

# Understanding language contact: A comprehensive methodological approach to studying the Volga Germans in Argentina

Anna Ladilova\*

**Abstract.** The current article provides an overview of the mixed-methods design, including online research, qualitative interviews, quantitative questionnaires, visual documentation and participant observation in three Argentine provinces, applied in the context of the research project “Collective Identity Construction in Migration: A Case Study of the Language Contact Situation of Volga Germans in Argentina” (Ladilova 2013). The aim of this study was to conduct a formal analysis of language contact phenomena, with a special focus on transference and code-switching, as well as an in-depth exploration of the construction of collective identity. From the extensive dataset of 96 narrative interviews and almost 450 questionnaires, the final analysis focuses on 12 narrative interviews and 381 questionnaires, offering a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of language contact and cultural preservation among Volga Germans in Argentina. I will discuss the processes of (a) developing the methodology during the study, (b) selecting the data that I finally decided to include in the analysis, and (c) bringing together the different types of data in the article.

**Keywords.** Volga Germans; language contact; sociolinguistic methodology; field study

**1. Introduction.** When studying language contact contexts for which data are scarce, researchers usually need to get in touch with the target population. Certainly, in the digital age, there are many ways of achieving this, apart from the classic field study. In addition, there are different methodological approaches to data collection besides interviews and questionnaires. Research data can also be found in corpora, which are freely available for research. Regardless of how the data is collected or accessed, the question remains as to how the different data sets can be brought together to provide a coherent picture of the research question. In addition, there is a need to select ‘useful’ data and decide which analytical approaches to apply in order to evaluate and interpret them. In what follows, I will give an overview of the challenges of data collection and analysis, which I hope will prove helpful not only to students conducting research in the field of language contact studies, but also to researchers in the field who may find new inspiration for their research practice. I will do this by taking the example of a study on the language contact situation of Volga German in Argentina.

**2. Socio-historical background.** While there are numerous studies on language contact between German, Spanish, and Russian in different social contexts, the language contact situation of Volga Germans in Argentina is under-researched, studied by only four authors (Schmidt 1997; Hipperdinger 2005; Cipria 2007; Ladilova 2015) and recently by a research team (Prediger et al. 2023). This latest study focuses on the development of a multimodal corpus for the study of German as a minority language in Argentina (DiA). This corpus is currently under construction and aims to represent the current as well as the historical situation of the speakers of the group through multimodal data. In addition to questionnaire-based interviews (oral), the corpus includes letters and elicited written testimonies (written) and linguistic landscape image data (visual). The

\* Author: Anna Ladilova, Justus-Liebig-University Gießen (anna.ladilova@romanistik.uni-giessen.de)

other studies mentioned above are also based on transcribed interview data as well as questionnaires and aim at describing the language contact situation of Volga Germans in Argentina from a sociolinguistic point of view, thus also focusing on language attitudes.

The Volga Germans are in a unique situation of social multilingualism due to their double history of migration, first from German-speaking countries to Russia, where they settled on the Volga River in 1763, and then to Argentina in 1874. Despite living outside German-speaking areas for more than 250 years and being exposed to Russian in Russia and Spanish in Argentina, the group has maintained parts of its original culture and language due to a conservative lifestyle until 1950. Only after 1950 did contact with mainstream Argentine society increase to the point where it became necessary to learn Spanish. As a result of increased contact with the Spanish-speaking majority society and the experience of discrimination due to poor knowledge of Spanish, the German varieties gradually gave way to Spanish. However, since the centenary of the arrival of the Volga Germans in Argentina in 1978, there has been a growing interest among the members of the studied community in preserving and transmitting their own culture and language, indicating an ethnic revival of the group. This led to linguistic loyalty to the German variety (Cipria 2007), which therefore acquired a strong covert prestige among the group members, while Spanish retained its overt prestige as the majority language in Argentina. In addition, lexical elements of Russian, such as *pirok* 'a filled roll' or *nuzhnik* 'a toilet outside the house', although often not recognized as such by the speakers themselves, are part of the linguistic repertoire of the group studied (Schmidt 1997). This situation leads to a linguistic hybridity that reflects the cultural composition of Volga Germans in Argentina and fulfills socio-discursive functions, such as marking group identity (through the use of the German variety) or referring to the majority society (through the use of Spanish) (Ladilova 2013).

