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Danuta Przepiórkowska
GESIS – Leibniz-Institute for the Social Sciences and University of Warsaw

Translation of Questionnaires in Cross-National Social Surveys: A Niche with its Own Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This paper attempts to illustrate that translation of questionnaires in cross-national social surveys can be viewed as a distinct niche in the universe of Translation Studies, since it has a number of unique features, including its own theoretical framework and methodology, and relatively few links with mainstream Translation Studies[1].

Surveys have long been used to study people's opinions and attitudes and to collect factual information. While the mode of asking questions has changed over the years, surveys as such are still thriving. With the arrival of cross-national surveys[2], a need arose to ensure comparability and methodological rigour of survey questionnaires administered in different countries in various languages. This development prompted

[1] Throughout this paper I use the notion of 'mainstream Translation Studies' in the broad sense, referring to literature used in university translation courses, as well as journals and conferences focusing exclusively on translation and interpreting studies.

[2] In this paper, I use the term 'cross-national surveys' as synonymous with 'comparative surveys', even though some comparative surveys may involve minority populations within the same country (in which case they are sometimes termed 'cross-cultural surveys'). In any case, the focus here is on survey projects involving more than one surveying language and a translation process.

theoretical and methodological reflection on the translation of questionnaires for the purpose of such surveys[3].

A niche of scholarly interest

Translation of survey questionnaires can be called a niche in the sense that it is a rather narrow subfield, located at the borderline of comparative survey methodology and Translation Studies (TS). In the social sciences, this niche is viewed as a narrow part of comparative survey methodology or cross-cultural research methodology. In Translation Studies, it has received very little attention.

The very rare examples that can be found, for instance, in TS journals, tend to refer to related fields such as cross-cultural psychology [e.g. Bolaños-Medina, González-Ruiz, 2012] or „research instruments" in general [e.g. Gasse, 1973] but not specifically to questionnaire translation in surveys. On the other hand, papers on survey translation have appeared in journals focusing on other disciplines, such as *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *Quality of Life Research*, *Survey Research Methods*, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, to name just a few. Notably, there is a vast body of literature on various aspects of translation and adaptation of measurement instruments (including questionnaires) in disciplines such as psychology, education, as well as medicine and health studies. However, discussing those fields would go far beyond the scope of this paper.

Questionnaire translation in social surveys has been theorised within a relatively narrow circle of centres, notably GESIS – Leibniz-Institute for the Social Sciences (formerly ZUMA, Germany) and the Institute of Social Research (University of Michigan, USA), both connected with the name of Janet Harkness, who set some very important milestones in the reflection on translation in comparative social surveys.

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3 For more on the history of cross-national surveys, see [Mohler, Johnson, 2010]. Some of the best-known examples include: the European Social Survey (www.europeansocialsurvey.org), the World Values Survey (www.worldvaluessurvey.org), the European Values Study (www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu), the Eurobarometer (http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion), the International Social Survey Programme (www.issp.org) and others (all links valid as of 27 February 2016).

Much like other niches, questionnaire translation has its own dedicated literature, usually published in the broader context of cross-cultural survey methodology. Many of them were authored or co-authored by Janet Harkness [see, e.g. Harkness et al., 2010; Harkness, Schoua-Glusberg, 1998; Harkness, 2003; Harkness, Pennell, Schoua-Glusberg, 2004; Harkness, Braun, 2005]. Notably, all of those appeared in the broader context of comparative survey methodology, with hardly any references to mainstream TS.

As regards authorship, publications on questionnaire translation in cross-national surveys are often prepared jointly by linguists and methodologists and – following the strong tradition in social sciences – usually by more than one author.

However, one should also note some works by linguists experienced in the field of questionnaire translation who made interesting yet scarce attempts to 'marry' comparative survey methodology to developments in linguistics and Translation Studies [e.g. Kussmaul, 2007; Behr, 2009; Dorer, in progress; Arffman, 2012].

