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TEXT AND CONTEXT: CHALLENGES TO COMPARABILITY IN SURVEY QUESTIONS

MICHAEL BRAUN & JANET A. HARKNESS

In cross-lingual, cross-cultural studies, appropriate language and translations often play a key role in securing cross-cultural comparability. Sometimes language-as-language seems to be the foremost issue, sometimes more a blend of language, language use, and culture. At other times, problems of “equivalence” have less to do with language and how it is used than how cultural contexts frame respondents’ understanding of questions. In the following we set out to explain how – against the backdrop of specific cultural contexts – cognitive and communicative processes can trigger different interpretations of survey items.

The paper provides illustrations of each of these challenges to “equivalence” and demonstrates how cultural contexts – whether linked to language or not – are related to respondents’ perceptions of what questions mean in ways similar to effects noted in cognitive research on the influence of question context and co-text on respondents’ perception of meaning. In fact, we suggest that question contexts are always culturally anchored contexts. The effects of a language system, its usage, and the specific cultural context are frequently difficult to disentangle.

The paper explores the relationship between language-anchored features and non-linguistic aspects of survey questions in contexts that create problems for “equivalence” or comparability. Selected examples illustrate the usefulness of an integrated framework in trying to come to terms with social science research across different cultures and languages.

1 Introduction

In cross-lingual, cross-cultural studies, appropriate language and translations often play a key role in securing cross-cultural comparability. Sometimes language-as-language seems to be the foremost issue, sometimes more a blend of language, language use, and culture. At other times, problems of “equivalence” are more problems of how the respondents’ understanding

of the items is framed by their cultural context than problems of language or how language is used. Against the backdrop of specific cultural contexts, the paper illustrates how cognitive and communicative processes can trigger different interpretations of survey items.

The processes of interpretation and understanding of questions work in a very general fashion, in both national and cross-nationally comparative studies. We begin below by first discussing effects of cultural contexts, irrespective of whether a questionnaire was translated or not. We then apply these to translation, considering how source question meaning and translated question meaning can be ascertained and kept comparable.

2 Cultural Context Effects Irrespective of Translation

2.1 The role of cultural contexts

Statements, questions, and other utterances have what is generally called semantic meaning, that is, meaning(s) language users regularly associate with the words and the arrangement of words present in any given utterance. They also have pragmatic meaning, that is, meaning that is determined by the interdependence of what is said with the context in which it is said. Pragmatic considerations have an impact on how words and utterances are understood in a given context. These considerations are based on the “common ground” (Clark & Schober, 1992) which participants in the communication share, including their shared knowledge of the world. In everyday life, communication is facilitated by appropriate behavior by both the senders and the receivers. The senders of a message tailor what they say to provide others with the information that they need in order to understand the message in the way intended. The receivers contribute to the success of communication by assuming that what is said is based on common ground and by using “grounding procedures” (Schober, 1999) to verify the adequacy of their interpretation, if necessary.

Unfortunately, the situation in surveys is different from everyday communication. In standardised interviews, for instance, communication is asymmetric; interviewers are supposed to ask, respondents are supposed to answer, but not to ask. If respondents do ask, e.g. about the meaning of questions, interviewers are supposed to ensure that their answers have minimal effects on the respondents’ behavior in the interview. In order to further this aim, they are recommended to respond “Whatever it means to you” (Fowler, 1992: 219), a response definitely unacceptable in everyday communication. While formalised interviewer scripts might actually reduce the impact of variations in the conduct of interviewers on the respondents’ behavior, they create new problems. This is partly due to the fact that interviewer effects represent only one source of error. The wording of individual questions as well as the question order and the response category design may also violate the cooperation principle (Grice, 1975), which guides successful communication.

