

### The use of interpreters in the conduct of household surveys: development of U.S. Census Bureau Interpretation Guidelines

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# THE USE OF INTERPRETERS IN THE CONDUCT OF HOUSEHOLD SURVEYS

## Development of U.S. Census Bureau Interpretation Guidelines

YULING PAN

### 1 Introduction

According to the recent figures in census data, there is clearly an increasing need for non-English language data collection instruments and other survey materials in the United States. The Census 2000 Supplementary Survey revealed that, in the United States nationwide, there are approximately 45 million people aged 5 years and older who speak a language other than English at home. This represents about 18 percent of persons in this age group. Of these 45 million people, over 10.5 million speak English either “not well” or “not at all” (Li, et al., 2001). In addition, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that in 2000, 4.4 million households encompassing 11.9 million people were linguistically isolated. According to the Census Bureau’s definition, a linguistically isolated household is “...one in which no person aged 14 or over speaks English at least ‘very well.’” A linguistically isolated person is defined as “...any person living in a linguistically isolated household” (Shin & Bruno, 2003). The numbers of linguistically isolated households and people in the 2000 Census were significantly higher than those in the 1990 Census, when 2.9 million households and 7.7 million people were reported to be linguistically isolated (Shin & Bruno, 2003).

In order to meet the increasing demand for obtaining high quality data from the increasingly multi-lingual and multi-ethnic universe of respondents, the U.S. Census Bureau translated the 2000 decennial census questionnaire into five non-English languages (Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Tagalog) and provided language guides in 49 languages. In April 2004, the U.S. Census Bureau issued its translation guideline “*Census Bureau Guideline: Language Translation of Data Collection Instruments and Supporting Materials*” to provide guidance on translation approaches and procedures to ensure the high quality translation of survey instruments and supporting documents.

However, obtaining high-quality data from households where English is not the home language requires more than just having a correctly translated data collection instrument. The Census Bureau decennial census and ongoing demographic surveys entail personal interviews. Personal interviews are conducted largely by monolingual, English-speaking field interviewers, and sometimes by bilingual field interviewers in some languages. There are two issues that call for our attention when interviewing non-English-speaking households. One is the use of interpreters in such an interview. When a monolingual English-speaking field interviewer encounters a household in which the adult members speak little or no English, he or she must rely on someone (an interpreter) who speaks the target language of the respondent for assistance in conducting the interview. There is a lack of standards and procedures for identifying interpreters to interpret an interview. The other issue has to do with the use of bilingual field interviewers who conduct oral translation on the fly. Bilingual field interviewers translate the script of a questionnaire while they interview respondents. We need to consider what level of bilingual competence and interpretation skills are required for bilingual field interviewers to effectively conduct the interpretation of a survey interview.

While there is growing research interest in survey translation methodology, its impact on data quality and the recommended approach for survey translation (e.g., Harkness, 2003; Harkness, et al., 2003; de la Puente & Pan, 2003), not much attention has been paid to the ways in which interpreters are currently being used in the conduct of household surveys. There is little research done on the use of interpreters and the interpreter's role in survey interviews. Standards and procedures for the use of interpreters in field interviews are lacking, and there is an urgent need for the development of such guidance.

Therefore we are proposing a research plan to develop guidance on how to best train and use interpreters in in-person interviews at the U.S. Census Bureau. This paper outlines the research plan and the proposed research activities to develop a Census Bureau interpretation guideline. It includes 1) goals of the research plan and research activities, 2) preliminary research and findings, 3) issues to be addressed in the proposed Census Bureau interpretation guideline, and 4) further research.

## **2 Research Plan**

Our proposed research plan has the following goals:

1. To identify issues and challenges involved in conducting interviews with non-English-speaking respondents (i.e., interviews conducted in English using interpreters and in languages other than English by bilingual field interviewers);
2. To suggest ways to address the observed challenges associated with the conduct of in-person interviews using interpreters;
3. To investigate the current practices and procedures of assessing language proficiency of bilingual field interviewers and interpreters;
4. To assess what training is needed for interpreters and field interviewers to effectively interview non-English-speaking households.

The research plan includes the conduct of three main research activities. First, we will conduct a web search to identify interpretation guidelines used by research organizations and survey firms in the United States and around the world. The purpose of this effort is two-fold: one is to investigate current best practices for the use of interpreters in field interviews by survey organizations; the other is to determine whether there are any policies/guidelines about using interpreters.

The second research effort is to observe U.S. Census Bureau field interviewers conducting interviews with non-English-speaking respondents. The goal of the field observation is to better understand current practices and issues in interviewing non-English-speaking respondents through the use of interpreters and/or bilingual field interviewers.

