiencies, privileging other, often physical, attributes. As one interviewee said, "You're purely judged by your ability to do the sport you know, not by what you can speak [laughs]" (GI04). These many strategies and interpretations mean that translation with the

body must be seen as an integral communicative act in sports settings. Needless to say, non-verbal communication carries its own set of risks: it would be naïve to assume that some gestures or bodily reactions are either self-evident or universal; like any language, the body language is strongly inflected by culture, religion, local context, climate, history, and so on, and also needs sensitive and attentive translation. This need for sensitivity and attentiveness – but also a positive and courteous attitude expressed both verbally and behaviourally – was mentioned by our interviewees:

> If you work with a team, with a group, you can sometimes feel that something is wrong or you can feel that they just don't talk to communicate or to pass the message to the other players. So [as a referee] I try to be understanding [but also] need to be a good observer. You […] watch [the players] if there's something wrong, you always need to communicate with them […] maybe it isn't always what they want to hear but as long as you use good manners, as long as you try to be very polite and honest with them, that helps to build that relationship with people. (BI08)

If meaning-making is not a prerogative of human language, and "being alive means to be in a connection of systems and interactions between these systems" (Marais, 2019, p. 117), translation defines an infinite "process of changes that make meaning possible by continuously transforming signs into other signs" (Marais, 2019, p. 123). This being the case, an interaction in a sports game can have different translational moments, as players' actions can be interpreted within a closed system of signs (the rules of the game), but the signs in that semiotic system can also be further translated into other signs, including different languages and culturally-inflected actions (Ciribuco, 2020, p. 195). The findings from our observations and interviews demonstrate that in sporting sites of translation, we may often need to decentre language as the chief or dominant communicative mode, and view embodying language itself as something that is used by individuals who have a physical presence in these spaces. Once again, a translational sensitivity and creativity are key to navigating communicational challenges successfully.

3.4. Overlapping translation resources

The research conducted showed that extensive translation strategies/modes happen in non-professional sports settings but it is not the type of translation that is normally associated with sport (see Baines 2018, Itaya 2021). It is instead a translation which is volunteer based, reactive, using the resources at hand; also, at times, it is not a verbal or textual form of translation but rather a bodily translational act. The strategies observed and discussed in the interviews attest to translation activities which broaden understandings of how translation works in multilingual sports settings and reinforce the importance of the study of non-professional, impromptu forms of communication in multilingual sites (Antonini 2017, Simon 2019).

In the observations and the interviews, we also noticed that these sports sites are places of overlapping and often complementary translation strategies: each of the translation approaches mentioned above (use of volunteer translators, use of technology, and use of the body) should not be seen in isolation or as distinct categories; in fact, they are regularly used in combination. Volunteers use language technologies to help with their

work, and technology can complement the use of the body. A sports trainer explains that with some clients she slows down her speech, and ensures that there is understanding of the "lingo in the gym" and the instructions by different methods:

> I watch – eye contact. I watch her body: is she doing and performing what I'm asking her to do. If she looks confused, I say "Do you understand me? Please, feel free to tell me you don't, and I will try again". If I have someone with very limited English, […] we would go on to Google Translate on the phone sometimes and that would help [overcome] the barrier. (GI06)

Different strategies are used for various levels of language proficiency and there are overlaps between physical and technical forms of translation. One interviewee commented on how the different translation resources are combined to enable communication:

> We use Google Translate here quite a lot. And because there's so many nationalities here in this community, we'd have a lot of people that would use this centre – so, if we needed somebody to translate or to support us, we'd reach out […] to one of the volunteers or teachers here in the centre. (GI02)

Another interviewee details volunteers using short phrases and bodily indications:

> So a lot of time, the people who are coming from Korea or Japan – right? – Oh, yeah, we have people from South Africa as well. I think once there was a Ukrainian guy, he came and he played along with us. So sometimes the language is bit like, you know, they cannot express properly, right. So, in that case we, because we are playing sports, we help them out like, you know, by telling them: "OK, do this. Do that" – just the words, not the whole sentence and that's how they pick [it] up. (GI13)

While a final example of these overlapping resources is provided in the following extract:

> When we are together so the main language would be English, and when people are not understanding because more of like sign language and do this and that, and because we could see like the act that the coach is doing and we could do. If needed, like people who are multilingual like me, if needed help I'll translate to my colleagues who are speaking Arabic and I was fluent in English, I was switching to Arabic for them – so to explain what the coach wants from them to do. And the same I would switch to Somali. And because of that like almost every one of us has a little words that we learn from each other. (GI14)

Our research also suggests that the three translation strategies often work in synergy to ensure successful communication, and that a breakdown in communication can happen when one of the strategies fails and there are no other resources. For example, in an observation of a tennis coaching session, the coach did not share a language with some players and attempted to demonstrate physically what he wanted to happen, but participants did not understand the meaning of his gestures. He continued giving verbal instructions in English but when these were not translated by any volunteers among the players, the result was a complete breakdown of the sports session. (GN03)

