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# Mediating digital literacies across transnational refugee networks: language and resilience inside and outside Syria

Tony Capstick

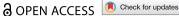Department of English Language and Applied Linguistics, University of Reading, Whiteknights, UK

**ABSTRACT**

The challenges encountered by refugees in resource-low settings has led to increased calls for new approaches to understanding the role of digital literacies in enhancing resilience by building on the experiences of refugees in the Global South. Moreover, there have been repeated calls from within academic circles and the humanitarian sector for more inclusive approaches which de-centre outsider assumptions about refugees' lived experience. This paper addresses these gaps in the current landscape of migration studies with an account of refugee-led participatory research with a focus on how language as a source of capital is used to enhance resilience across refugee networks when mediating health literacies. Drawing on concepts from critical multilingualism which deconstruct and decentre otherwise privileged language practices, the study illustrates how refugee family members outside Syria mediate complex health literacies as part of their everyday digital literacies for non-refugee members inside Syria, thereby enhancing the resilience of transnational family members across the network. The findings reveal how refugee-led research is best facilitated when refugees' own language practices are a priority in research design. Working in this way illustrates how research teams negotiate power relations in their research by foregrounding research dynamics and structural hierarchies within interdisciplinary research.

## Introduction

The challenges encountered by refugees in urban spaces has led to increased calls for new approaches to understanding the role of digital literacies in enhancing resilience by building on the experiences of forced migrants in the Global South (Netto et al. 2022; Cole 2021) Moreover, there have been repeated calls from within academic circles (Hackl 2022; Etzel 2022) and the humanitarian sector (Capstick and Delaney 2016; Heugh and Mohamed 2020) for more inclusive approaches which de-centre outsider assumptions about refugees' lived experience. Furthermore, inclusive refugee-led research is in short supply (Holmes, Reynolds, and Ganassin 2022; Hutchinson and Dorsett 2012; Udwan, Leurs, and

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Alencar 2020). In short, the current landscape of migration studies lacks participatory research with refugees. Indeed, in this journal scholars have advocated for a focus on how language as a source of capital is used to negotiate institutions and navigate immigration regimes (Gómez Cervantes 2023) while others have noted that a focus on the role of language in the strategies that refugees employ to enhance their resilience has been overlooked (Netto et al. 2022). This paper responds to each of these gaps by proposing that refugee-led research is best facilitated when refugees' standard and non-standard language varieties are a priority in research about resilience and digital literacies. The reason for this is that the majority of the world's refugees speak more than one language but, as Netto et al note, there has been a lack of attention on multilingual environments across migration studies (2022, 543) and refugee studies (Bloch and Hirsch 2017).

Access to digital literacies impacts refugees' decisions about countries of destination, routes, opportunities for integration as well as their longer term opportunities for education and employment (Netto et al. 2022; Aiyar et al. 2016). Furthermore, a focus on language use by refugees and the language(s) used by researchers supports critical reflection about the complex connections between different research spaces and the role of language(s) in shaping in shaping research relationships (Holmes, Reynolds, and Ganassin 2022), especially in the contexts of forced migration. It is even more pressing in the current context where research focuses on the needs or refugees and refugee policy worldwide (ibid). Bloch and Hirsch (2017) and Bloch (2020) have placed language as central to understanding the future of refugee studies, whether that is part of research within second-generation refugee background families or within the bordering practices of transnational refugees. At the same time, Canagarajah (2006; 2017) and many others have identified the need to explore the interface between migration and language, and multilingualism in particular, in understanding the needs, representations and challenges that policy makers, practitioners and refugees themselves face (see Capstick 2016).

Alongside this, we see shifts in global humanitarian responses and migration studies itself through an increasing emphasis on analysing resilience as well as attempts to understand the uses of mobile technology, including its role in enabling individuals to communicate with family and friends transnationally, and when accessing information and support (Dekker et al. 2018; Doná and Godin 2018; Ritchie 2022). These technologies also enable access to housing and employment (Martin-Shields et al. 2019), thereby exacerbating concerns over their role in extending existing inequalities within refugee communities regarding access to, and use of, digital technologies (Georgiou 2019; Leung 2018; Bastick and Mallet-Garcia 2022). Holmes, Reynolds, and Ganassin (2022) locate these inequalities within the politics and ethics of working with multilingual refugees and 'doing no harm.' At the same time, previous claims that hardly any research has examined the role of linguistic practices and literacies in either using these devices (Kaufmann 2018) or resilience-building (Netto et al. 2022) are no longer the case (Capstick and Delaney 2016; Capstick 2020; Capstick and Ateek 2024). While we agree with Campion (2018) that it is surprising in light of the central role that language and literacy play in enhancing resilience-building through maintaining connections with family and friends globally, as well as navigating their new environments, accessing services and finding employment, the current paper extends Netto et al's work in this journal which employs participatory action research methods involving refugees to explore how their use of smartphones shapes and is shaped by language and literacy. In doing

so, we propose ways forward for developing digital solutions (2022, 544) which account for the multilingual turn as an outcome of migration (May 2013; 2017).