The third research effort is to observe Census Bureau field interviewer training sessions, to review field interviewer training materials, and to conduct focus groups and debriefing interviews with field interviewers and other Census Bureau field staff. Through this research effort, we will obtain field interviewers' views of how using interpreters works for them and what guidance is needed in the interpretation guideline.

Sociolinguistics will be the principal paradigm used to analyze the data from the research and to generate recommendations. By this we mean that we will look into the characteristics of the social setting of the survey interview, the role of the interpreter in this kind of social setting, and requirements of linguistic and cultural competence for interpreting in survey interviews. The findings from this research will ultimately be used to develop Census Bureau guidelines for the use of interpreters in the conduct of household surveys.

### **3 Preliminary Research**

Of the aforementioned research efforts, we have started two research activities. One is to conduct a web search of interpretation guidelines used by research organizations and survey firms in the U.S. and around the world. The other is to observe Census Bureau field interviewers conducting interviews with non-English-speaking households. The following subsections report the preliminary findings from these two research activities.

#### **3.1 Preliminary findings from a web search of interpretation guidelines**

Between September and November of 2004, we conducted a web search for guidelines on using interpreters, adopting the same search method as that used in a previous web search for translation guidelines (de la Puente, et al. 2004). Google was the primary search engine. Search engines available within specific websites were also used.

The web search consisted of two phases. In the first phase, we began searching the web for any existing interpretation guidelines used by research and social science organizations within the United States. These organizations include educational institutions, court systems, and health care organizations. Results indicate that some research organizations have guidelines for the use of interpreters. The court system has codes of conduct for interpreters, but few standards of practice exclusively addressed court and legal interpreters. Health care service delivery agencies have more established standards of practice for interpreting and provide more and better guidance than agencies and organizations whose work is not focused on health care delivery.

In the second phase of our web search, we focused on exploring the websites of only survey research organizations. The results of the second phase of the web search indicate that unlike research-oriented organizations, most survey research organizations do not have interpretation guidelines. However, some sites do indicate that there are guidelines, but they are not posted on the web. Other sites indicate a need for their organization to have guidelines, but it is unclear whether or not they are working toward creating guidelines. In these cases, we made telephone calls or sent email messages to the organizations to find out how they deal with various languages they encounter. We asked them questions like: What languages do you encounter? Do you hire interpreters or do you rely on bilingual or multilingual field interviewers? Are there specific interpreter guidelines or standards for international research? What are the problems involved with international research?

The response of these organizations was extremely positive. Many companies admitted that they have no idea whether or not anything has or will be done about language barriers

and interpreter guidelines for their organizations. Others admitted that they had never considered the issue and they commended the Census Bureau for tackling it.

### **3.2 Observation of field interviews**

During the months of August and September of 2004, we observed monolingual and bilingual field interviewers conducting interviews in the field and from a Census Bureau telephone center. We selected areas that have a high concentration of the non-English-speaking population in the United States for our observations.

From the field observation, we identified three main issues with the use of interpreters in field interviews. These issues have to do with identifying interpreters, interpreters' qualifications, and interpreters' performance.

The first challenge is to determine whether there should be formal procedures/standards in place for identifying interpreters. The current practice is that some Census Bureau regional offices provide interpreters (the Census Bureau has 12 regional offices). But in most cases, field interviewers find their own interpreters (from their own resources, connections with the neighborhood, or on the spot). Field interviewers have no way to assess an interpreter's qualifications or performance. When asked how they know if an interpreter is doing a good job, one field interviewer said that he judged it by the interaction between the interpreter and the respondent. If the interaction seemed to be smooth, he assumed that the interpreter was doing a good job. In our observation, we noticed that an interpreter could carry out a seemingly smooth conversation with the respondent without accurately translating what the field interviewer or the respondent were saying.

The second issue is associated with the qualifications of interpreters used in in-person interviews. The qualifications of interpreters vary a great deal. Some regional offices keep a pool of interpreters that they can use for major languages in the region. On many occasions, a neighbor or a young household member is asked to be the interpreter for an interview. In these cases, those who serve the role of an interpreter do not have formal training in interpretation nor do they have work experience in interpretation. On top of that, they are called into the job on short notice. They do not receive any training or briefing about the interpretation assignment to prepare them for the work.

The third challenge has to do with interpreters' performance. From our field observations, we identified the following problems with interpreters' job performance:

1. Interpreters are not always familiar with the survey on which they are working; often they have not been informed of confidentiality and privacy policies, and this can lead them to omit this information when speaking to respondents.

2. Interpreters often usurp the role of the interviewer: they construct their own questions and sometimes even provide answers for the respondent.
3. Interpreters sometimes take on an additional role in the interview: lecturing respondents, initiating sidetrack conversations with the respondent.
4. Most importantly, interpreters are not always giving an accurate translation of what the field interviewer says to respondents and vice versa. They sometimes add or omit information.