3.5. Awareness of opportunities, challenges and possible communication failure

In some situations, we witnessed a lack of awareness of the linguistic challenges faced by the players (for example, a coach continuing to talk in English expecting that the players would understand) and a failure of functionality of the strategies employed, all of which led to miscomprehension and ultimately frustration on the part of those involved in the sporting activity. We consequently have found that awareness of language challenges can be an important indicator of success in the deployment of translation strategies. This awareness is not always present, as shown below:

> The role of language in sport is not huge. If I was going to say anywhere to be the easiest place to integrate people, it's sport, it's exercise because you're physically doing something which is a lot easier for people to understand. Verbally, going out for drinks and meals is very hard because then you have to base yourself on language, there's nothing [else]. It's very hard, even with body language you might have to use your hands. But sport – yeah, has a very big role if you're trying to integrate people who don't speak a lot of the same languages. (GI06)

It is acknowledged by this interviewee that sport can be an excellent opportunity for integration and that communication via the body is an important strategy for translating meaning. However, because of this restricted view of the role of language in sport, there is also a lack of recognition that language barriers can exist and can hinder integration and inclusion.

Acknowledgement of the issue of language and the need for translation can result in actions being taken and, in our research, organisations who had identified language barriers as being present were proactive in producing resources in multiple languages (including for example flyers, registration, posters, recruitment information etc.). Recognition of language barriers also helps at a wider level where sporting organisations can be encouraged to provide guidelines, resources and training for their grassroots to help them overcome these issues. Some volunteers who realised that the language and cultural issues were in fact posing barriers were also willing to put in the effort to acquire some essential language skills themselves (rather than putting the entire onus on the participants) and deploy multiple forms of translation, including translation technology, tad hoc non-professional interpreting, and body language.

3.6. Sports and inclusion

The cumulative effect of successful translation strategies in the sports sites observed is the creation of inclusive environments where the sporting activity succeeds in being an important part of migrant integration. Participants in our research highlighted the potential of sport as an inclusive practice: "I think sport is massive. […] Sport is a great vehicle for integration and helping people connect" (BI01). Some sporting organisations we observed were set up with this very purpose in mind and individuals were motivated to seek out sports programmes to help improve their connection with the local community and other ethnic groups in the area. As one of these sports facilitators said:

> [Our organisation] is a solidarity through sport initiative, bringing together people from all walks of life, whether they're people living in Ireland or whether they're migrants or people living in direct provision and seeking international protection. So, […] bringing people together to use the medium of running or walking for community integration – is the kind of big aim, but it's very simple really. (GI08)

Another migrant sports organisation was established by migrants themselves because "we wanted to have a healthy mental and physical well-being and to empower that" (G0I14).

The people interviewed for our research consistently emphasised the enormous potential of sport to promote social change relating to issues of integration, discrimination and social injustice, particularly in the context of migration. They have seen sports activities act as an effective tool to prevent racial hostility, unite communities, create a safe space and foster a sense of belonging for migrants. One sporting organisation observed that they welcome other cultures to their group because they were established "to make people come together"; the interviewee from that sports organisation highlighted the positive role sport could play in making connections:

> It allows us to network with other people, right? Lot of my good friends are from my badminton place, also I go for salsa classes. [...] I again network with a lot of people who like to dance and they are from- a lot of people from Brazil, Spain and a lot of other places, right, Ukraine, lot of people. So I really enjoy that. I mean, so these are networking opportunities basically that you get. (GI13)

Reflecting on the positive benefits of participation in sports activities, another interviewee confirmed the sense of unity:

> [...] when we started playing, I would say compared to now and where we were, we are closer to each other, more united, we made and shared good bonds now that like we made amazing friendship and sisterhood and we still keep in touch. (GI14)

In both Belfast and Galway, participants focused on how involvement in sports activities had created opportunities for migrants for volunteering, developing their social and linguistic skills, and boosting employment prospects. Participants emphasised the power of sport to improve language skills and give migrants space and freedom to 'integrate' at their own pace and on their own terms. This meant that even when people seemed siloed into language groups and not necessarily communicating with different cultures, the very act of participating in an activity and being present was often enough for an inclusive goal to be met. In some of our observations and in discussions with facilitators we noticed the tendency for language groups to stick together during sporting activities:

> I can see the groups, people kind of forming, […] – if you speak, say, Urdu and I speak Urdu – I walk with you. They kind of go back to that setting. And it's probably easier […] because you're having that conversation in your own language. But I do find that everyone kind of is very eager just to integrate and make friends. But then as the group goes on […] over weeks, people can kind of break back into their own groups, setting, their own comfort of their nationality and they pair up quicker with somebody from their own nationality. (GI05)

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The understanding of what constitutes integration varies and the existence of multiple languages on a sporting site does not necessarily mean that 'integration' is taking place. However, the presence of translation (in whatever form) signals that interactions are ongoing, and that consequently a form of inclusion is being fostered. As observed in the above example (GI05), people can be simultaneously linking with their own language groups and also with other languages and so the processes involved are overlapping and intertwined. Our research therefore complements existing studies on how sport can facilitate integration (Nowy et al., 2020; Michelini et al., 2018) and adds the proviso that this integration can be furthered by translation and effective communication strategies.