In an attempt to enable refugee researchers to carry out their own research in their own communities, the study reported on here began with a participatory research project between universities in the UK and Ghana with the Council for At Risk Academics (CARA), a UK-funded charity which works in partnership with universities and research institutes to offer practical and financial help to academics in exile and their families and universities, by identifying the issues of inequity and power that are important to CARA researchers. This paper focuses on resilience strategies employed by refugees, including the choices refugees make to promote resilience (Sleijpen et al. 2017, 352) by paying particular attention to how such strategies relate to access to support (Udwan, Leurs, and Alencar 2020). We illustrate with interactional data how individuals adapted to the Covid pandemic by working with CARA on the analysis of CARA researchers' language and literacy practices. This enables us to pin down how strategies are socio-political in nature and involve interactions between migrants and the wider environment (Siriwardhana et al. 2021). In doing so, we follow the focus of Netto et al. (2022) in this journal to highlight the role of language in the strategies that refugees employ using smartphones in forced migration contexts (2022, 544–545). What we add here is the focus on how texts, languages and other semiotic resources cross the world as diverse temporal and geographical zones are brought closer together. People are shuttling across borders more frequently (Canagarajah 2006). What Canagarajah means here is that the mobility of people and ideas intensifies in relation to these changes, as our spatially rooted ways of conducting social ties, identities and community life appear or are granted less importance. Transcending localized, physically fixed and placed definitions, we are aware of fluid, changing and socially constructed ways in which those features are defined and respond to the need for building on the lived experience of refugees, and how distant and virtual forces shape identities, communities and social ties (ibid). In this context, language and literacy resources become important for how these social constructs and experiences are defined and practiced as space and time are compressed online. This compression has been described in terms of 'simulteneity' (Levitt and Schiller 2004, 1003) as demonstrated in the transnational literacy practices of migrants online (Capstick 2021). Beyond crossing boundaries, we are able to collapse boundaries, and bring to bear diverse ties, identities and communities on a single interaction or relationship.

## Language, power and practices in refugee-driven research about literacy

For Barton and Hamilton (2005), literacy practices are the purposeful way that individuals and groups deploy reading and writing in their everyday lives. Ivanič et al. have argued that literacy practices involve a complex negotiation of identities which are held together by values (2009, 50). For example, how refugees choose different literacies to stay in touch with family and friends will relate to the value they give these practices *before and after* migration. Their purpose for sharing information about Covid and using different language varieties, genres, modes and platforms is shaped by the identities and the literacy practices they maintain, take up or relinquish. This is because the meaning and value which individuals attach to literacy practices are shaped by their identities, which are in turn shaped by the values that they hold. In this study, the CARA

researchers draw on a range of genres in their literacy practices. For Swales (1990), genres are linguistically realized activity types which are created to realise a shared purpose. In this study, when refugee researchers check medical information online, the genre is the document and its expert medical terminology. Four main genres were identified in the data for this study: *government information* (though which country's government was not always identifiable); *science-related information* (related largely to a vaccine, medicine or hospital treatment); *news source* (where the news website or journalist was more prominent than science behind the news story), and fourthly Syria-related source (where a government was not named). Thus the literacy practices in this study cut across disciplines and genres, as well as across nation-states.

Drawing partly on this foundational literature on literacy practices, digital literacy has been defined as the varying ability of both children and adults to use digital technologies, with a focus on the technologies and less on the modalities of speaking and writing deployed when, for example, 'writing' on social media (Barton and Lee 2013). It refers not only to the applied technical skills necessary to use and access the internet, but also to the capacity to critically and confidently engage with the online environment. Digital literacy and smart phone use are seen as vital for refugees for digital documentation and identity (Ritchie 2022; Gilliland, 2017), and for connecting with governmental and non-governmental authorities and services (Traxler, 2018; Capstick and Delaney 2016). Mobile devices in this research are shown to be critical for refugees for access to information, language and knowledge enhancement (Ritchie 2022; Caidi and Allard, 2005). However, digital exclusion has also tended to focus on access, literacy, and use (Bastick and Mallet-Garcia 2022) where the term 'digitally excluded' hides the nuances of digital exclusion in the blurred boundaries of online and offline spaces. In the current study, we draw on Pegram (2018) and Netto et al who define digital literacy as the ability to use digital tools and resources but we also focus on the identities and values which refugees draw on when making decisions about how they share information. These scholars note Street's work (2003) and his literacy practices approach which sees literacies as fluid, being shaped by political, historical and socio-economic factors, and 'varying according to time and space, but also contested in relations of power' (Street 2003, 77). Here we include more recent work on transnational literacies in which we connect everyday literacy practices to multi-stranded social relations across two or more nation states (Warriner 2007; Capstick 2020) as these practices maintain as well as transform these social relations just as refugees' identities are transformed as they engage in their transnational digital literacies.