Respondents in surveys have a number of tasks to complete: interpret a question, generate an opinion, match the opinion to a response category (“formatting”), and edit the response taking differential social desirability of answer categories into consideration (Strack & Martin, 1987; Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988). In order to complete all these tasks, respondents have to understand the meaning, and in the case of unclear or ambiguous questions, they try to derive the meaning from the context. The textual context of a question is represented by the rest of the questionnaire, in particular by the parts already processed: introductory texts, similar questions, the sequence of questions, and answer scales. While the question context holds much sway in social-cognition explanations of respondent behavior (see Schwarz, 1996; Sudman, Bradburn & Schwarz, 1996 for good overviews), another group of variables are less frequently used in these explanations: the personal experiences of respondents. Socio-demographic characteristics, previous behavior of the respondent, psychological or physical states, and external conditions are all related to or are even indicators of these experiences. These variables also form an important context, relevant for the respondents’ behavior, such as the interpretation of questions, which has similar effects as the question context.

In addition to the contexts formed by other components of the questionnaire and the personal experiences of respondents, cultural contexts are of utmost importance in comparative research. Cultural norms, values, and experiences influence the processing of the different tasks respondents have to fulfill in an interview (Johnson et al., 1997). All three kinds of contexts provide respondents with information that can have an effect on the interpretation of a question. These contexts often operate in interaction. The interaction between question and personal-experience contexts results in the conditional context effects discussed in the social-cognition literature (Smith, 1992).

Cross-national surveys are likely to contain questions which do not resonate with or match the societal reality and the issues of public debate in some of the participating countries. Nevertheless, following the cooperation principle, respondents will assume that all the questions in a survey should make sense for them. Clark & Schober (1992: 28) suggest their reasoning may be as follows: “If the surveyor thinks this word has an obvious meaning, then it must be the meaning that is obvious to me at the moment”. Whenever a salient relationship between a question and the situation in a given country can be established, respondents can be expected to establish it. Depending on the details of their cultural context, respondents can thus also be expected to perceive one and the same question differently. Researchers would be well advised to consider this when interpreting responses.

Question context effects arise when, in parsing a question, respondents process elements of the question context that were not intended as contributions to the interpretation process. Question contexts, in the narrow sense of the term “context”, are provided by information which is not permanently available to respondents. Cultural context effects, on the other hand, are not the result of where a question is placed in a questionnaire but how the cultural context contributes to the way respondents process questions. Cultural context effects are based on cross-cultural differences in the saliency of different concepts and in the permanent accessibility of pertinent information. The everyday reality and the frequency of particular events in a society lead to the formation and stabilization of schematic structures.

2.2 Cultural context effects

Different interpretations of a question that are linked to cultural factors can be discussed in terms of what are sometimes called “framing effects”. These result from differences in framing conditions. Following Stocké (2002), we distinguish between framing effects related to question ambiguity, heuristic considerations, and schemas relevant for a given topic or question. Respondents naturally parse questions in terms of their knowledge of the world and understanding of the interview situation, in other words, they use their cultural knowledge to help them interpret question meaning.

An item from the 1994 ISSP module on family and gender (Braun, 1994; Zentralarchiv 1994) illustrates how this interpretive process may work. The item “A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works” leaves several informational components unspecified, including the age of the child, the amount of labour-force participation respondents are to assume for the mother in question, and other considerations such as whether the father is employed outside the home or another adult relative is available to care for the child (Braun, 1998, 2003). Ambiguity-based framing effects will result: respondents will assemble the scenario culturally most salient for them, filling the “gaps” by activating schemata linked to the social realities of their given society. Relevant details might include the rate of female participation in the labor-force, respondents’ knowledge about the availability of part-time jobs and whether crèches are common for very young children. Thus, in some countries respondents might tend to picture the child mentioned in the question as an infant, knowing that older children could be cared for by other means, whereas in other contexts where child care is generally difficult or where mothers regularly stay at home until children are past the toddler stage, 5-year olds might come to mind. In some societies, given the facts of labor-force participation, respondents will assume full-time employment of both parents or scarcity of paid jobs all-round, irrespective of gender.