Furthermore, papers and talks related to survey questionnaire translation are hardly ever delivered at major TS conferences but, instead, can be heard at sociological and methodological events, often during dedicated sessions. Examples include the CSDI series (International Workshop on Comparative Survey Design and Implementation, initiated by J. Harkness), the conferences of the European Survey Research Association (ESRA), the European Congress of Methodology, conferences of the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) and many others. Moreover, there are also some occasional events organised for the rather narrow circle of experts dealing with this particular topic, such as the working meetings of the European Social Survey Translation Expert Task Group[4] or the recent GESIS Symposium on Competencies and Knowledge in Questionnaire Translation and Cross-Cultural Questionnaire Development (Mannheim, Germany, 2015).

[4] http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/translation.html.

Specific theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of questionnaire translation in surveys is based on the dual nature of survey questionnaires: each questionnaire is both a text and a measurement instrument. The latter has far-reaching consequences for the theoretical underpinnings of questionnaire translation.

Since a questionnaire is a measurement instrument, the translation process must be viewed in the light of the so-called 'total survey error approach', where „a survey is no better than the worst aspect of its design and execution" [Groves et al., 2004: 34]. Designing and conducting a valid and reliable survey is a very complex process, and there are many sources of potential errors which may challenge the validity of the findings. In the case of comparative surveys, the number of such factors increases considerably because the measurement instrument is applied in many countries and/or among diverse populations, speaking different languages. As a result, the questionnaire translation process can, and does, contribute to the overall error.

Quite obviously, comparability is the main preoccupation in cross-national surveys, alongside overall quality and the need to avoid survey errors. This has led to the development of the so-called 'Ask the same question' approach (ASQ). In comparative surveys, it is postulated that the translated questionnaires in target languages should measure the same piece of social reality as the source version of the questionnaire (and in most surveys, the source questionnaire is drafted in English). This has been traditionally done by requiring that translations offer „a close rendering of the source questionnaire" [Harkness, Schoua-Glusberg, 1998: 92]. However, this idea has been challenged and elaborated, leading to the conclusion that covert rather than overt translations are needed in order to "reproduce in the target text the function the original has in its frame and discourse world" [House, 2001: 250].

In the context of the ASQ approach, equivalence is another important concept. While this notion also has been central for Translation Studies and described in a variety of ways (see: [Kenny, 1998] for an overview), the understanding of equivalence is also ambiguous in cross-national surveys as it touches upon not only the textual and discursive aspect of the survey questionnaire but also its role as a survey instrument. With a few dozen types of equivalence defined in literature [Johnson, 1998], researchers tend to focus on the much more clearly defined notions of validity and reliability of measurements [Behr, 2009: 51]. Mohler and Johnson go even further: „since the concept of equivalence seems empirically unattainable, we propose below to focus on the more realistic goals of conceptual comparability and measurement similarity" [Mohler, Johnson, 2010: 26].

With comparability in mind, many authors have highlighted the need for 'adaptation' of survey instruments, both in the general sense (transferring an instrument across languages and cultures) and at the specific sense (modifications of questionnaire items made in an attempt to retain the meaning). Adaptation is considered inseparable from translation in cross-national research since it aims to „tailor questions better to the needs of a given audience but still retain the stimulus or measurement properties of the source" [Harkness, Villar, Edwards, 2010: 122]. In this sense, adaptation may be applied to source questions (changing them with a specific audience in mind) and to translated questions. Harkness provides a typology of adaptations in surveys and international assessments [Harkness, 2008: 72-74], which can be arguably described as based on a far-reaching domestication strategy in Venuti's sense [Venuti, 1995]. Survey translations follow the domesticating strategy in all cases, in an attempt to reduce the burden on the respondents, and measure the reality of their world rather than the world of the source language/culture. In this sense, 'adaptation' in questionnaire translation is close to the notion used in TS as „a procedure employed to achieve an equivalence of situations wherever cultural mismatches are encountered" [Bastin, 1998: 6].