Also of concern in this paper is the extent to which digital literacy is increasingly seen as a determinant of health. Health literacy – the ability to obtain, read, understand and use health-care information to make appropriate/ informed health decisions (Johnson 2014) – is increasingly becoming an important skill for health-related information in the digital age. However, though digital health literacy may at first appear to be the convergence of digital literacy and health literacy, the reality is likely more complex because each competence domain of digital and health literacy may affect one or more competence domains of digital health literacy (Arias López et al. 2023). It can deepen health inequities in digitized healthcare settings as those without digital health tools, or who can't access them in a preferred language, will be disadvantaged during health crises. Hence it was important to the CARA researchers leading this study that we were able to discover how the symbolic power of dominant languages in migratory contexts

impacted access to information about Covid. A literacy practices approach therefore enables us to see what refugees do with literacy and how they deploy multilingual writings as a resource for multilingual refugee communities as part of their resilience strategies. In doing so, we are able to account for literacy resources in countries of origin as well as countries of settlement thereby extending the transnational lens in migration studies. This is particularly salient in the current global context because, despite the large amounts of media reporting about refugees and migrants, there has been inadequate reporting of how refugees produce and consume information, as well as mediate or broker written material for others as part of their digital literacies without resorting to language acquisition or language proficiency as well-worn responses to refugees' ability to manage complex information. Similar autonomous models of literacy are oriented to when refugees' ability to find work or fit into school and society are linked to the conflation of proficiency with social capital even though we know that (1) multilingual refugees draw on their polyglot repertoires to manage information and situations that many others who are 'proficient' are not able to manage and (2) that language and literacy are shared resources, with refugees and migrants drawing from their transnational networks to carry out tasks (Blommaert; Capstick 2016).

Recently theorised notions of space and scale in sociolinguistics that relate to proficiency or acquisition are part of a long critique of monoglot (using only one language) ideologies since Hymes (1968), through work on crossing (Rampton 2006; Harris 2006) to Blommaert's work on polyglot (using more than one language) repertoires (1999) which reveal how an over-reliance on measuring proficiency masks the strategies that refugee speakers and writers draw on in their multilingual repertoires. We can see how refugees can be polyglot in *one* language and how this polyglot repertoire is organised indexically in relation to layered and stratified spaces. It is not measurements of proficiency, often the focus in digital literacies research, that sociolinguists are therefore interested in, nor is the focus formal language learning, but rather a re-focusing on the specifics of how people use their multilingual repertoires to manage in complex migratory settings. Their informal learning, appropriation and mediation has been shown to be an important strategy for enhancing resilience (Capstick and Delaney 2016) as has translanguaging where refugees come together with IDPs and host communities (Capstick and Ateek 2024). Baynham has suggested that a literacy mediator is 'a person who makes his or her literacy skills available to others, on a formal or informal basis, for them to accomplish specific literacy purposes' (1995, p. 39), while later adding that the roles of translator of spoken language and literacy mediator in multilingual encounters can overlap (Baynham and Masing 2001). For Baynham and Masing, in encounters such as these, literacy mediation means not only code-switching between languages to assist those who are unfamiliar with those languages, but also switching between oral, written and visual modes. The literacy mediator therefore translates between codes (e.g. Kurdish and English) and modes (e.g. moving between online and offline) when reading, writing and speaking on behalf of others. However, Gere and Robbins (1996) has used the term cultural brokerage to describe what happens when the power relations between dominant and non-dominant groups are asymmetrical and the discourses invoked by the former are unfamiliar to the latter. In the analysis below, when the talk moves far away from an implicit text toward the discourses the texts invoke, the term cultural brokerage will be employed. This is because a cultural broker is

able to translate dominant discourses relating to, for example, Covid, while a literacy mediator may be good at sharing information but not able to straddle the cultural contexts which grants them and their families' access to powerful genres.

To put this within the context of the paper, refugees face specific challenges related to the way that information is shared that require consideration in COVID-19 readiness and response operations and to avoid 'infodemic' among language minorities (Reddy and Gupta 2020; Sengupta 2022) particularly when refugees face constraints to meeting together with humanitarian actors who may have on occasion provided literacy mediation about health information (Capstick 2020). With these constraints in mind, and the knowledge that the refugees in this study draw extensively on their social media networks, the approach taken in this paper is to combine the study of practices with the analysis of texts in order to understand how this involved families' access to information in a range of languages.