**3. Developing the methodology for the study of language contact.** The language contact situation of Volga Germans in Argentina was the subject of my doctoral research, which I carried out between 2008 and 2012. There were only two other preliminary studies on this topic, both of which had similar methodological approaches involving interviews and questionnaires collected decades before my own study and aimed at describing the language contact situation in structural and sociolinguistic terms. Both collected their data in the Volga German villages in the south of the province of Buenos Aires. There was also a smaller study by Alicia Cipria in 2007 on language loyalty in a village in the province of Entre Ríos. Otherwise, there has been no (socio)linguistic research on the Volga Germans in Argentina, and many settlements have remained unstudied. Moreover, there was no comparative study. Therefore, I decided to collect my data in different Volga German villages in the provinces of Entre Ríos and Buenos Aires, as well as in the province of La Pampa, which are the main settlement areas of Volga Germans in Argentina. I chose Volga German villages with a population of between 1500 and 2000, of which about 90% identified themselves as Volga Germans. Rural settlements were chosen because both the pilot study (Ladilova 2011) and the preliminary literature on the subject (Schmidt 1997; Hipperdinger 2005; Cipria 2007) confirm that the minority language is better preserved in these settlements than in urban Volga German communities.

The methodological framework employed in this study reflects a phased and holistic approach based on a method triangulation (Flick 2008: 80ff.), combining both quantitative and qualitative methods in various stages that brought about various types of data, as shown in Table 1.

Stage	Data collected
I Qualitative: preliminary study - 2008	Online research E-mail and Skype interviews
II Quantitative: Pilot study - 2009	Online questionnaires
III Quantitative + Qualitative: Field study - 2010	Questionnaires Interviews Participant observation Picture story (Lost Son) Word lists and pictures (Slavisms) Photographs of people, places, and objects
IV Qualitative: Follow up study - 2011	Online communication

Table 1. Overview of the methodological framework

As part of the qualitative preliminary research in 2008, I conducted research of the online presence of Volga Germans in Argentina, including blogs, social media (especially Facebook), Volga German associations and other websites dedicated to the history and genealogy of Volga Germans in Argentina. I also wrote e-mails to 15 of these Volga German associations and blog authors that I found online and received nine replies. Six of them became regular e-mail and Skype contacts with whom I exchanged information about the current situation of Volga Germans in Argentina in the sense of qualitative open interviews. Establishing meaningful connections with the Volga German community in Argentina was a critical aspect of the study, as establishing regular contacts proved indispensable for the subsequent phases of data collection.

In the second phase, the pilot study was conducted in August 2009 using the online questionnaire program LimeSurvey. The questionnaire was designed with methodological reference to the work of Yolanda Hipperdinger (2005), Göz Kaufmann (1997), Arndt Schmidt (1997), and Angela Urban (2004) and was sent to members of the Volga German community in Argentina via the mailing list “ger-rus-arg-l-request@rootsweb.com”. In addition to demographic data and information on the migration background of the informants, their language skills and use, as well as their attitudes towards the languages and speaker groups in contact were analyzed. The survey was conducted in both German and Spanish, with respondents able to choose their preferred language. The predominantly closed online survey, in which the answer options are predetermined in contrast to an open survey, allowed the planned data collection methods to be refined on site, while a few open questions helped to further develop the hypotheses (Ladilova 2011). Even though the use of online questionnaires and mailing lists targets only a certain part of population, it allows to easily elicit quite a lot of data in short time, which is already available on the computer for qualitative analysis, without the need to travel to the country of interest. After analyzing the 64 questionnaires collected during the pilot study, the third phase of fieldwork was conducted in Argentina from February to April 2010. First, a one-week preliminary study was carried out,