We concluded that these problems occurred due to the lack of standards in identifying interpreters and the lack of job training for them.

### **3.3 Use of bilingual field interviewers**

For some languages, the Census Bureau has hired bilingual field interviewers. This looks like an ideal situation because the field interviewers are familiar with Census Bureau surveys and procedures. However, we notice that there are several issues worthy of our attention. First of all, there are various types of bilingual field interviewers. Bilingual field interviewers consist of heritage speakers (speakers who have learned and used the target language in a home environment only), second language learners, and recent immigrants. Their bilingual competence varies considerably. During our observations, we noticed that some bilingual field interviewers were not proficient in the target language, and some of them did not have a strong English proficiency either. Another issue is that bilingual field interviewers conduct interpretation on the spot. They may not have the necessary interpretation skills to effectively convey messages across the two languages. Research shows that being able to speak the two languages does not always equate to being able to conduct interpretation. Interpretation calls for a special skill set to successfully transfer meanings from one language to the other (Gentile, et. al, 1996).

This brings us to the next set of research questions. That is, what level of bilingual proficiency is required for bilingual field interviewers to successfully handle interviews in two languages? What level of interpretation skills are required to interpret a survey interview? What procedures do we need to have in place to verify or certify bilingual field interviewers' bilingual proficiency and interpretation skills? And what assessment tool do we need to develop in order to evaluate the bilingual competence and interpretation skills of bilingual field interviewers?

## **4 Issues to be Addressed in Census Bureau Interpretation Guidelines**

Based on our initial web search and field observations, we believe that it is important to provide guidance and standards for the use of interpreters. These guidelines or standards will help to ensure that the data collected in an interview through the use of an interpreter are as reliable and accurate as the data collected in standardized interviews in English. Preliminary research indicates that Census Bureau interpretation guidelines need to address the following critical issues:

1. What are the most appropriate criteria for use in selecting interpreters?
2. What standard procedure should be in place for using interpreters in the field?
3. What type of training is needed for preparing interpreters?
4. What materials should be provided for interpreters?
5. When encountering a non-English-speaking household, what type of protocols or procedures should field interviewers follow in identifying an interpreter on the spot?
6. What should be the key elements/features of the protocol/procedure?
7. How can a field interviewer best implement these procedures?

## **5 Further Research**

With these issues in mind, we plan to carry out further research to find solutions to the problems. We will continue our web search to learn more about best practices in the use of interpreters by survey organizations around the world. We will also extend our field observations of Census Bureau field interviewers in different regions in the United States.

In addition, we will conduct research to identify what type of training is needed for Census Bureau field interviewers concerning the use of interpreters and what guidance is needed in the interpretation guidelines. We intend to observe field interviewer training sessions, to review field interviewer training materials, and to conduct focus groups and debriefing interviews with field interviewers and other Census Bureau field staff.

One of the most challenging questions about the use of interpreters in in-person interviews is “How do we know if someone who claims to speak the target language is proficient in that language and has the skill to do the interpretation?” The U.S. Census Bureau currently does not have bilingual staff in all relevant languages to assess the language



proficiency or interpretation skills of potential interpreters. We foresee the need to develop a practical assessment tool of interpretation skill that can be used across languages.

We intend to pursue this effort by incorporating the U.S. federal government Interagency Language Roundtable's description of translation skill levels. The interagency language roundtable has recently issued a draft of skill level descriptions for translation (levels 1-5, with level 1 being the lowest and level 5 being the highest). This is a self-assessment tool for translators. We plan to use this concept to develop a series of questions that could be used for self-assessment of interpretation skills to be used by bilingual field interviewers and potential interpreters. This is the first step in developing a practical tool for language assessment.

## **6 Final Goal of the Research Project**

The ultimate goal of this research is to develop a U.S. Census Bureau interpretation guideline, incorporating findings from the present research and best practices of survey organizations around the world.

We envision that the U.S. Census Bureau interpretation guideline will consist of the following components:

1. Guidelines on protocols, procedures, and standards for using interpreters in interviews;
2. Guidance on interpreter training (survey information, confidentiality, interpreters' role in a survey interview, codes of ethics and codes of conduct);
3. Development of a self-assessment tool of interpretation skill and/or bilingual proficiency of field interviewers and potential interpreters.

As mentioned in the beginning, this research project is still at an early stage. We believe that by undertaking this research effort, we will be able not only to develop a Census Bureau interpretation guideline, but also to identify issues relevant to the development of the interpretation guidelines for the International Workshop of Comparative Survey Design and Implementation.

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