## Refugee-led research during the Covid-19 pandemic

As the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic intensified in multilingual refugee communities in the Global South, preparedness through digital solutions was more important than ever. Many refugees faced specific challenges related to the way that information is shared. Getting the right information in the right language is central to COVID-19 readiness and response operations and to avoid 'infodemic' among language minorities (Reddy and Gupta 2020; Sengupta 2022) as part of the challenges posed by linguistic diversity in times of crisis (Piller, Zhang, and Li 2022). The spread of misinformation in refugee settings posed a serious threat to refugees and their families as well as humanitarian workers. UNHCR suggested that in areas where access to government services, such as medical care was limited, there was a pressing need for international cooperation to protect the rights of vulnerable groups (Crawley 2021). With this in mind, the analysis which follows explores how displaced people drew on literacy mediators in their networks to make information accessible in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. We focus in particular on refugees from Syria given that the United Nations raised concerns over the widespread transmission of the new coronavirus in conflict-affected areas inside Syria, where healthcare facilities were under pressure and limited testing was obscuring the real extent of the pandemic. We set up the *Covid-19, migration and multilingualism* (*CV19MM*) project to bring together 12 CARA academics with scholars in universities in the UK and Ghana to help establish how refugees were sharing, translating and mediating information about Covid at a time when Syria had reported nearly 2,500 cases of COVID-19.

The 12 participants in this study had family, friends and colleagues in both the free areas of Syria (not under the control of the Assad regime) as well as inside the Assad-controlled areas but were themselves displaced in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and other cities. In this project we identified the online literacy practices that Syrian academics in exile turned to in order to share information about Covid-19 across their networks. We examine their networks for evidence of the kinds of collaboration which enable them to share information and explore the mediation of online texts where the boundaries between 'formal' and 'informal' language and literacy use are increasingly blurred as people come together online. We see individuals' and families' ability to cope with

these changing conditions as firmly within the resilience strategies we outlined in the previous section, and specifically within the parameters of how this resilience is enhanced when it comes to sharing and negotiating health information. Discussed in detail below, we see this study as refugee-led as CARA researchers identified the research questions and worked with non-CARA academics to design research methods training to equip CARA participants with the skills to carry out their own research in their own communities. Through guided research training in carrying out fieldwork online, the community researchers developed research skills in data collection and data analysis. The data range from informal social media postings to formal health information source material, as well as interview data about the talk that goes on around these texts and the social practices and networks of which they are part.

## Methodology

The ethical approach taken in this study responds to the legal precarity, the criminalization and politicization of migration, immobility, and power asymmetries (Clark-Kazak 2021) in that we adhere to the ethical principles of consent, privacy, and harm reduction identified by the CARA refugee researchers (CRRs) at the outset of the study. CRRs identified the main research aim and research questions prior to gaining consent from the lead university's Ethics Committee and gained informed consent from the participants. Recruitment was advertised across the CARA Syria programme and 12 researchers volunteered, all of whom were experienced researchers. These researchers followed CARA guidance about consent and data management and all data were anonymized on the database, drawing heavily on researcher vignettes to explore ethical decision-making and the ethics of digital ethnography (Tagg, Lyons, Hu and Rock 2017). Sensitive to the ethics and politics of working multilingually, the key questions generated by discussion among CARA researchers were: how do researchers negotiate the multilingual needs of participants and stakeholders particularly when different language varieties are used for different purposes in different at different stages of the research process by refugees who may have experienced trauma? In response, the CV19MM project was carried out largely online during the early stages of the pandemic. The Academic Research Team (ART) made up of an academic from a UK university, and academic from a university in Ghana and a CARA refugee researcher built the website and selected the research methods in consultation with the CRRs. Varieties of Arabic, Kurdish and English were used by the ART though individual participants also provided translations of their data entries. The rationale for deciding which elements of the research were carried out by the ART and which by the CRRs was based on the disciplinary expertise of those involved and was guided by the research questions identified by the CRRs, not on proficiency in English which is often the case.

For this project, we could see that written translation of data collection and reporting documents was primarily from Standard British English to Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). This included different varieties of Arabic and Kurdish, particularly when translating our research tools and most of the project administration documents. This meant that there was little interpretation required during data collection as teams carried out research in a language from their repertoire. In doing so, our digital ethnography is within the ethnographic tradition of a literacy practices approach, incorporating

language online (Barton and Lee 2013). This approach shares similarities with the foundational work of Hine (2000; 2008) and Pink (2012) who take a multimodal approach to researching literacy online but in the current study we take a closer look at the wider literacy practices of refugee researchers. This ethnographic approach involves the examination of particular events in order to understand broader practices. However, we were unable to include observation due to the restrictions of social distancing and lock down. We feel that we were still able to take an ecological approach to understanding the literacy practices of displaced people by accepting that all activities are situated and that people's actions both affect and are affected by the environment they are in during social distancing.