Using a set of related questions, Braun (2003) was able to demonstrate large differences in responses and understanding in an experiment carried out in 1998/99 in eastern and western parts of Germany (geographically the former East and West Germanys). Respondents were asked to evaluate the suffering of a 3-year old child in different situations (e.g. when both parents work full-time, when the mother works full-time, but the father only part-time, etc.). Respondents who have the same values on the ISSP item above which does not provide explicit detail of the schema involved, differed greatly in their evaluation of the effects on a 3-year old child. Former East Germany had and still has a much higher incidence of childcare facilities for young and very young children and a historically much higher participation rate of women in the labour force. Thus, for former East Germans, if they draw on the East German history of child care and labour force participation, the item has a higher item difficulty.

Questions that are perceived by respondents as not pertinent to an ongoing public debate, or that are not seen to address what respondents consider to be the relevant aspects of a topic, are also problematic. Feeling the question is in some sense irrelevant, respondents might not be motivated to process all the information presented in the question. Instead, they could focus on individual features that do link up positively or negatively with their own views on the topic and take that as a basis for answering the question. Heuristic-based framing effects will result. For example, the information that the woman is to be thought of as working full time in the item “All in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job” might be ignored by respondents who want to demonstrate that they have non-traditional attitudes but, at the same time, cannot imagine that both parents work full-time because they live in a society where it is difficult to juggle work and the family.

Finally, schema-based framing effects as the consequence of an automatic activation of mental structures can result when items holistically activate a schema, over and above the literal meaning conveyed by the question text. The ISSP item “It is not good if the man stays at home and cares for the children and the woman goes out to work” provides an illustration of this. The question is intended to test whether respondents are in favour of a reversal of an arrangement by which men go out to work and women stay at home and care for the children. This arrangement, however, also presupposes that it is accepted that some person should stay at home to care for the children. In other words, it implicitly adopts an ideology schema (cf. Fiske & Taylor, 1991 on ideology schema) that presents labour-force participation of both parents as incompatible with looking after children well. In societies in which this schema does not exist, respondents will be at a loss. Respondents in former communist countries are not likely to read the item the way it was intended. They might see it as implying the man does not have a job and is therefore at home. Much would argue against endorsing an item that is understood to refer to men

being at home because they are out of work. The intended notion of a role reversal will also not make much sense in regions of eastern Germany in which participation of women in the labor force used to be compulsory and is now welcomed for economic reasons.

Cultural contexts and cultural context effects pose problems for all cross-cultural comparative social research, irrespective whether translation is involved or not. In some of the examples mentioned above, the questions were identical in one language (German). It was the cultural background respondents brought to the questions that differed.

3 Questionnaire Translation and Questionnaire Meaning

We now turn briefly to consider the implications of the above for the translating process and for translated questionnaires. Questionnaires are usually designed in one language, often English, and then translated into the other languages required in order to interview populations that cannot be interviewed in the language available. In translation jargon we speak of translating out of a “source” language into a “target” language. Questionnaires are translated for three main purposes – for cross-national survey projects, for within-country research in countries with several official languages, and for projects in which it is necessary to include populations that do not speak the majority language of a given country. In each case, we can expect the cultural context to vary across populations.

The technicalities of team translation procedures have been discussed elsewhere (Harkness, 2002, 2003, 2004), the kinds of specific problems that arise (Harkness, 2003; Harkness et al., 2004), as well as issues of adaptation and cultural tailoring (Harkness, 2004) and we do not discuss these here. Instead, we focus on meaning in the context of translation, given that meaning is co-constructed and depends on semantics, immediate context and co-text, discourse conventions and pragmatics, and, as just outlined, the socio-cultural framework in which respondents are embedded.

3.1 Questions, words, and meaning

We illustrated earlier how respondents use knowledge of the(ir) world in interpreting what questions are intended to mean. Words and combinations of words are usually open to multiple interpretations, depending on the words themselves, the context of utterance, the participants involved, the foregoing communication (co-text), the common ground shared by participants, and other pragmatic considerations related to how we communicate and the role that pragmatic factors of various kinds play in that. Space restrictions prevent us from discussing these here.