during which the survey instruments (especially the interview guide) could be checked and completed in the field. Subsequently, 96 semi-structured interviews were recorded with a digital audio recorder and 450 written sociolinguistic questionnaires (which were developed based on the pilot study, which was however, shortened significantly) were collected. Sampling was carried out using the snowball method (Milroy & Milroy 1992), with the selectivity mitigated by the quota method (Albert & Koster 2002). The underlying categories were age, gender and place of residence, but not the language skills of the interviewees (e.g. knowledge of Volga German), as the aim was to obtain as representative a picture as possible of the language skills of the analyzed community. In addition, data collection was supplemented by visual documentation and participant observation (Spranz-Fogasy & Deppermann 2001). This was made possible by the fact that I stayed and lived with Volga Germans throughout my stay in Argentina, which allowed me to immerse myself in their family and community life. The contacts made during the preliminary study were essential, as they helped me to get in touch with the inhabitants of the villages where I conducted my research. In addition, the key contacts also accompanied me during the fieldwork and sometimes helped by distributing questionnaires, taking pictures and in some cases even conducting interviews.

The sociolinguistic questionnaires were distributed to 450 people and of those 385 were returned. It provided quantitative data that formed the basis for subsequent analyses. The questionnaires covered a range of topics, including language skills, acquisition, use, attitudes towards languages and contact groups, influence of time spent in Russia on culture, social networks, self-perception, knowledge of history, and migration-related factors such as origin of ancestors from Russia and Germany, reasons for emigration, and personal background (origin, place of residence, education, etc.). I found it particularly fruitful to distribute the questionnaires in school classes, asking the pupils to take several with them and to ask their family members and neighbors to fill them in. I often gave a short introduction to my research or a more detailed talk on the sociolinguistic situation of the Volga Germans in Argentina and returned a few days later to collect the filled-out questionnaires.

The 96 semi-structured interviews lasted between 30 and 100 minutes each and had the aim of exploring in greater depth the issues raised in the questionnaire, including aspects of language use, the meaning of places, groups or people, languages, contact cultures and other topics that arose during the interview. Most interviews were conducted with one person at a time, and even though I am not a Volga German myself, I was perceived as an insider by the interviewees, since I came from Germany and have Russian origin. I used the language(s) spoken by the interviewees, however, motivating the use of Volga German by asking the questions in German. Moreover, the German speaking interviewees were asked to retell the story “The Parable of the Prodigal Son”, known by everybody in the community and widely used in research on Romance linguistics, using pictures, in order to gain a more comparable insight into language skills. To assess lexical transfer as well as attitudes towards borrowings (particularly from Russian), word lists in Spanish and pictures depicting those words that were known or believed to be borrowed from Russian were included in the data collection process. The pictures of the story as well as of the borrowings were comprehensive for the interviewees and the latter represented an older snapshot in time, since they explicitly elicited words brought from Russia. Two booklets were kept containing metadata about each interview, including design, location, time and main themes as well as my observations from the participant observation. This meticulous record-keeping facilitated nuanced analysis of the data. Visual documentation, including photographs of people, places and things, captured contextual elements that emerged during the data collection process and added depth to the overall

analysis. Written consent, including contact details, was obtained from participants, with subsequent anonymization ensuring that ethical considerations were met.

After analyzing the data, I conducted a final qualitative follow-up study in 2011 via e-mail and Skype, which helped me in the process of interpreting the data.

Especially in a language contact setting, it might be a good idea to conduct group discussions instead of or in addition to interviews. Particularly when the interviewer is not present, but allows the discussion to take place using, for example, question cards, the spontaneous use of language within the group can be documented in a “supervised setting”. Moreover, the interactive process of meaning making can provide insight into the multidimensionality of language attitudes and social belonging.

**4. Selection and bringing together of different data types.** Of all the types of data I had collected, it was clear that the questionnaires and interviews had to be included in the analysis. The 96 interviews conducted during the field study were, however, too many to be transcribed manually. For this reason, three Volga German villages were selected for comparison in the interview analysis: the Protestant village of San Antonio and the Catholic village of Santa Anita in the province of Entre Ríos, as well as the Catholic village of Santa María in the province of Buenos Aires. This choice of location is based, on the one hand, on the fact that these three villages have preserved their original traditions, and thus also their varieties of German, to a greater extent than the other Volga German settlements, which is partly due to their geographical location, far away from major transport routes (Kopp 1979; Weyne 1987; Schmidt 1997; Hipperdinger 2005). In addition, these settlements have different linguistic and religious backgrounds, which are particularly fruitful for comparison. Apart from these three villages, the questionnaire analysis also included data from eight further Volga German villages in the above-mentioned provinces, as well as from two villages from the province of La Pampa.