After the research questions were designed by the CGRRs (Phase 1), Phase 2 involved online research methods training for the CGRRs, provided by ART. A university-funded website hosted the *Covid-19 & Digital Literacies Project* webpages. It consisted of material and resources as well as pages with information and links on the collaborating partners. The website database was the main facility through which the project's partners' community researchers submitted their logbook data entries and social media texts to the project team, which were all anonymised. Anonymized interviews in translation were also submitted. Other sections of the website included a section with research methods training materials and video recordings, researchers' guides and a facility for online video conferencing and ethical procedures.

During phase 3, ten refugee participants recorded data from 12/6/2020 to 19/9/2020. Each participant kept a fourteen-day word-processed logbook, in which the participant described their literacy practices (including platforms which included instant messaging, social media and online activities). The researchers logged into the website every day and selected two texts from these online activities. The first text related to social media interactions about Covid-19 while the second text related to wider digital literacies.

In the next phase, the logbooks were coded for resilience strategies by the ART. Online interviews and follow-up interviews were carried out through Zoom with the CRRs by th ART. While a close observation of the social media texts was important in understanding textual features, insights from the interviews and logbooks were coded to help us explore resilience strategies.

Phase 5 involved the analysis of discourse topics in the interview data and logbook entries by the author of this paper. This was carried out by identifying the discourse topics relating to mediation of Covid-related information in interview transcripts. Following Krzyzanowski (2011), the basic analytic category *discourse topic* is defined as 'expressed by several sentences in discourse … by larger segments of the discourse or by the discourse as a whole' (Van Dijk, 1984, p. 56). A discourse topic is therefore defined as the salient idea or theme that underlies the meaning of a series of sentences, that is, they organize the interviews thematically. As these interviews were primarily framed by questions about the participants' mediation, all the discourse topics relate to mediation, the macro-topic. Parts of the interviews where the participants talked about the reading and writing that they engaged in regarding Covid were first identified, then sub-topics related to the resilience strategies, those of self-support, health and identity management, were selected *to identify those parts of the data where participants talked about mediation and resilience.* The parts of the interviews related to the three sub-topics were then analyzed by the author of this paper for what the participants said about

literacy mediation and how it related to these forms of resilience though the latter did not involve explicit reference to the term resilience itself. *This meant working quantitatively by looking at the number of references to resilience within the context of mediation.* Hybridity across the different genres (e.g. medical information) was included in the discourse analysis of mediation and resilience with a specific focus on how practices cut across genres and how hybrid practices were a response to moving across different online platforms, devices and language varieties.

## Analysis

In this part of the analysis, the analysis of the discourse topics about literacy mediation is presented first as these illustrate the recurring themes across the data, what participants told us about the varieties of Kurdish, Arabic and English that how they drew on in the different genres in their literacy practices. Next we include a vignette about literacy mediation and end with a vignette about cultural brokerage, both of which are illustrations of how forms of mediation occur at the detailed level of interaction.

## Discourse topics

### Discourse sub-topic 1: literacy mediation for self-support

The majority of participants in the CV19MM project described literacy mediation oriented to a discourse of self-support. When orienting to this discourse, Fatah explained. 'I couldn't rely on my colleagues so I had to find a way myself' particularly when it came to translation. Those orienting to this discourse described how their academic studies required them to not only read a great deal online, but also to translate from US and British English to Modern Standard Arabic as 'the sources, they're in English.' When asked how difficult it was to then translate for others, we were told by one participant:

> It can depend on the technical language, how much I know and how much they know, which can be more than you think. Google is better than it was but then I check it with [friend] because she knows the science stuff but isn't so good with the practical stuff about prevention. Some are more careful than others

Literacy mediation of Covid information often begins with mediators using their existing skills developed to support themselves in their online work, but then expanding these skills to support others in their network, either asynchronously or synchronously as in the following example:

> I have a lot of pages open and I just put it all in Google and then go back through it with my friends

Amin explained how he had learned how to use translation tools on the internet as part of his academic literacy practices, alone, by working on his computer. It was his computer-based literacies which he most often referred to, learning informally by experimenting on his computer then his laptop without the help of others but using some of the knowledge he had picked up on his research programme as well as 'experimenting'. This type of informal learning is a frequent aspect of developing digital literacies (Barton and Lee 2013). Amin explained how teaching himself literacies related to his academic work

'help me to become an independent researcher'. Self-support is therefore the first step in building resilience as well as in building the expertise to mediate as Amin went on to explain how he shared these skills with others which he saw as benefitting his family for the first time:

> Now you ask, I'd never thought of it, but it's really the first time I can see a benefit of research for my family

### Discourse sub-topic 2: literacy mediation for health

Unsurprisingly in a project about health information and Covid, all the participants in the project described literacy mediation oriented to a discourse of health. Negotiating the written material for the participants involved moving across multiple genres including science publications, health websites, governmental Covid information websites, social media posts about staying healthy and, most common, direct messages and instant messaging, such as WhatsApp, about the preventative measures, warnings, advice and guidance from different sources across the world. The dominant language varieties that participants sourced information were standard varieties of English, though not always originating in English-speaking countries. Given the numbers of Syrian refugees who had settled in Germany, English was still dominant when sharing information out of that country or English translations of German-original texts was used. This kind of mobility in the language practices of the literacy mediators was an important aspect of identity management too, discussed below, and appeared to go hand in hand with the hybridity across genres.