In sum, question meaning is not determined by the wording of questions alone. The distinction between what an utterance or part of an utterance is intended to mean (often called *speaker intended meaning*) and what recipients of an utterance understand it to mean (called *perceived meaning*) is an important one in unravelling how meaning is negotiated in communication and is also frequently open to misunderstanding.

Chafe's (1980) famous pear stories, stories generated on the basis of visually presented stimuli, are an excellent illustration of the fact that different cultures perceive the same material differently. Tanzer (2005) discusses cultural effects in visual material used in educational tests. As illustrated earlier, differences in cultural framing may mean that a reading of a question salient for one cultural group is not the reading that is salient for a second cultural group. In other words, perceived meaning may well differ from cultural group to cultural group. Within country research has shown that cultural groups that form part of a single larger society also differ in how they understand and respond to questions (e.g., Johnson et al., forthcoming; Miller, 2003; Willis, 2004). We can expect differences will increase as the distance between cultural, societal, language and pragmatic systems increases.

Whenever translation is called for in survey research, differences in these systems will exist across the survey populations interviewed. As a result, even if a translation may be judged to be technically adequate, the interpretation a question receives can easily differ across different cultural groups.

3.2 Researcher expectations for translations

In producing translations of survey questions, researchers intend to ask the same questions in different contexts and languages. Few would expect survey translators to produce word-for-word translations in order to do this and it would be an odd translator who actually managed to work on this basis. This said, survey translators are generally expected to convey the semantic content of questions faithfully and to stay as close to the original as possible. This is commonly taken to mean that translators should try to convey also finer details considered relevant in terms of measurement or question design. Thus if a question includes the phrase "if any/if at all" (e.g., *To what extent, if at all, do you ...*), which is a survey strategy to accommodate respondents for whom the question may not apply, translators would normally be expected to match this in translation. As noted elsewhere, including such details may produce awkward or more complicated questions (Harkness et al., 2004). Alternatively, if the source questionnaire refers to "foster children" or "god children", the target questionnaire might also be expected to refer to these. This, as it turns out, is also not an easy matter; societies differ linguistically and legally in the distinctions they make

between various kind of “children” and forms of caring for the children. Then again, if the source question formulation is symmetrically organised and asks “to what extent do you *agree or disagree* with the following statements”, translators will be expected to convey this deliberately balanced phrasing, rather than producing something more like “Do you agree with the following statements?”. However, not all languages can match the agree/disagree pair. In addition, it has been suggested in various places that Hispanic populations will prefer to indicate agreement or the opposite rather to distinguish degrees of agreement or disagreement. The same applies to the translation of single key words or phrases. Thus if the source question asks about pride “in the arts and literature”, as in the 1995 ISSP module on National Identity, translators might be expected to find terms that cover exactly everything covered by “arts and literature” in English, without changing stimulus or respondent burden. This again can prove to be a challenge. In order to include the performing arts in German, for example, an additional and rather formal descriptor would be necessary.

Thus translation in the form often expected for surveys can best be likened to a balancing act, requiring know-how, practice, talent but also the confidence on the part of the translator to speak up when close translation will not work. Translators working into languages and cultures at a great distance from the source questionnaire language and culture have, in any case, less opportunity to stick close to the source text if they want to avoid the text sounding really awkward or nonsensical. An overview of problems related to close translation can be found in Harkness et al. (2004).

The European Social Survey tries to encourage participating countries to seek functional equivalence of stimulus, partnered with comparability of semantic content. In other words, if a source question contains the phrase “race or ethnicity” and one or both of these terms cannot be directly translated for any of a variety of reasons, translators have the leeway to seek a phrase that can be used in their cultural context to secure information about cultural and/or genetic ancestry. At the same time, this freedom (and responsibility) is a challenge for survey researchers. Readers who speak Spanish, German or French, for example, might find it instructive to compare the different approaches to translation evidenced in translations in the same language in recent ISSP and ESS studies. Questionnaires for both surveys can be downloaded free of charge from the web.