I selected six interviews from each of the three locations I chose to focus on for the interview analysis, so that I had one interview for each age and gender group. Therefore, I analyzed a total of 18 interviews. I transcribed them using the F4 software, combining the conventions of the semi-interpretative working transcription method HIAT (Ehlich & Rehbein 1976) and the conversation-analytical transcription method GAT (Selting et al. 2009). Moreover, the interview sections in Spanish were transcribed according to standard orthography, with the exception of the implosive /s/, which was transcribed as <h> in cases of aspiration. The sections in Volga German were transliterated to reflect as closely as possible the characteristics of each variety. There were no fixed criteria for this, as Volga German varies not only from village to village, but also from speaker to speaker, and even within the same speaker's discourse. The transcripts were then qualitatively analyzed using MAXQDA, with the aim of both a formal analysis of language contact phenomena and a qualitative content analysis according to Gläser & Laudel (2009) and Mayring (1995). The theoretical considerations of the study formed the basis of the extraction. The main research questions (the role of contact languages in the process of collective identity construction) and the interview guide were used to determine the research categories and their possible characteristics. The four main categories, each with subcategories, were ‘meaning of countries’, ‘groups’, ‘languages’ and ‘culture’.

While questionnaires collected during the preliminary study were already digitized and could be analyzed quantitatively in SPSS, the questionnaires collected during the field study were completed by hand by the informants and therefore had to be typed into the computer in order to allow for quantitative analysis. There were two ways of doing this: (a) by filling in an online survey that was constructed in the same way as the questionnaire, which could then be automatically

transferred to an Excel spreadsheet, and (b) by typing the answers directly into an Excel spreadsheet. The first option was convenient and less prone to error than the second option. It could also be completed from different computers, which was particularly relevant at this stage, because several people helped me to type in the data from the questionnaires. The data set was then analyzed in SPSS. However, before this could be done, it was necessary to check the suitability of the informants (in terms of their background, i.e. informants without a Volga German background, who were sometimes found in the questionnaires, had to be excluded) and the completeness of their answers (some questionnaires were only half completed and could therefore not be included in the data set).

In contrast to the handling of questionnaire and interview data, it was not at all clear for me how to include the other data sets I collected during the study in the analysis. The picture story was initially intended to provide a better basis for comparison of language proficiency (particularly of German), but it ended up being analyzed in the same way as the rest of the interviews because it contained many of the language contact phenomena that were at the center of the analysis, as well as comments on the story that were important for content analysis. The word lists and pictures of Slavisms were taken from the preliminary study by Schmidt (1997) and were extended throughout the field study as the informants added more and more words they remembered from Russian which got activated while being asked about the Slavisms. This dataset was not used for the main study discussed in the context of this article, but was analyzed in detail later in the context of an article focusing on borrowings from Russian in Volga German varieties in Argentina (Ladilova 2019). The pictures of the interviewees were glued into the booklets containing the field notes and participant observation, in order to bring the context of the interview into memory while I was transcribing and analyzing the data. This helped me to remember the details of the interviews and the supplementary participant observation more vividly and served as a motivation in the research process. Other photographs taken during the field study have not yet been included in any publications. A further step towards multimodality in language contact research would be to videotape the interviews or group discussions and to analyze the gestures made by the informants while narrating their experiences and worldviews in central parts of the interviews. Systematic gesture analysis can be fruitfully integrated into the GAT2 transcription system (Selting et al. 2011) and is particularly fruitful for the analysis of conceptualization processes, as Ladilova (2023a, 2023b), Müller (2014) and Schröder (2017, 2022, forthcoming) have shown. However, even if systematic gesture analysis is not part of the scope of the analysis, having the videos of the interviews rather than the audio recordings helps greatly in the process of interpreting the data.