Alaa in Gaziantep described how she consumed ever-increasing amounts of information about Covid from UK government websites while comparing these to what she was reading on Arabic-language media sources and English-language media sources. She often had multiple sources open on her laptop and smartphone at the same time. She told us that she would use the smart phone mainly for reading and use the comment function on Facebook for writing comments. We see this as one of the forms of literacy mediation for health that the literacy mediators engaged in. Alaa's posts, which she shared with us in the data base, used English as well as Arabic. In doing so, she enhanced her own resilience by developing her self-support strategies while then going on to share this information with others in her network, thereby enhancing family members health-related resilience. She makes her posts accessible to people with low levels of education as well as people with much higher levels of education by drawing on a range of sources from across the government, scientific and health genres, as well as across different language varieties.

In such instances, the literacy mediators translanguaged when they used multiple language varieties in the same post, that is, they used standard and non-standard varieties of Arabic as well as health terminology in standard varieties of English. This, Fateh told us, not only helped his own understanding of the information but also helped him forge stronger links with his family as he used varieties familiar to them:

> I showed her [my wife] the websites in English and she told me what she thought about them in Arabic, which was the first time she really knew my work

This analysis illustrates how multilingual literacy mediation extends beyond self-support and health strategies and becomes part of identity management discussed below as it appeared across the data that participants saw this as their duty as wives, daughters, sons and fathers, particularly when no longer living in their country of origin.

### Discourse sub-topic 3: literacy mediation for identity management

All of the participants who provided data oriented to a discourse of identity management. That is, when describing why they mediated for family and friends, all the participants explained that mediation went hand-in-hand with fulfilling the responsibilities of being a son, daughter, wife, husband, father, mother, friend or colleague. Participants described how they drew on their professional and academic identities when developing literacy practices which enabled them to collaborate with other academics, but they signalled the importance of fulfilling kinship responsibilities when describing how they worked hard to share information with family and friends across the world using social media technologies to make sense of medical genres. Mostafa and Yasser explained how their literacy practices changed as the affordances of their smartphones enabled them to access medical genres in their homes, though this was often at the mercy of their internet connection and poor bandwidth. They described using non-standard Arabic with family on social media which they 'translated' from standard forms of Arabic. Incorporating these non-standard varieties of Arabic enabled them to easily incorporate guidance about Covid into their communications by checking information with others in their network.

Alaa makes her online literacies available to her mother in Syria when she showed her how to use Google Translate:

> It starts with figuring out how to translate formal Arabic from the Idlib webpages on Google then how to check it all in informal Arabic chatting with my Zoom with my [smart]phone

It is in this movement across language varieties, platforms and genres that we see hybridity first at the individual level when Alaa orients to a discourse topic of self-support and then this hybridity is maximised for the benefit of her family when she deploys her online literacies at the transnational level to her global network. Alaa described how, over a period of three weeks, she used the details from the Idlib source about social distancing at a time when those measures had not been introduced inside Assad-controlled Syria. She also explained how the instant messaging feature of *Facebook* was used for maintaining relations with cousins and friends inside Syria as well as with immediate family as lockdown gave her more time to spend interacting with family online:

> Covid gave us time to talk together about my work and things we'd never really got into before

Alaa was not alone here. Other participants explained how their *Facebook* posts enabled them to maintain relationships with their mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters and in carrying out activities relating to sharing information, they were fulfilling their roles as daughters and sons, brothers and sisters.

In a final database entry, Yacoub in Turkey explained that he was referring to his role as a father to sons inside Syria and Germany when he shared information on Facebook,

discussed in detail below. This was the most direct reference to his identity as a father in the interview data. Yacoub chooses to use standard and non-standard varieties of Arabic but it is his use of non-standard Arabic that signals his identity as the father of a 'dialect-speaking son' and perhaps also a signal for his identity as a Syrian using a Syrian variety of Arabic, which he had explained earlier in the interview that he would not use with his academic colleagues.

Understanding the literacy practices here as part of the participants' resilience strategies enables an interpretation which cuts across discourse topics and is shaped by the social, political and historical forces of forced migration. In the final section of the analysis, interactional data of Yacoub's cultural brokerage is examined in detail.

## Yacoub's cultural brokerage

In this section of the analysis we analyse in detail the interview data with the participant who spoke in the most detail about their role mediating information about Covid. We illustrate the connections between the kind of textually mediated community of which Yacoub is part with his CARA peers and how the mediation of information across different genres in Yacoub's digital literacies provided access to literacies related to Covid-19 and in doing so, enhanced the family's resilience. We see how digital literacies proliferate in the lives of refugees outside Syria alongside non-refugee family members inside Syria as documents form part of the digital environment in which the meanings of writing and reading enhance resilience.

