Translation Problems in International Surveys

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The carrying out of surveys across language barriers raises several problems related to translation and the use of bilingual personnel, and intensifies the necessity of considering carefully the reliability of procedures and the validity of results. This article, based in part on conversations with representatives of several research agencies, systematizes some of the experience of those who have worked on international surveys.

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This paper attempts to present a preliminary systematization of some of the language problems which arise in the conduct of international surveys, i.e., in surveys designed in one country for accomplishment in another. While many of these problems are hardly new, and while solutions have, in some cases, already been proposed, the great variety of such proposed solutions suggests that they have been based on differing underlying assumptions; these, no doubt, should be made explicit. The almost complete lack of formal intercommunication about these matters is probably another major cause of the variety of procedures and the lack of explicitness of underlying assumptions. It is hoped that this paper will contribute in some measure to more systematic consideration of the methods which are being used as well as of the devices used in the reporting of results.

The focus is on interviewing and written questionnaire studies, where problems of schedule translations occur and of communication between members of the research team. These problems, of course, are not unique to survey studies; any treatment of translation also applies to such endeavors as the content analysis of foreign language communication materials.

ADMINISTRATIVE CONSIDERATIONS

A consideration of language problems involved in international surveys would include discussions of whether English or the language of the subject group should be used in each stage of surveying: in initial questionnaire construction, revision, code design, coding itself, and analysis.

In such decisions, methodological considerations should perhaps be the only criteria; in practice, however, realism demands that other matters be considered. Among the more common of these are: (1) the costs of alternative procedures, which may be a controlling consideration in the case of research carried out within a limited budget; (2) the simple availability of personnel who combine the necessary linguistic and the necessary sociological skills; (3) the problem, in the case of some research, of obtaining security clearances for such personnel; (4) the availability of office space and necessary clerical machines, in the field.

It may be necessary to retain more control in some studies over the final content of a questionnaire or interview schedule as well as over the categories set up for free-answer items. Such a situation might arise because of security requirements, or because cross-cultural comparability of items or a close relationship to a set of theoretical concepts is desired.

In any case, the primary concern should be to minimize alteration of meaning in translation. The following sections deal with the types of distortions that may result from language factors, and some of the checks that may be instituted to reduce these distortions.

TRANSLATION AND MEANING

Translation distortion may arise 1) from differences in the meanings of words, 2) from differences in syntactical contexts, and 3) from differences in the cultural context of the readers or hearers. The following is presented as a guide to points about which translators should be alerted. It should also serve as a means for improving communication between translators and other members of a research team.

Lexical meanings. (a) Words may or may not have objective referents. If the same objects appear in both cultures meaning may be easily translated. But even in the case of objective referents one term may have a larger range of referents than another. A case in point is
the *Time* survey which included a question about washing machines. It was found that in one country the referents of the term included both electric and hand-operated machines. Such a difference is often difficult for a translator to recognize.

(b) Some languages, such as Japanese, are especially rich in *homonyms*, leading to ambiguities in oral interviews. Even if the intended meaning is clear from context the existence of other referents may influence reactions. The same problem arises where a single word has several meanings.

(c) Most translators are aware of the difficulties caused by *affective and figurative meanings*. In translations a choice must very often be made between the objective referent or a figurative meaning. In a Korean study it was found that a question concerning “expectations” about treatment in PW camps led to responses which could only be explained by the fact that the meaning of “hope” was also included in the Korean word for “expectation.”

(d) It is probable that few words have exact counterparts in another language, and there are cases of meanings which cannot be expressed in certain languages at all. The Marathi-speaking people of India, for instance, appear to have no concept corresponding adequately to our generalized other, which the English terms “people,” “one,” or “they” evoke. It is difficult, therefore, to phrase a question that does not refer to an identifiable group. These instances of *untranslatable concepts*, which bilinguals are especially equipped to notice, may be good clues to crucial cultural differences.

(e) Finally, bilinguals have a tendency to regard similar words in two languages as identical in meaning—e.g., “sympathy” in French, Russian, and English, and “sensible” in French and English. These errors may not be noticed either in a check by another bilingual, or in a back-translation. At the Russian Research Center, for instance, a translator overlooked the fact that though both Russian and Ukrainian have the same two words for Jew, one polite and one depreciatory, the meanings are reversed in the two languages.

*Grammatical meaning.* (a) The *syntactical requirements* of language differ considerably. The grammar of some languages requires commitment as to the sex and social status of the speaker or hearer,

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or statements about location, agency, possession, sources of information and aspects of time which are not necessary in English. On the other hand some information is included in English which is not necessary in certain other languages. In either case, translation into an understandable form of the other language involves the introduction of pseudo-information or the loss of information. In Japanese, for instance, many social distinctions affect language. Translators into Japanese who are not present at the time of speaking are handicapped and must introduce pseudo-information usually requiring knowledge of the social context of speech.