**5. Drawing conclusions.** The context of data collection, especially during a field study in which we are in close interactive contact with the subjects of our study, is a holistic experience in which we as researchers are involved not only cognitively but also emotionally and (inter)corporally (Merleau-Ponty 1945), co-constructing the data collection process together with our informants. Nevertheless, the data we most often collect only reflects the cognitive level, while the other levels are not supposed to affect the ‘objectivity’ of data analysis and interpretation. However, our cognition is closely linked to our emotional and physical experience of the world, which influences the memory and analytical process needed to interpret the data. It would therefore be more plausible to include these components in the interpretation of the data in a more overt way, reflecting on the process of data analysis in a holistic way, rather than just documenting the results. This could be done by maintaining detailed field notes that capture not only observations but also our emotional and physical responses during interactions. This way, it is possible to contextualize our cognitive analyses within the broader experiential framework of our fieldwork. On the other

hand, by employing method triangulation, multiple data sources (including pictures and videos) and analytical perspectives, help us to mitigate potential biases stemming from the close interactions with informants and ensure a more robust and comprehensive understanding of the language contact phenomena. Last but not least, member checking could be applied, where preliminary findings are discussed with participants to confirm accuracy and resonance with their experiences. This collaborative verification process can further anchor our interpretations in the lived realities of the informants, enhancing the credibility of our analysis. The delicate dance between researcher proximity and objectivity is therefore an ongoing consideration, which highlights the importance of reflexive research practices in understanding the complex interplay of language, culture and identity in migration scenarios.

## References

- Albert, Ruth & Cor J. Koster. 2002. *Empirie in Linguistik und Sprachlehrforschung. Ein methodologisches Arbeitsbuch*. Tübingen: Narr.
- Cipria, Alicia. 2007. A 250 años de la primera migración: lealtad y auto-estima lingüísticas en comunidades de alemanes del Volga en Entre Ríos. *Southern Journal of Linguistics* 31. 1–19.
- Ehlich, Konrad & Jochen Rehbein. 1976. Halbinterpretative Arbeitstranskriptionen (HIAT). *Linguistische Berichte* 45. 21–41.
- Flick, Uwe. 2008. *Triangulation. Eine Einführung*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Gläser, Jochen & Grit Laudel. 2009. *Experteninterviews und qualitative Inhaltsanalyse als Instrumente rekonstruierender Untersuchungen*. Wiesbaden: VS.
- Hipperdinger, Yolanda H. 2005. *Die Sprache(n) der Wolgadeutschen in Argentinien. Die Kolonisierung des Bezirkes Coronel Suárez*. Wien: Praesens.
- Kaufmann, Göz. 1997. *Varietätendynamik in Sprachkontaktsituationen. Attitüden und Sprachverhalten rußlanddeutscher Mennoniten in Mexiko und den USA*. Frankfurt am Main: Lang.
- Kopp, Thomas. 1979. *Wolgadeutsche siedeln im argentinischen Zwischenstromland*. Marburg: Elwert.
- Ladilova, Anna. 2011. Sprachkontaktsituation der Wolgadeutschen in Argentinien. In Imke Mendoza, Bernhard Pöll & Susanne Behensky (eds.), *Sprachkontakt und Mehrsprachigkeit als Herausforderung für Soziolinguistik und Systemlinguistik. Ausgewählte Beiträge des gleichnamigen Workshops der 37. Österreichischen Linguistiktagung 2009* (= Language contact and multilingualism as a challenge for sociolinguistics and theoretical linguistics: selected papers from ÖLT 2009), 79–99. München: Lincom Europa.
- Ladilova, Anna. 2013. *Kollektive Identitätskonstruktion in der Migration: Eine Fallstudie zur Sprachkontaktsituation der Wolgadeutschen in Argentinien*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
- Ladilova, Anna. 2015. Language and identity of migrants. The role of the heritage language in the process of collective identity construction in a migration situation. In Răzvan Săftoiu (ed.), *Constructing and Negotiating Identity in Dialogue. Special issue of Language and Dialogue* 5(1). 176–193.
- Ladilova, Anna. 2019. Ruso en el habla de los alemanes del Volga en Argentina. *Logos. Revista de Lingüística, Filosofía y Literatura* 29(1). 109–121.  
<https://revistas.userena.cl/index.php/logos/article/view/1150/1236>
- Ladilova, Anna. 2023a. *Multimodale Interaktionsanalyse. Konzeptualisierung von Integration bei Brasilianer:innen in Deutschland*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