Yacoub arrived in Gaziantep, Turkey, as a refugee from Syria in 2017. Most of the people in his Gaziantep network were Syrian and several had obtained Turkish nationality. Some were new refugees from Syria. Yacoub had worked for the World Health Organisation for 2 years in Gaziantep. By August, the numbers of infections were rising in the free areas inside Syria. His brothers inside Syria were only able to work online and his youngest son finished his high school certificate online. His second son was in Idlib University taking an English course online with a teacher in Gaziantep as part of his medical degree. He was 20 years old at the time and had been studying medicine for 2 years in Arabic with some English. His eldest son was a refugee in Germany where he learned and studied in German. All the family members regularly posted in a family WhatsApp group. When they found information about Covid they would send it to additional family members in the WhatsApp group in standard and non-standard varieties of Arabic, English and German: *all family members translate, de-code and mediate for each other regardless of proficiency in a named language.*

Yacoub explained that he used the non-standard varieties of Arabic when writing online to his father with information about his father's diabetes, which we believed enhanced identity management for this family. His mother and father did not speak or read English as they had never needed to learn English in Syria. The literacy required to be able to access health information online was not a priority for his parents since, he explained, there were always people who could help when reading and writing were required and it became clear that he saw it as his duty as a son to provide this practice. Family identities are, therefore, central to the take up of digital literacies for enhancing resilience. Yacoub explained that for over ten years he had been using the Internet to find research about agronomy (his specialism) which he then put to use searching for

information about his father's diabetes. This included using search engines and becoming familiar with the academic jargon as well as academic discourses of his research community, as he often found himself on websites which used technical language in English which he found difficult to understand. When looking at health settings, Wodak (1996) found that in institutional discourse such as that found in the doctor's surgery, those entering the institution from outside are unable to act on their own initiative and must react to the information received from professionals. This form of discursive control, of who has access to discourses about health, can be seen in Yacoub's health literacy practices. Yacoub learned to overcome this discursive control as he learnt to search for information and generate his own understanding. As a result of this agency, Yacoub was able to understand websites about diabetes, which were well outside his research field, check the information using WhatsApp with his two sons who were training to be medics, and translate and share information with his father inside Syria thereby gaining access to these powerful discourses. Yacoub's family inside Syria drew on Yacoub's digital literacies as a set of resources which enhance the family's resilience to the health implications of Covid-19. The specific digital literacies which he had developed in relation to looking after his family *from a distance* were informally acquired practices which drew on skills related to research but which he adjusted to the specific situation and genres of the Covid-19 pandemic. Yacoub did this with the help of his own sons who lived in Syria and Germany. This continuation of the duties that they performed when they lived in Syria illustrates the strength of self-support and identity management which cross national borders when refugee family members come together with non-refugee members in transnational networks.

The focus of Yacoub's posts was information about Covid originating from the following sources: a doctor in Idlib working as Director of the Idlib health centre in Northwest Syria; Idlib Health Centre advice; and many YouTube videos from doctors in the US which Yacoub translated and posted using instant messaging and the share function on *Facebook*. His initial advice was about staying home and wearing a mask if they left the house but the information became more complex as the pandemic spread. Yacoub explained that 'after researching the vocabulary on this topic I learn it then find ways to make the ideas useful to my father'. Yacoub also shared advice about handwashing and videos from doctors. With friends, Yacoub explained that he shared more technical information in Standard Arabic and sometimes in English – he had approximately 20 people in his network who he felt were confident in English otherwise 'it is Arabic 100%'. He explained he was able to do this because 'I'd been moving back and forwards between the original and the new information, between the English and the Arabic, between the research papers and the Covid posts'. We interpreted this as meaning that Yacoub was able to extend his literacy practices from the searches he carried out for his academic literacies and put them to use for Covid-related literacies. However, as Yacoub extended his literacy practices to tackle the health-related literacies of the Covid-19 information, he had also to engage with the dominant discourses of health institutions such as the Idlib Health Centre, and in doing so his role shifted to decoding health discourses by straddling both dominant and non-dominant cultural contexts when unpacking discourses (Capstick 2016). In the example below, Yacoub goes further than translating from English to Arabic, he also 'unpacks' or decodes discourses about health. Where first he had used WhatsApp messages (social media genres) about

diabetes (health genres) to translate 'blood pressure and diabetes' ضغط الدم وداء السكري in formal Arabic to ضغط الدم وداء السكري, on this occasion he used a similar approach. After reading the website from the Idlib Health Centre (government health guidance) about how Covid transmission could be prevented by wearing a mask, and knowing that his father did not wear a mask, he first checked the information with his son who was training to be a doctor inside Syria. His son used the words in Modern Standard Arabic. He then checked the same information with his son who was training to be a doctor in Germany who replied in English. Yacoub collated this information, and in doing so expanded his multilingual literacy practices to incorporate these terms. He then translated the Standard Arabic and the Standard English into the non-standard variety of Arabic that he knew his father would understand and he shared this with his father on WhatsApp using terms that he had already explained to his father from their conversations on WhatsApp about his father's diabetes, terms such as 'medicine' (علاج) حبات which he then checked his father's understanding by asking 'do you implement measures to prevent infection with it?' which he felt was more appropriate for a father/son relationship in his village as it is 'more of a question but in the informal it is a recommendation':