Briefing sessions for translators should make clear what in a given project “stay close to the original” means. Otherwise, translators might focus on words rather than on the intended meaning of questions. Research on students of translation shows that inexperienced translators work more on the level of words than on the level of unit meaning, thereby increasing the likelihood of too close and ineffective translation (Kussmaul,

1995). Unfortunately, survey research often employs inexperienced people who may translate infrequently and have little professional training.

Thus, as we understand survey translation, the task to be undertaken goes considerably beyond commissioning translators to produce a literal or semantically faithful translation. This is not to say that survey translations should be free translations. Measurement issues in questions often require careful retention of scope or emphasis across translations, for example.

Like respondents reading a source question, translators scan questions for sense or intended meaning on the basis of their knowledge of the context, the co-text (questions surrounding the question to be translated), and the socio-cultural framework within which a given question is embedded. Unlike respondents, they are trained to parse not only to understand but to parse with the specific aim of translating. Their training and skills help them identify potential ambiguities and translation problems. This is one reason why translators can be very useful proof-readers for draft questionnaires and can be helpful in developing questionnaires intended for comparative use.

At the same time, without understanding the measurement properties of questions and answer categories, it may be difficult for translators to be sure what a question is really intended to do. This is one of the reasons why team procedures are suggested for survey translation. By setting up a team, people with the necessary language and translatory skills can be brought together with people who understand the goals and structure of an instrument (cf. Harkness & Schoua-Glusberg, 1998; Harkness, 2003; Harkness et al., 2004). Thus translators who have an understanding of survey question design are invaluable. Other things being equal, the better briefing that translators can be given, the better equipped they will be. A technical understanding of specific design components in questions can guide their appraisal of the source question and their decisions on how best to translate this.

3.3 Using translation to inform questionnaire design

It is sometimes assumed that questions that performed well in one or more contexts will perform well in other contexts too. Since tried and tested questions may also be adopted into a survey without pre-testing for the new context, problems they may have for a new socio-cultural and linguistic setting may only become apparent after the event. The literature abounds with examples of questions that have “gone wrong”. Harkness (1995, 2003, 2004) has suggested using rough or “advance” translation to inform source questionnaire design for comparative projects. The idea is that translators embedded in the socio-cultural context for which they are translating will be able not only to point to linguistic

challenges in the source question with regard to translation but also to pragmatic and socio-cultural issues. In our experience, only considering the questions in their English form disguises some of the problems lying in wait for implementation in other cultures. Optimal protocols for such procedures remain to be developed. If researchers alone are involved in producing these first draft translations, we run the risk that they, like inexperienced translators, would be influenced by the source questions and could fail to note problems. If we use only translators without knowledge of survey design, we run the risk that they do not perceive the measurement issues at stake.

This notwithstanding, the automatic parsing for meaning that is part of the professional translator's training is invaluable for developing survey questions intended for multiple socio-cultural contexts. These rough translations are an early alarm-signal strategy. They are not intended as a substitute for testing at the much later stage of final draft questionnaires. Finally we note that different populations sometimes share a language, that is, they use a different regional form of the language (American, British or Australian English). While the linguistic differences may not be great, the socio-cultural differences may result in differences of interpretation. Care should be taken to adjust wording if necessary.

4 Conclusion

Poor translations of good questions mean respondents read and respond to a question they should not have been asked. Researchers lose the opportunity to ask the questions they intended. However, technically well-translated questions that are understood differently in different cultures are equally problematic. In order to make sure that respondents anchored in different cultural contexts perceive one and the same intended meaning, procedures of question development, question testing, and question translation need to change.

By providing detailed specification of the measurement intended and the scenario envisaged in the source questions, translators and adaptors could produce questions that allow respondents to focus on the intended meaning and the appropriate scenarios in other contexts. In saying this, we obviously envisage that translation be understood as translation of intended meaning and intended measurement goals and not simply translation of semantic content. A major goal for future research must be to develop a systematic scheme to identify what aspects of questionnaires should be given particular scrutiny for comparative design, with or without language differences.

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