- Ladilova, Anna. 2023b. Methodological aspects of the analysis of co-speech gesture in intercultural interactions. In Ulrike Schröder, Elisabetta Adami, & Jennifer Dailey-O’Cain (eds.), *Multimodal Communication in Intercultural Interaction*, 61–80. New York: Routledge.
- Mayring, Philipp. 1995. Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. In Uwe Flick (ed.), *Handbuch qualitative Sozialforschung*, 209–213. Weinheim: Beltz.
- Merlau-Ponty, Maurice. 1945. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.
- Milroy, Lesley & James Milroy. 1992. Social network and class: towards an integrated sociolinguistic model. *Language in Society* 21. 1–16.
- Müller, Cornelia. 2014. Gestural modes of representation as techniques of depiction. In Cornelia Müller, Alan Cienki, Ellen Fricke, Silva H. Ladewig, David McNeill & Jana Bressemer (eds.), *Body – language – communication. An international handbook on multimodality in human interaction*, 1687–1701. De Gruyter.
- Prediger, Angélica, Siegwalt Lindenfelser & Renata Szczepaniak. 2023. Deutsch in Argentinien: Gebrauch, Struktur, Varietäten, Identitäten, Ideologien. Aufbau eines multimodalen Korpus: Methoden und Auswertungsperspektiven. In Barbara Hans-Bianchi & Barbara Vogt (eds.), *Deutsch im Kontakt. Neue empirische Studien zu Kontaktphänomenen und -szenarien in der Gegenwart*, 395–447. Hildesheim: Olms.
- Schmidt, Arnd. 1997. *Kollektive Zweisprachigkeit in einsprachiger Umgebung. Eine wolgadeutsche Sprachinsel in Argentinien*. Kiel: Westensee.
- Schröder, Ulrike. Forthcoming. *The role of verbo-gestural metonymy and metaphor in building cultural frames in ELF talk*. Faculdade de Letras, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais.
- Schröder, Ulrike. 2017. Multimodal metaphors as cognitive pivots for the construction of cultural otherness in talk. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 14(4).
- Schröder, Ulrike. 2022. How intercultural is built on the common ground of alterity experience: A cognitive multimodal approach to talk-in-interaction. In Ulrike Schröder, Milene Mendes de Oliveira, & Adriana M. Tenuta (eds.), *Metaphorical Conceptualizations: (Inter) cultural perspectives*, 309–340. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Selting, Margret, Peter Auer & Dagmar Barth-Weingarten. 2011. A system for transcribing talk-in-interaction: GAT 2. *Gesprächsforschung: Online-Zeitschrift zur verbalen Interaktion* 12. 1–51.
- Selting, Margret, Peter Auer, Dagmar Barth-Weingarten, Jörg Bergmann, Pia Bergmann, Karin Birkner, Elizabeth Couper-Kuhlen, Arnulf Deppermann, Peter Gilles, Susanne Günthner, Martin Hartung, Friederike Kern, Christine Mertzlufft, Christian Meyer, Miriam Morek, Frank Oberzaucher, Jörg Peters, Uta Quasthoff, Wilfried Schütte, Anja Stukenbrock & Susanne Uhmann. 2009. Gesprächsanalytisches Transkriptionssystem 2 (GAT 2). *Gesprächsforschung – Online-Zeitschrift zur verbalen Interaktion* 10. 353–402.
- Spranz-Fogasy, Thomas & Arnulf Deppermann. 2001. *Teilnehmende Beobachtung in der Gesprächsanalyse*. In Klaus Brinker, Gerd Antos & Wolfgang Heinemann (eds.), *Text- und Gesprächslinguistik*, 1007–1013. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter.
- Urban, Angela. 2004. *Russisch-spanischer Sprachkontakt in Argentinien. Die russische Emigration nach Argentinien und deren sprachliche Folgerscheinungen dargestellt am Beispiel der russischen Sprachgemeinschaften in Buenos Aires und Oberá, Misiones*. Wien: Praesens.
- Weyne, Olga. 1987. *El ultimo puerto. Del Rhin al Volga y del Volga al Plata*. Buenos Aires: Tesis.