Issues in Questionnaire Translation

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Why focus on Questionnaire Translation?

The purpose of questionnaire translation is to produce instruments that maintain equivalence of measurement across languages/dialects, to achieve a functionally equivalent and culturally appropriate version of the original instrument.

Only in this way will it be possible to achieve results that are comparable cross-nationally.
When is Questionnaire Translation Necessary?

- Cross-national studies
- National studies by Federal Statistical Agencies that will include multiple local cultures and capture the diversity of emerging immigrant populations
- Studies of special populations – for example, Hispanic populations in the US that would involve different national varieties/dialects of Spanish (Mexican, Puerto Rican, Haitian etc.)
Defining Target Audience

- Language minorities
- Immigrant populations
- Monolingual (or at least not bilingual)
- Language different from designers’
- Lower level of education
- Hybrid culture
- Different degrees of acculturation
Questions to Consider in Translation

- Matching meaning?
- Matching measurement?
- Asking the same question?
- When does “close” count?
Effects of Overly Close Translation

✓ Focus on meaning of words rather than meaning of questions
✓ Respondents are inadvertently asked a different question
✓ Processing is more complex
✓ Translated questionnaire sounds unidiomatic
Survey Translation

✓ One translator – one translation

✓ Multiple translators – one translation (split committee)

✓ Multiple translators – multiple parallel translations (parallel committee)

✓ A note on back translation
Committee Approach

- Three translators prepare translations independently (split or parallel)
- Reconciliation meeting with referee
- Qualitative research with monolinguals (focus groups and/or cognitive interviews)
Steps in producing and testing question translations

- Translation
- Translation review
- Decisions/Adjudication
- Quality control
- Qualitative research
- Pretesting
- Documentation
Reconciliation Meeting

- Question-by-question review
- Reaching consensus when possible
- Providing alternatives if no consensus possible
- Identifying terms/items for qualitative research
Referee’s role

✓ Resolves style disagreements
✓ Manages interaction
✓ Brings survey researcher perspective
✓ Keeps an eye on source version
✓ Pushes for global decisions
✓ Liaison with research team for consultation and documentation
Focus groups

✓ Allow for the ability to distinguish what is idiosyncratic
✓ Allow us to listen to how Respondents use language
✓ Allow to include more people in a shorter time
✓ Allow to include different national origin Respondents and see if they reach consensus
Cognitive Interviews

✓ Allow to administer all or part of instrument
✓ Give a glimpse into thought processes
✓ Allow to see how different alternative terms work
Advantages of Approach

✓ Group process benefits
✓ Include different varieties of language in translation team
✓ Incorporates target population into process
✓ Relatively low cost
✓ Relatively quick
What is wrong with back translation?

Back Translation is a black box: we know what went in, we know what came out, yet we know nothing about the adequacy of the translated version.

It consists of 2 consecutive individual translations – compounding the weaknesses of the translator’s idiosyncrasies and possible uneven skills in both languages.
Efforts to Standardize Translation Procedures

- Census Bureau Translation Guidelines
- International Social Survey Program
- European Social Survey
- Survey Research Organizations
Standardizing Translated Versions of the Same Questions

Issues:

- Maintaining longitudinal comparability vs. improving questions
- Is priority to compare with past translations or with original English questionnaire?
- Is there a strong will to overcome political (& power) issues?
- Negotiations can be arduous