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Abstract

The IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees is one of the first large-scale quantitative surveys in Germany focusing on refugees exclusively. It is able to provide valuable insights on the recent cohort of refugees who arrived in Germany as of the year 2013. However, due to the fact that most respondents of the target population are not proficient in German, the research partners who conducted the survey faced several obstacles. One crucial aspect in this regard was the written and audio translation of field instruments. Therefore, this paper gives some insights into the translation and fielding procedures and presents numbers on the use of written and audio translations in the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees. We found that especially a written translation was very helpful, but also the audio files proved to facilitate participation in the survey. However, due to the fact that those tools are new and innovative, further research on their effects on survey quality needs to be carried out.

1 Introduction[25]

In 2015, around 890,000 refugees came to Germany (Bundesministerium des Inneren [BMI], 2016). This inflow was unique in the younger German history. To respond to these events in Germany, the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) (Wagner, Frick, & Schupp, 2007), the Institute for Employment Research (IAB), and the Migration, Integration, and Asylum Research Center at the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF-FZ) implemented a panel study[26], the so-called IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany[27], with humanitarian migrants that arrived in Germany between January 2013 and January 2016 as its target group (for first analyses, see Brücker, Rother, & Schupp, 2016; Brücker et al., 2016; Brücker, Rother, & Schupp, 2017).

The following description of the refugee sample relies on the methodological documentation of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (Kroh et al., 2017a, 2017b). The sample

25 *Acknowledgements*: Thanks go to our partners at the Institute for Employment Research (IAB), the Migration, Integration, and Asylum Research Center at the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF-FZ), and the fieldwork company Kantar Public with whom this study was developed.

26 This study contains around 4,500 respondents in around 3,300 households.

27 doi:10.5684/soep.v33.1

was drawn from the central register of foreigners (AZR) at the BAMF (see Babka von Gostomski & Pupeter, 2008). This register is updated regularly. However, due to the inflow of refugees at the German borders, especially in 2015 and 2016, there was a delay between the time of arrival of refugees and their proper registration. To tackle this delay, the sample for the refugee survey was drawn in tranches. The first tranche was drawn in January, the second in April, and the third and fourth in June 2016. In addition, the sample was split into two subsamples, namely M3 and M4. The former had a focus on adult migrants while the latter focused on refugee families. In general, both subsamples had a higher sampling probability for females, persons over 30, and refugees with granted asylum or refugee status. By applying weights that account for such a disproportional design, the samples remain representative in respect to the target group and can be used jointly.

Being a household panel, the sampling design followed the concept of so-called "anchor persons". This means that even though we sampled on an individual level the whole household of the sampled (anchor) person was included in the survey (Kroh et al., 2017b). Each household of an anchor person and subsequently each member in this household were included in the sample. A letter was sent to each household explaining the project and emphasizing that this project was not related to any asylum procedures that a household might currently be involved in.

2 Translation and Fieldwork

Besides the particularities related to the sampling procedure and design, the research partners further needed to consider the fact that the respondents likely did not speak German well enough in order to take part in the survey in the German language. Therefore, all the material (advance letters, flyers, and questionnaires) was provided in seven different languages, including German (see Table 1). The translation process and the provision of the field material was the responsibility of Kantar Public.[28] For the translation of the material, professional translators for each language were used. The process for the questionnaire was as follows: To begin with, a German version of the questionnaire was developed by the research partners. It was then translated into English by two translators working separately. Either the English or the German version was then the starting point for all other translations[29]: Two translators each produced a translation. Then one translator created a reconciled version and this was handed to the other translator who could correct remain-

28 https://www.tns-infratest.com/sofo/kantar-public.asp

29 This mixture was due to the fact that the corresponding language was not German for all the participating translators.

ing mistakes.[30] In the end, all the material was provided to the respondents both in German and in one of the languages listed in Table 1.[31]

During the interview, both languages (German and the respondent's language) were displayed on the screen. Since the mode of the interview was computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI), both interviewer and respondent were able to look at the screen jointly to overcome language barriers. For cases where this was not sufficient, Kantar Public also provided audio files for each language. These audio files had been produced by the same translators who had already developed the written translation. On top, if anything in the interviewing process was problematic, Kantar Public also provided a hotline where professional interpreters were available to help during the process of fieldwork.

Table 1 lists all the translated versions of the questionnaire that were eventually produced by Kantar Public. Furthermore, it provides information on the use of these translated questionnaires during fieldwork.

