

EXPERIMENT FOR TESTING QUESTIONNAIRE TRANSLATION METHODS IN THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL SURVEY (ESS): ASK THE SAME QUESTION VERSUS MORE ADAPTIVE APPROACHES

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Abstract

The European Social Survey (ESS) is a biennial academic survey fielded in 25+ countries since 2002. A British-English source questionnaire is translated into all participating language versions. The quality of the questionnaire translations is crucial for the comparability of the resulting data; therefore, the ESS has been using different methods to ensure high quality questionnaire translations since its first round: the source questionnaire is designed to minimize translatability and intercultural problems; the final translation process follows the TRAPD (Translation – Review – Adjudication – Pre-testing – Documentation) model, based on a committee or team approach. Assessment includes an external translation ‘verification’ and formal checks using the Survey Quality Predictor (SQP).

So far, the ESS has followed the ‘Ask-the-Same-Question (ASQ)’ approach: all translations should be as close as possible to the source text, ideally ‘asking the same question’. Under the new European cluster project, Synergies for Europe’s Research Infrastructures in the Social Sciences (SERISS), an empirical experiment will be carried out to test this ASQ approach versus another where national teams are given more leeway to adapt rather than translate the source questionnaire into their national contexts. The exact set-up of the experiment will be decided in 2016: 30 questions will be translated independently using both methods into a small number of languages. These translations will then be administered via a webpanel also developed under SERISS. The analysis will focus primarily on

equivalence (using statistical techniques such as IRT) whilst also testing the conceptual space, using correspondence analysis, or a related technique. This will be the first empirical evidence about the ASQ approach – which has been applied by several surveys assuming it allows for more equivalence – but the scientific community is lacking a proof that it does indeed produce better, i.e. more comparable and equivalent translations than by leaving national experts more room for adaptation.

Keywords: European Social Survey, questionnaire translation, ask-the-same question, adaptation, experiment

1. Introduction

Current best practice in survey translation advocates the use of team translation approaches. The strength of team approaches relies on bringing together professionals from various areas of expertise, such as translation, language and culture, survey methodology and experts in the topic(s) of the survey. In cross-national survey projects, additional discussion often takes place between the national teams and the central translation team when question translation requires adaptation.

Adaptation refers to changes to the survey instrument that are deemed necessary to make a question more relevant or adequate to a specific group of respondents, and can be rooted in various linguistic, cultural and measurement features. Even though such changes are virtually ubiquitous in any survey translation effort, researchers sometimes try to avoid implementing them on the assumption that the closer a translated version is to the source question, the more comparable the data obtained from those questions will be. At the same time, there are arguments to defend the view that versions are tailored to the target population might lead to optimal measurement in that population and therefore reduce total survey error. There is, however, no guidance in the literature with respect to when adaptation improves or hinders quality and comparability and how teams should resolve disagreements regarding the need for specific adaptations.

Within the SERISS (Synergies for Europe's Research Infrastructures in the Social Sciences) cluster project, an experiment is being prepared that intends to provide empirical evidence on best practices for adaptation in survey translation. It will investigate the advantages and

disadvantages of two translation strategies that vary with respect to the degree of adaptation that is allowed. To our knowledge there has been no study that experimentally compares data quality resulting from different survey translation strategies.

Two translation strategies will be compared in a controlled setting in 3 target languages. For each language, two translation teams will be formed: for each language one team applying the so-called ‘Ask-the-Same-Question (ASQ) approach’, translating – in accordance with existing survey translation best practices – to ‘stay as close as possible to the source questions’ (within reasonable limits) (cf. e.g., Harkness et al. 2010, p.46) and a second team following an adaptation-driven approach. For each language, both teams will be requested to translate the same 30-40 items.

This paper is work-in-progress and will describe the current state of preparing these experiments, challenges encountered and expected as well as the value-added for the scientific community.

2. Ask-the-Same-Question (ASQ) approach versus more adaptive approaches

The European Social Survey (ESS) is an example of a cross-cultural survey producing its national survey instruments by translation of a source questionnaire drafted in British-English (cf. e.g., Harkness et al. 2010). Current best-practice for carrying out this type of translation in cross-cultural survey research is the Ask-the-Same-Question (ASQ) approach. It requires that all translated questionnaires stay as close as possible to the source instrument. The rationale behind this requirement is that comparability of understanding and answering the survey questions is presumed to be facilitated and increased when the different language versions are as close as possible to each other, ideally ‘asking the same question’. Comparability between the data received from different populations in different countries, cultures and/or language groups is one of the major goals to be striven for in cross-cultural survey research.