4. Conclusion

Our study and its findings underline the importance of examining non-professional sites of translation and the adoption of a spatially situated approach to translation, following the work of scholars who highlight the role of translation in defining the linguistic and cultural identity of places (Simon 2012, 2019; Cronin and Simon 2014). This type of research does not concentrate exclusively on translation as a professional activity and does not in fact concentrate on exclusively linguistic activities (Blumczynski 2023). Rather, it explores "what is translational" about reality (Marais 2014, p. 76). Such an approach has enabled researchers to capture the role of different forms of translation in a variety of contexts, including linguistically diverse situations where no translator or interpreter is present, but translation nevertheless happens (Flynn and van Doorslaer 2016; Flynn 2023). This article contends that studying sports sites within communities is a vital extension of the spatial approach to translation. The findings of this study highlight the important role that sports sites play in multilingual communities, where translation occurs in ways that are distinct from professional translation activities.

A further important aspect of our research is an indication of how translation technology is being used on the ground and its significance in situations where individuals are working to help migrants integrate in their community. Recent research on migration and technology has concentrated on the importance of smartphones for migrants and refugees, especially when they are new to an environment (Kaufmann 2018; Vollmer 2018; Ciribuco 2020; Khvorostianov 2023). The research acknowledges the importance of digital technologies for "language learning and everyday translation" among other things (Kaufmann, 2018, p. 890). The extent to which community workers, activists and volunteers active in and around local sports organisations or taking part in physical activity use MT to communicate with migrants is not well documented and our research showed the willingness of these individuals to engage with Google Translate and to use it to enable their activities. The study of translation in sports sites was therefore an opportunity to study the prevalence surrounding the everyday use of MT in a recreational context that can be quite important for the migrants' well-being and inclusion within the community.

In contexts of migration and displacement, a variety of non-professional individuals often find themselves informally engaged in translating or interpreting (Antonini et al., 2017), including in workplaces (Kraft, 2020; Muñoz Gómez, 2020) and migrant neighbourhoods (van Doorslaer et al., 2016; Inghilleri, 2017; Flynn, 2023). Our research has found that these activities are also present in sports settings where non-professional individuals

provide important linguistic services by translating or interpreting to enable recruitment, sporting activities and general communication. This finding chimes with general studies of sports sites as places of inclusion, where human resources, in particular volunteers, have been found to be the most crucial factor in the success of including newcomers in sports (Mickelsson, 2024, p. 11). A final, important finding from our research relates to the use of the body as a translational vehicle. Translation scholars – with the exception of those focusing on sign languages (Kusters & Hou, 2020), somatic theory (e.g. Robinson, 1991, 2013, 2017), and embodiment (e.g. Vidal Claramonte, 2025a, 2025b) – have paid relatively little attention to the body so far, which does not do justice to the body's capacity for expression, and therefore for translation across different types of meaning. In translation studies, however, an interest in the biosemiotic dimensions of translation is developing (Marais, 2019) that – among other things – enable the understanding of multiple embodied phenomena as translational processes. Our research shows that these embodied translation activities are very present in sports sites and can be crucial for successful meaning making.

Our study, conducted in multiple settings catering to a variety of populations, shows that involving individuals through sport does indeed require a variety of negotiations that qualify as translation – across languages, across bodily communication, and across systems of cultural reference. It furthermore shows how current research on sports, migration and integration (e.g. Smith et al 2019; Flensner et al. 2021) could be expanded to include greater attention to linguistic issues. Sports-focussed NGO's and charities do not necessarily have sporting achievement as their only (or even main) aim. Other related goals can include uniting communities, supporting integration, creating a safe space and a sense of belonging for migrants, improving physical and mental health and general wellbeing, creating opportunities for expressing cultural identity, and offering opportunities for volunteering, training, and improving employment prospects. Our research argues that all of these opportunities are enabled and facilitated through translation and that better outcomes are possible with greater awareness and recognition of linguistic barriers and possible translational solutions.

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Appendix

General outline of the semi-structured interviews and the sample questions which were tailored to suit the interviewee's role (e.g. coach, organiser, player):

- Could you describe your role (in the organisation)?
- How long have you been working/playing or volunteering in this capacity?
- Do you ever hear any other languages spoken/used in your organisation?
- How do you deal with language issues if they arise?
- Does your organisation have written guidelines on how to interact with individuals with limited English/Irish proficiency?
- What do you think organisations such as yours are doing to provide a better experience to migrants and refugees who do not speak English/Irish?
- Is there anything you would like to add?

Notes

[i] The above figures relate just to Galway city as defined by the census, however, many suburbs (such as the suburb of Oranmore) fall under the Galway County category and are both very close to the city and also very multilingual.

[ii] Direct Provision is a system adopted by the Irish government for the accommodation of international protection applicants.