(b) *Stylistic factors*, or optional variations in syntax, may introduce unnoticed emphasis or other meaning, which must somehow be equated in the other language. In some cases, as in Finnish, endings used in speaking to children, or expressing certain shades of doubt, may be important information but be virtually impossible to translate.

*Functional equivalence in a different culture context.* If the meaning of communication arises from expected responses, the cultural differences associated with the language being used may require, for the preservation of such meaning, more extensive changes than are usually implied in the translation process. Sometimes just the addition of courtesy phrases may be necessary, but often complete rephrasing is necessary to prevent misconstruing the speaker’s intent.

In dealing with matters of attitude or ideology, one might be tempted to translate questions literally in order to examine cultural differences in responses. In effect, this becomes a study of differences in the meanings of words, and one cannot be sure, without complex controls, which aspect of the verbal stimulus is accounting for the differences. It is for this reason that one of the recommendations of those working on the *Time* survey was that cross-cultural surveys “abandon near-identical wordings in the different countries . . .” and make no attempts to set up comparative tables for such questions.\(^8\)

**PROBLEMS DUE TO DIALECTS**

Bias arising in this country from the use of language inappropriate to the social group interviewed is magnified in many other countries because of greater differences between groups in education, and lack

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of communication between social classes and regions. Language alone may arouse animosity, a sense of inferiority, a desire to impress the interviewer, or other response-distorting effects. Because vocabulary and grammatical usage are indicators of dialect, it is necessary that translators, as well as interviewers, speak the dialect of the group to be sampled.

Emigrants might be inappropriate translators because of their deviance from the group to be sampled or because the social changes occurring since their departure might be accompanied by language change. Changes in vocabulary and in the meanings of old vocabulary have coincided with social change in Germany and Russia, for instance, to such an extent that anyone communicating with Germans or Russians on subject matter affected by these changes would be identified as to age and point of view. Alex Inkeles has found that there have been some shifts in Russian occupational terminology at various times which must be known in interpreting statements about parental occupational status. He suggests that phrases selected from samples of respondents' own words on pretests be used.

Bilingualism itself leads to deviance in certain respects. Not only is the bilingual sometimes socially deviant because of his participation in two cultures, but he may unwittingly introduce words directly from the second language, increase use of words similar to those in the second language, and borrow stylistic devices. Editing of questionnaires by a monolingual is a means of guaranteeing stylistic conformity.

SPOKEN AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE

In every language there are differences between spoken and written patterns, based in part on historical and social factors. For practical reasons many of the cues for meaning present in speech are absent in writing, and vice versa. In some languages—Arabic, for example—the difference between the written and the spoken language is so great that the "written" language, when spoken, is comprehensible to very few people, and may not be used for ordinary speech, even by those who understand it. Often the spoken language has never been written, or is written only for humorous or other special purposes. Furthermore,

the written-spoken difference is almost inevitably complicated by prestige and social-class factors.

In the case of oral interviews, the spoken language only should be used. Although this point appears obvious, it is often difficult to train translators to deal with the spoken language. Practically all surveys abroad have suffered at the hands of translators who want to use "high-brow" language unsuitable for an interview. If they are literate they are driven both by habit and prestige motives to use the written language. This suggests procedures such as using an illiterate translator who translates orally to a literate translator so that the latter may write down the translation in some notation for the use of the interviewer.

Such a procedure would be applicable for spoken languages used by illiterate groups. When there is no easily used written form of a dialect recorded interviews might be considered, although the cost of such a procedure and the suspicion it arouses often makes this impossible. Translating of responses might also require study of special procedures, such as oral reading of the answers by the translators, or listening to recorded interviews without transcripts, to ensure interpretation of the words in the context of speech.

BILINGUALISM

Bilingualism must be defined with respect to at least four variables.

1. Linguistic community. Dialects spoken should be appropriate for the sample of respondents used and permit adequate communication with other personnel on the research staff.

2. Subject matter. Most bilingualism probably involves a fairly restricted range of subject matter in at least one of the languages. A "native" speaker may have lived abroad so long that his competence in his mother tongue is confined to speaking about the objects, concepts, and feelings of childhood. On the other hand, bilingual speakers may be more competent in the technical interests of their adult life in their second language, and have relatively little knowledge of terms applying to the home and family.

3. Kinds and degrees of skill. Familiarity with a language may vary along several dimensions of syntax, vocabulary, and phonetic skill. Passive knowledge of a language ordinarily precedes the ability to speak it or write it; beyond this, development of a large vocabulary,
ability to conceptualize easily, and using the language with a high
degree of stylistic subtlety. All of these factors should, of course, be
considered in the evaluation of skills and the allocation of personnel.
Furthermore, priority of passive language use implies that the trans-
lator should translate into the language in which he has greater facility.

4. Bicultural experience. In the understanding of the meanings of
terms and of phrases, both when they have objective referents and when
they have affective or figurative meanings, there is no substitute for
common cultural experience which provides situational definitions.
For this reason a person may appear to have considerable fluency in a
language, but be unable to communicate adequately with someone
from the linguistic and cultural community concerned.