Specific methodology

The term „methodology" is understood as a set of postulates as to how the translation process should be organised and conducted in cross-national surveys. Reflection on best practices in the conduct and analysis of multicultural, multilingual, and multiregional surveys date back to the late 20th century [Mohler, Johnson, 2010]. The most crucial aspects include the translation procedures and translation quality assessment, both closely intertwined.

In questionnaire translation process, the rule of „two pairs of eyes" (a translator and a proofreader) is replaced by the rule of „many pairs of eyes" [Behr, 2009: 226]). This is both the methodological postulate and the practice applied in many survey translation efforts (ESS, Eurobarometer, ISSP and others). The main reason is to ensure cross-national comparability via translated instruments which will be applied in fieldwork with hundreds, or sometimes thousands, respondents. The rationale behind this postulate is captured by Dorer as follows:

> […] relying on one person to provide a questionnaire translation is problematic, in particular if no team-based assessment is undertaken. A translator working alone and simply 'handing over' the finished assignment has no opportunity to discuss and develop alternatives. Regional variance, idiosyncratic interpretations, and inevitable translator blind spots are better handled if several translators are involved and an exchange of versions and views is part of the review process [Dorer, 2014: 11].

With these considerations in mind, various team-based methodologies were developed over the years to handle this challenging task and control target versions of the questionnaire, especially in languages unfamiliar to researchers. In contrast with the most classic case of one original and one translated text[5], translation of survey questionnaires is a process that often concurrently produces more than one target version and involves more than one translator.

In the early days of cross-national surveys, the so-called 'backtranslation' was recommended as a method to control the quality and equivalence of such versions [Brislin, 1970]. In this process, the translated questionnaire is translated back into the source language by another person and then both versions in the source language are compared to make judgements about equivalence. Many authors have highlighted the numerous shortcomings of this approach [see, e.g. Harkness, Pennell, Schoua-Glusberg, 2004; Behr, 2009]) yet the process is still commonly used and has many proponents, even if used just as a step in quality assessment and not as a stand-alone method.

[5] Exceptions would include, for instance, retranslations of classic literary texts which, however, tend to appear sequentially and are spread over time.

To address the weaknesses of backtranslation, team approaches have been proposed for a few decades under different names: committee approach, parallel translation, team translation etc. [Harkness, Schoua-Glusberg, 1998: 101]. The main aim here was to match survey expertise and linguistic/translation expertise in order to address textual/ communicative aspects of a survey questionnaire and its measurement features: „by setting up a team, people with the necessary language and translation skills can be brought together with people who understand the goals and structure of an instrument" [Harkness, Braun, 2005: 103].

The translation process based on a team approach involves a review meeting (also known as reconciliation meeting) where various target versions are discussed and brainstormed in order to arrive at an optimal version [for a useful overview, see Acquadro et al., 2008].

An extension of this approach that has been gaining currency in recent years, largely thanks to its application in the European Social Survey, is the so-called TRAPD method (Translation, Review, Adjudication, Pretesting, Documentation), which also highlights the need for pretesting the translated instrument and documenting the process [Harkness, 2003; Harkness, 2008; Dorer, 2014]. This approach is considered to be the current best practice in questionnaire translation [Harkness, 2008; Harkness, Villar, Edwards, 2010].

Apart from methods involving multiple pairs of eyes, which pool together expertise in translation and survey methodology, the quality assurance in questionnaire translation may involve additional steps, such as linguistic verification of the almost-final instrument, structural verification of the questionnaire (such as the SQP tool [Zavala-Rojas, 2014]) and cognitive pre-testing [e.g. Harkness, van de Vijver, Mohler, 2010].