عبديرو بالكن منشان ماتنصابو

Yacoub added, 'sometimes I translate the post or the articles myself or organize, if translate is not suitable or not right or is not true or does not fit my relationships with people' which illustrates the importance of those family relationships and identities when mediating texts.

## Discussion

By critically prioritising standard and non-standard varieties of Arabic, and different genres of written information, in the vignettes analysed here, we have gone some way to providing a reflexive account of our field work decisions that does not deny refugees' multilingualism. This has also provided multilingual refugees with the opportunity to engage with research about digital literacies. In doing so, our study responds to the concern (see Araújo e Sá and pinto 2020) about how to deal with the linguistic challenges of monolingual norms applied to research within migration studies. Institutional norms can prioritise certain knowledges, epistemologies, and methodologies, thereby silencing the voice of those we work with (Connell 2014; Holmes, Reynolds, and Ganassin 2022). By designing a refugee-led study which explores the indistinct boundaries between online and offline, we see how refugees' transnational practices converged in the participants' digital literacies. Distinctions between different digital spaces blurred as literacy practices from research settings, health settings and the wider family network converge in Yacoub's life online during the pandemic. Different family members, as well as different academic and professional colleagues, brought together different literacy practices which mingled as genres generated and spread across multiple national borders, creating new practices related Covid. Whereas Kalman found that family members of different generations take up new opportunities to participate in reading and writing events and to learn new literacy practices, in the current study we see how members of Yacoub's network scaffold each other's literacy when sharing information about diabetes and Covid. Drawing on Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, we understand power in this

context in terms of 'unequal role relations' (2009: 106) between actors in the research process. As such, power represents the ability to have your own interpretation or view accepted and acted upon over somebody else's whether by force or coercion or through persuasion, influence and consent (Fairclough 2001). In our findings, we saw how a range of strategies are used to accept or act upon about health, which included searching, translating and mediating web sources, strategies which ranged from the informal and incidental strategies related to academic research. These strategies are textually mediated as they rely on gaining knowledge of the technical language by engaging with texts in standard and non-standard Arabics such as those on websites.

Yacoub, as a literacy mediator for his parents, worked with his sons to explain the English information that he found on the Internet about diabetes. He developed health-related literacy practices which became central to the family's ability to cope with the ever-changing situation as well as provided a source of advice on how to cope with the day-to-day challenges of managing diabetes. Thus, literacy mediators like Yacoub not only need to understand the bureaucratic terminology of healthcare but also need to be able to negotiate what Wodak calls the 'power registers' (1996: 40). Wodak describes these as the linguistic behaviour, or symbolic capital in Bourdieu's terms, of the powerful elite which is invested in knowledge expressed in specific institutional genres. Yacoub negotiated the power registers instantiated in academic texts and texts related to Covid.

## Conclusion

The analysis of refugees' digital literacies in this paper sought to shed light on the role of multilingualism in the transnational communicative practices of refugees' creative responses to mediating Covid-related information online as part of their resilience strategies. The paper sought to provide analyses of how genres blur in transnational digital literacies and how hybrid practices converged in the health literacies of transnational refugee networks. We aligned work exploring language and human migration in today's globalized world with work relating to the crossing of national borders as well as the mediation of symbolic boundaries around 'national' and 'local' language varieties by illustrating how smartphones are seen as a tool for literacy mediation and resilience. We saw how family members deploy their literacies for self-support and health-related resilience strategies, but we also discovered how these literacy practices provide access to multiple genres, medical services and support networks.

The reason for dealing with language in this way foregrounds refugees' agency when overcoming the constraints of sharing complex information as well as when mediating different varieties. In doing so, we integrated work from applied linguistics into the interdisciplinary perspectives from geography, migration studies, sociology and anthropology that constitute refugee studies. Some of these applications relate to how constructs such as language, identity and borders are being re-theorized in response to increased mobility. Others relate to the ethics and politics of researching multilingually. Following Holmes, Reynolds, and Ganassin (2022, 1) we foregrounded researchers experiences of the political and ethical dimensions of multilingual research because, in contexts of forced migration, languages and their speakers often come into conflict with political regimes in addition to other forms of power, such as the power registers in this study.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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