Introduction of a language variation not only raises issues of com-
munication between research team and respondent, but increases the
complexity of internal staff communication in two ways—by introduc-
ing new content and by complicating channels. First, because of the
special problems of distortion in meaning which have been discussed
above, there must be means explicitly provided for discussing these
matters. Second, the channels of communication themselves become
more complex because of the presence of persons who cannot speak to
each other or have great difficulty doing so. This suggests the necessity
of a more conscious examination of morale problems and information
transmission than is customary in a domestic research staff.

PROCEDURES AND LANGUAGE PROBLEMS

The complexity of the problems involved in cross-language surveys
increases the importance of checks on reliability and validity of trans-
lation. This becomes imperative in studies performed where language
and cultural differences are great, and where trained personnel are not
readily available. Thus some preliminary attention must be given to the
problem of reliability or agreement between translators and the prob-
lem of validity, or the assurance that the intended meaning of the
original item corresponds to the meaning that will be found in it by
those eventually exposed to the translated version.

1. Where English items are to be translated into a foreign language,
a simultaneous translation procedure by two or more translators may
be used to discover errors. Even this simple procedure, however, could
lead to confusing results where equally permissible synonyms occur in the foreign language. In some cases the procedure of back-translation by an independent translator has been used for checking translation errors. In a Columbia University study one back-translation caught an error which was due to lack of adequate specification of intent in a question translated into Russian. “If you had been offered your boss’s job in 1940, would you have taken it?” became “If your boss had offered you work, would you have taken it?” By itself, as Max Barioux points out, this does not tell us where the error lies, in the original translation or in the back-translation. Nevertheless, such a procedure can be very useful in pointing up language difficulties and meaning discrepancies if it is followed by a conference between researcher and translator as to why certain errors have occurred.

2. Sources of systematic error have been discussed in the previous sections. They include difficulties due to differences in inclusiveness of terms, in range of referents, in meanings associated with terms that may have an apparent and traditional translation, problems of inclusion or exclusion of material because of syntactical requirements, and so forth. In such cases a reliability check by itself is insufficient. The essential problem is one of validity, of assuring one’s self, in so far as possible, that an equivalence of meaning has been conveyed from the original to the translated version. Two possibilities in this connection bear discussion:

a) Max Barioux, discussing problems of translation in French surveys suggests the following procedure as a method of arriving at meaning equivalence:

1) In country of origin, the author of the questionnaire draws up an exhaustive set of notes while formulating the questions. These notes explain in detail each question and word used, and include synonyms and alternative phrases wherever possible. This helps to define the exact nature of each element making up the text to be translated.

2) In the country where the translation is to take place, the text and the notes are given to two translators who, without consulting each other, try to arrive at the best possible translation.

3) A third translator then takes both translations, as well as the explanatory notes, and without consulting the original text, indicates which of

the translations seems to him to reproduce best the content and structure of the explanatory notes.

4) Finally, the original text, the two translations, and the choice of the third translator are compared, in order to decide definitely on the wording to be used.*

Such a procedure is applicable particularly when the main direction of the study is in the hands of researchers from the foreign country or bilingual persons with sufficient knowledge of the foreign language.

b) There may be cases, however, when, for one administrative reason or another, it is necessary for researchers with insufficient knowledge of the foreign language to assure themselves that a translation equivalent in meaning has been made. In such a case, notes on the translated item explaining and elaborating on the meaning in the foreign country of the various terms used in the items might be made by one or more translators so that the study director can check for comparability to his original intention in the item. It has been suggested that a face-to-face interview with a bilingual, having him free-associate to the words used, might be even more valuable than such a written communication, since the interviews are administered orally, and special aspects of meaning can be pursued.

These procedures give some assurance that adequate communication has taken place between the study director, or whoever constructed the original item, and the translator. But it should be borne in mind that in the last analysis the problem is one of communication between the researcher and the respondent. Where, for instance, dialect differences play a large part we cannot be sure of this correspondence of meaning unless the translators are sufficiently familiar with the particular dialect or dialects of the respondents. Such translation checks as mentioned here, therefore, cannot serve as substitutes for pretests, which become all the more important in international surveys because of the language and dialect problems involved.

Additional aspects of validity crop up at the analysis stage, when the researcher must interpret the respondent's reactions to items with knowledge as complete as possible of the meaning—and range of meaning—of items to the respondents. An AIPO survey in which the differences in meaning—country-to-country—of the word "democracy"
were demonstrated, illustrates the importance of this type of information if valid interpretations are to be made of responses.

On the problem of validity, as in the case of the other problems mentioned in this brief report, it is easier to see the difficulties than to solve them. Certainly, much more needs to be discovered about the sorts of procedure checks that might be instituted at various stages to cut down distortions that for linguistic reasons may be present in international studies.