The questionnaire translation process produces more than one translation but also more than one source version. The first version is translated, reviewed, possibly tested (e.g. in a cognitive pre-test) and then the source questionnaire is adjusted or rewritten. This is an iterative process which may take a number of cycles, thus producing a number of originals (source texts) and an even greater number of translations. This process is usually collaborative, with question design teams working together with translation teams (with roles sometimes overlapping). The idea behind this process, allowing multiple source versions and multiple translations, is known as 'decentering' (for a discussion, see [Harkness, Schoua-Glusberg, 1998: 98-100] or [Harkness et al., 2010: 47-48]). This process has also led to a purposeful use of translation as a stage in questionnaire development process as an ‘early alarm’ for potential linguistic, pragmatic and cross-cultural issues [Harkness, Braun, 2005: 104]. In this way, translation is „integrated into the study design” process [Harkness, 2003: 35]. In some aspects, this iterative process resembles cyclical multilingual drafting of the EU legislation, with multiple languages and many actors [see, for instance, Robertson, 2011]). However, in contradistinction to EU legislation, the dilemma of ‘all originals’ vs. an original and translations is not raised in cross-national surveys. The original is referred to as ‘the source version’ or the ‘master questionnaire’ while the translated versions in various languages are usually referred to as ‘target versions’ or, more specifically, as ‘the German questionnaire’, ‘the Russian questionnaire’ etc.

Furthermore, numerous attempts are made in cross-national surveys to control the process of translation through quality assurance procedures, numerous post-translation quality control efforts and at the stage of source text drafting. At the textual level, many questionnaires are furnished with annotations instructing translators on how to understand and translate various terms and phrases [for an overview of annotations, see Behr, Scholz, 2011]. At the paratextual level, separate documents, called ‘translation guidelines’, are developed, specifying the methodology and concrete procedures that are required. Guidelines may be devised for specific survey rounds [e.g. ESS 7 Guidelines: Dorer, 2014] or describe general best practices in questionnaire translation (e.g. Cross-Cultural Survey Guidelines, 2011 or the U.S. Census Bureau Guidelines[6]). Although not explicitly mentioned, these devices invoke functionalist approaches to translation, where „any notion of equivalence between a source text and a target text is subordinate to the *skopos*, or purpose which the target text is intended to fulfil” [Mason, 1998: 32]. At the interpersonal level, translator briefings or training sessions are organised to provide instructions associated with the task. For an overview of translator briefings and their role, see [Dorer, 2014].

[6] Cross-Cultural Survey Guidelines (http://ccsg.isr.umich.edu/), Census Bureau Guideline: Language Translation of Data Collection Instruments and Supporting Materials (https://www.census.gov/srd/papers/pdf/ rsm2005-06.pdf) – both 13.03.2016.

A niche of practice

Cross-national surveys share many features also at the level of practical execution of the translation process. First and foremost, English, the lingua franca of the modern academic world, is most commonly used as the drafting language for the source version (e.g. ESS, ISSP, EVS, WVS, EWCS etc.), with some exceptions (e.g. Eurobarometer using English and French in parallel, Arab Barometer relying on Modern Standard Arabic and English etc.).

Major cross-national survey efforts are funded almost entirely by public sources, either national or international, which has a number of important consequences for the practice of questionnaire translation.

Public funding often entails financial rigour and the pressure on cost-cutting. While outsourcing to professional translators is practiced and recommended (e.g. Cross-Cultural Survey Guidelines – ch. VIII or ESS 7 Guidelines – Section 6), it may entail costs which go beyond the project budget. Thus, questionnaire translation is often performed by survey team members, most of whom are neither linguists nor professional translators. Another, non-financial reason for team members to translate the instruments is that they often have the substantive competence in survey design, methodology and subject-matter of the survey that 'ordinary' translators often lack. In the committee approach (see above), one of the two required translations may be performed by a team member whereas another one may be outsourced on a commercial basis.

Due to financial pressures, efforts are also taken (and theorised) to develop low-cost techniques for survey design and translation without compromising on quality [e.g. Dean et al., 2007].

The so-called 'split translation', where one translator translates part of the questionnaire and another one translates the remaining part of the document, offers „advantages of having more than one translator in the review discussion" but helps to „avoid the cost of full or double translations" (Cross-Cultural Survey Guidelines, 2011: VIII-4).

