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Comparative Survey Design and
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Platform for methodological research on
topics relevant for survey-based research



Questions in Translation and questions in translation

Sheth Foundation Sudman
Symposium on Cross-Cultural
Survey Research
September 30- October 2, 2004

Janet Harkness, ZUMA, Gemany



Understanding Survey Questions in Translation

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Outline

1. Writing the questions we ask
2. Translating the questions we write
3. How questions mean
4. How translations mean
5. The interdependence of design and translation in cross-cultural research

1. Writing the questions we ask

Effort and expense are expended on making questions clear

- Preparatory work
- Crafting questions
- Testing questions
- Producing interviewer manuals
- Training interviewers

Things do not always go smoothly

- Interviewer asks question

† & er x ↗ ⊙ ↗ ∞ ● ∩ & ℳ ?

- Respondent replies:

What is that supposed to mean?

2. Translating the questions we write

In deciding to translate, we assume

1. Translation lets us ask the same questions;

It is THE (or a good) way to keep things the same

In deciding to translate, we also assume

2. Translators will

- understand the source questions (SQ)
- produce translated questions that match SQ
in design, meaning, stimulus, burden and saliency
- alter as little as possible
- (deliver a finished product)

Keeping things the same?

Translation always involves difference

- **Language-driven differences**
- **Adaptation differences**
- **Cultural tailoring**
- **Purpose of translation**

Translation involves difference

- **Language-driven**

Twenty-four, four-and-twenty, twenty-and-four

- **Adaptation**

Do you have difficulty walking 100 yards?

- **Cultural tailoring**

Format familiarity, politeness, disclosure needs

- **Purpose of translation**

(cf theatre productions) localizing; conveyance of Other

Things do not always go smoothly

- How important is it to be wealthy?
- How important is it to be healthy?

- Communication about my illness at home is poor
- We do not talk much about my illness at home

Why things do not always go smoothly

- Translator ability
- Procedures used
- Client requirements and expectations
- Language challenges/differences
- Cultural challenges/differences
- Source question quality
- Source question unsuited for export
- *How we mean*

...Whatever it means to you...

- A respondent asks what a question or word means
- The interviewer has no scripted explanation but has a scripted response
- S/he replies

Whatever it means to you

Whatever it means to you...

- What does survey research assume about the question?
- What does survey research hope will happen?

I suggest...

- ...we hope the respondent gets the question meaning right.

In other words,

...we assume there is something to get and be gotten right; we implicitly assume our question has a meaning.

But I also suggest...

...we need to reconsider the meaning of *meaning*.

How questions mean

People process language to grasp the relevance of contributions to the ongoing communication / context (cf. cognitive linguistics, e.g., relevance theory)

Introducing a valuable distinction

Between intended meaning and perceived meaning

Intended meaning & perceived meaning

- **Intended meaning (IM)**

The meaning the speaker intends/wishes to convey

- **Perceived meaning (PM)**

The meaning the hearer understands

We work implicitly with aspects of this all the time

Statement: ✋ & ♀ ♋ ♎ ♏ ♐ ♑ ❖

What do you mean?

That is not what I meant

That is not what I meant to say

Why don't you say what you mean?

We commonly do not *say* what we *intend* (pragmatics, speech act theory)

- Can you tell me the time?
- That is an interesting question
- Read my lips

Meaning is not an inherent property of words (or utterances)

- de Saussure: the sign is arbitrary.
- Words become associated/identified with meaning(s) through use.

How we attribute meaning

- We scan or parse language (statements, questions), for salience/ meaning in context.
- We use acquired information (memory) together with information currently presented, activating cultural knowledge, including pragmatics.

In everyday contexts, we blur distinctions
between words and meaning

We use words to convey our intended meaning.

We succeed in conveying our meaning in **Context**, on the basis of common ground participants share

Common ground

- Communicative context (interview)
- Question context (co-text)
- Immediate context
 - E.g., interruptions, listeners, interpreters
- Socio-cultural context

Meaning associated with words can be multiple.

Potential meaning expands, contracts, changes

two guys

you guys

sexy legs

sexy annual reports

Context and meaning

Context affects how speaker intention (speaker intended meaning) is perceived

- When did you last see your mother?
- When did you last visit a dentist?

Successful questioning and answering if...

- Contextual knowledge is shared
- The intended meaning of a Q is the salient reading for R and thus R's perceived meaning
- Participants can repair and adjust for possible (inevitable?) misunderstandings

Consequences for question design (1)

- Respondents may often *not* misunderstand.
- They may simply perceive a salient reading from their perspective.

Consequences for question design (2)

- If we want to have intended meaning (IM) = perceived meaning (PM), our questions should make IM clear.
- IM/PM = part of theoretical basis for crafting and testing questions.

Consequences for question design (3)

- We need to ask so as to be understood
- If IM is not in line with a commonly understood meaning associated with a term/question, we need to re-work design and/or elaborate.

Consequences for question design (4)

- If R does not share researcher Context (cultural differences), design must accommodate.
- Raises general questions for design, respondent burden, testing for shared Context... and translation

3. How translations mean

Since meaning is determined between participants in Context → challenges for translation

- Did you vote in the last general election?

3. How translations mean

Since meaning is determined between participants in Context ➡ challenges for translation

- Did you vote in the last presidential election?
- How many children do you have?
- Do you have difficulty ...playing golf

So...how do translators know what questions mean in both languages?

- Translators differ from respondents and researchers in how they read/process questions
- They read to translate across cultures and languages.

Translators and meaning...

- They parse for meaning with heightened awareness of pitfalls and of leaps needed
- Because of the way we all process language, translators, too, may take perceived meaning to be intended meaning.

Remember what we expect of translators

- Understand the source questions
- Produce translated questions that match the source questions: design, meaning, stimulus, burden and saliency
- Change as little as possible

Remember that translation involves changes. In addition...

- See how context affects perception of meaning
- Know (perceived) essentials cannot always be kept the same (e.g., answer scales)

So...what should translators translate?

It depends

Certainly not words for words

Certainly not just semantic "content" if the pragmatics result in a different question being perceived

4. Translation and design: take one

Translation is not the remedy for design problems in the cross-cultural context

- Is your appetite good?

Translation *is* a tool for design
enhancement

**Language acts as an anchor and hence
as blinkers**

Translation *is* a tool for design
enhancement

**Language acts as an anchor and hence
as blinders**

Translation and design enhancement

- Advance translation uncovers problems
- Translators can spot problems for source or target versions
- (ESS, SHARE, ISSP queries and experience)
- (References later)

...As a tool for design enhancement

- Do you provide financial support for any grown-up children or grand-children?
- Would you be willing to spend time socializing with NAME?

Translation and design: take two

Questionnaire translation is also design

- Changing languages is one part of what we require from survey translation.
- Intended meaning, measurement properties, & design should move from one culture & language to another.

How can this be done?

- Translators have culture-bridging skills; they are not question designers.
- Question designers often without culture-bridging skills.
- Culture-bridging sensitivity inhibited in single language perusal/ discussion.

Acknowledging the design components

- Traditional sequential procedures are counterproductive (cf. Harkness, van der Vijver and Johnson, 2003)
- Translators and designers needed in a team for design and adaptation (for source *and/ or* versions)

Usability issues

Costs and benefits of interdisciplinary input and collaboration

- Once it becomes the norm, not difficult to organize or fund
- Team models already available

In sum

- Translation procedures technically on right road
- Design procedures theoretically on right road
- Know-how, expertise and research beginning to consolidate
- Demonstrated added value is key to general acceptance

Thank you for your attention

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