However, experience shows that when transposing questionnaires from one language and/or culture into another, often mere ‘translation’ is not sufficient and a certain degree of

‘adaptation’ is needed so as to achieve questionnaires that are easy to understand and culturally appropriate to the target populations.

2.1 What does ‘adaptation’ mean?

Adaptation in the field of translation and survey research can have different forms: for instance, rather comprehension- or norm-driven, resulting from different institutional or pragmatic settings or resulting from pure linguistic needs.

The types of adaptation implemented will be analysed and classified into different categories following existing classifications by Harkness, Villar, Edwards (2010) and Behr (2013).

3. Current state of setting-up the experimental design

The statistical design of the later analysis of the experiment is currently being planned by the one of the project partners in the SERISS cluster project. At the moment finalizing this paper, this design was not yet available and can therefore not be discussed here.

3.1 Languages of the experiment

After finalizing the translations according to both translation approaches, the resulting translated items will be administered using the CRONOS Webpanel that is being developed in Workpackage 7 of the same SERISS cluster project. This webpanel will be administered in 3 countries: the UK, Slovenia and Estonia. Thus, the questions will be administered to respondents both in English (source language) and in the languages of Estonia and Slovenia, the languages of this translation experiment being Slovene, Estonian and Russian (as used in Estonia).

3.2 Items to be used for the experiment

The experimental setting will include 30 to 40 questions (including attitudinal and factual/behavioural). The selection of the questionnaire items to be used in this experiment is currently under consideration: (a) the preference will be for items that have proved problematic in the past for the particular reason of administration: where ex-post findings suggest that (a stronger) adaptation would have been required but not implemented in a final national survey instrument; or (b) items that were previously flagged for adaptation but it was not allowed. Items should be taken from the surveys participating in this SERISS cluster project, thus, above all ESS and SHARE, but also EVS and GGP, from all rounds or waves. The author of the paper is currently in the process of selecting these items.

3.3 Composition of the translating teams

Two translation teams will be set up for each language, including professionals with similar expertise and experience working in questionnaire translation. According to the ‘team’ or ‘committee approach’ as recommended by, e.g., Janet Harkness and Alisú Schoua-Glusberg (cf. Harkness and Schoua-Glusberg 1998, p.101f.), and applied in the ESS (cf. European Social Survey 2014), each of the 6 teams will be composed of 2 independent translators, carrying out parallel translations, and 1 reviewer/adjudicator overseeing the review session and review step. Individuals will be randomly assigned to one of the two teams; but the qualification for rather the translation or review function will be taken into account as appropriate.

The author has started looking for suitable personnel through her channels in the surveys represented in SERISS. Screening potential candidates is currently under way.

3.4 Briefing the translating teams

Both teams will be specifically briefed about the translation method to be applied. Preferably both translation teams have experience in translating survey questionnaires, but are not yet experienced in applying either of the two methods. The basic task specification for the teams applying the ASQ approach will be similar and based on current ESS translation guidelines (see European Social Survey, 2014). The experimental team applying a higher degree of adaptation will receive instructions to tailor the instrument as needed, and they will be provided with definitions of the concepts being measured by the questions to help in the adaptation process.

Standards for both translation approaches will be developed based on the existing literature and in particular taking the ESS translation scheme into account, thus, the author, being the ‘ESS translation expert’ will agree on these standards in consultation with the ESS Translation Expert Task Group.

4. Further-reaching goals of the experiment

The informed inspection of the analytical results will show the comparative performance of the two translation approaches and will help set up best practices and standards for creating questionnaire language versions in multilingual survey research. The empirical findings will be used to (a) develop best practices for using both translation approaches, (b) determine, if possible, which of the translation approaches is more apt for survey research, and whether this depends on type of question (e.g., attitudinal or factual) and on type of required adaptation (e.g., cultural or pragmatic). These findings together with best practices to be developed for both methods are urgently needed by the multilingual survey community.

5. References

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