Public funding also necessitates methodological rigour, which is one of the reasons why translations are performed by teams and why translation guidelines are prepared and followed. Furthermore, considerations such as public scrutiny and accountability mean that the translation process is expected to be well documented. One benchmark example of this practice is the documentation of the translation process in the European Social Survey [Dorer, 2014, 23-24]. Another reason for extensive documentation is to provide an 'audit trail' for the project team and to other teams within the same survey (e.g. to report on problems, to enable final decisions etc.). In addition, documentation of the translation process may provide guidance and reference material for other surveys and, moreover, represent useful input material for analysis.

Conclusions

The question asked by organisers of the Imago Mundi 2015 conference[7] (*Can there be a single theory of translation or does each type of translation call for a different methodological framework?*) has no easy answers but, undoubtedly, some types of translations do need their own methodological frameworks, as exemplified by questionnaire translation in cross-national surveys. While this niche seems to have evolved in parallel with mainstream TS, there is inevitably some overlap in theoretical reflection (equivalence, culture-specific items, purpose/*skopos* of translation, target audience, domestication/adaptation etc.). An overview of recent research [Harkness, Villar, Edwards, 2010: 130-136] shows that areas of focus in questionnaire translation include adaptation, documentation, tools, scales and response categories, assessment and production. In other words, the subfield has mostly focused on the HOW and WHAT of questionnaire translation, i.e. the process (organisation of questionnaire translation, guidelines, technological tools) and its products (quality assurance and control, correspondence between the source and the target texts). However, it has offered little reflection on the WHO of questionnaire translation, i.e. agents involved and their perception of their roles in the process (translators are mentioned mostly in the context of recruitment, briefing/training and their tasks).

The field of questionnaire translation does have its own 'turns' (moving from back-translation to team-based translation, or turning translation into a step of the questionnaire design process), although it has

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7 Imago Mundi: „Theory of Translation or Theories of Translations?", a conference organised by the Institute of Applied Linguistics, University of Warsaw, on 20-21 November 2015.

remained largely unaffected by various 'turns' in translation studies [Snell-Hornby, 2006]. Reflection still needs to be undertaken on the impact of English as the language of source texts (perhaps also from the perspective of globalisation or postcolonial studies), multimodality associated with different modes of interviewing (visual, aural, with the use of texts, pictures etc.) or empirical evidence from language corpora to inform the translation process.

Not long ago, authors from this field noticed that "there continues to be a disjoint between theories, practice, and benchmarks acknowledged in the admittedly diverse translation sciences and the various approaches taken to translations and to assessment of translation in survey research" [Harkness, Villar, Edwards, 2010: 118]. It is to be hoped that TS research will inform questionnaire translation and vice versa to bridge that gap in the years to come.

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Streszczenie

Tłumaczenie kwestionariuszy w międzynarodowych badaniach społecznych: Nisza z własnymi założeniami teoretycznymi i metodologią

Artykuł opisuje niszę, jaką są tłumaczenia kwestionariuszy w międzynarodowych surveyowych badaniach porównawczych, a także jej cechy charakterystyczne (ramy teoretyczne i refleksję naukową, metodologię, praktykę realizacji tłumaczeń kwestionariuszy), a także wskazuje na istniejące luki, które mogą zostać wypełnione przez badania translatoryczne tej dziedziny w przyszłości.

Słowa kluczowe: tłumaczenie, kwestionariusze, badania międzynarodowe, badania porównawcze

Summary

Translation of Questionnaires in Cross-National Social Surveys: A Niche with its Own Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The paper describes the niche of questionnaire translation in cross-national surveys and its characteristics (theoretical framework and scholarly reflection, methodology, practice of questionnaire translation), indicating some gaps to be filled by future Translation Studies research in this subfield.

Key words: translation, questionnaires, cross-national surveys, comparative research