Table 1 Distribution of languages used during fieldwork, in percent

Language	Percent
German/English	16.1
German/Arabic	65.2
German/Farsi	12.6
German/Pashto	1.0
German/Urdu	1.7
German/Kurmanji	3.4
N	4,527

Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, own calculations

Leading by far, the German/Arabic version was used most frequently with 65%. This reflects the regions of origin of the respondents quite well: The Middle East, and especially Syria, was the biggest source of migrants in this sample. Nevertheless, it is quite striking that the second most used language version was German/English with around 16%. If we cross-tabulate citizenship and language version used (see Table 2), we see that many respondents who used the German/English version came from countries such as Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, or the Balkan states (41.1%) – countries from which respondents are not very likely to be granted asylum. These countries account for around 7% of the sample. Therefore, a bias due to not providing a questionnaire in languages of these countries should be limited for future waves of the panel. The second highest share of

30 There are some studies that deal with the quality of questionnaire translation and bias in terms of a transfer of meaning. With the mentioned procedure of questionnaire translation, a possible bias should be minimalized. However, for a comprehensive overview regarding occurring obstacles, see Harkness et al. (2010).

31 The translated instruments can be provided by the SOEP team on request.

respondents using the German/English version were African nationals such as Eritreans and Somalians (28.4%). The remaining users of the English version distribute in small numbers over the rest of the populations.

Table 2 Language version and country of origin of respondents who used a given language the most, in percent, absolute numbers in parenthesis

Language versions	Countries of origin	Percent (absolute numbers)	N
German/English	Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia & Balkans	41.1 (299)	728
German/Arabic	Syria	73.5 (2,171)	2,952
German/Farsi	Afghanistan	88.4 (505)	571
German/Pashto	Afghanistan	95.7 (45)	47
German/Urdu	Iran/Pakistan	85.7 (66)	77
German/Kurmanji	Iraq	65.8 (100)	152
Total			4,527

Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, own calculations

3 Controlling the Use of Translations

It is obvious that, given the translation process and the different modes of translation (written and audio), we require an assessment of these aspects. Furthermore, these aspects will also need to be taken into account in substantive analyses. To tackle the translation and fieldwork particularities, the research partners provided an interviewer questionnaire in which they asked the interviewers to rate the respondent's German language proficiency, provide information on the extent to which written translations and/or audio files were used, and to rate the helpfulness of these "tools". In the following section, I will present these assessment instruments and present a first descriptive analysis.[32]

a) How well could you conduct the interview in German?[33]
   Wie gut konnten Sie das Interview in deutscher Sprache durchführen?
   Scale: 1 (very well) to 5 (very bad)
b) During this interview, how often were the translated texts used?
   Wie häufig wurden in diesem Interview die übersetzten Texte verwendet?
   Scale: 1 (with every question) to 5 (not at all)
c) In this interview, how helpful were the translated texts?
   Wie hilfreich waren in diesem Interview die übersetzten Texte?
   Scale: 1 (very helpful) to 4 (not at all helpful)

32 The following questions were provided to the interviewers in German only (the English translations provided here merely serve documentary purposes).

33 We used this question also as an assessment of the German proficiency of the respondent. As shown further down, this assumption is legitimate.

d) During this interview, how often were the audio files used?
Wie häufig wurden in diesem Interview die Audiodateien verwendet?
Scale: 1 (with every question to 5 (not at all)

e) In this interview, how helpful were the audio files?
Wie hilfreich waren in diesem Interview die Audiodateien
Scale: 1 (very helpful) to 4 (not at all helpful)

Table 3 Distribution of respondent's German language proficiency, as rated by the interviewer, in percent

German Language proficiency	Percent
very well	11.2
quite well	15.0
okay	22.1
quite bad	22.9
very bad	28.8
N	4,527

Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, own calculations

Table 3 shows that there is a clear trend towards assessing the German language skills of the respondents as (quite) bad (without the middle category). Nevertheless, it is remarkable that there seems to be a group of refugees in the sample (around 11%) that already masters the German language. Even though there is thus a share of respondents that seems to speak German very well, these numbers nevertheless indicate that translations are necessary. If we correlate these numbers with the four biggest refugee nationalities in our sample – respondents from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Eritrea –, we can conclude that especially refugees from Syria speak German quite well or better (with over 28% of the Syrians in the sample, the interview could be conducted in German quite well or better – as reported by the interviewers). Previous publications indicate that especially Syrians have high educational degrees. We therefore assume that this is the reason for their high German proficiency (see Schupp et al., 2017).

As mentioned before, for those who did not speak German well enough for survey participation in the German language, the research partners provided a written translation. Table 4 shows that this mode was used in particular by respondents with (quite) bad German-language skills. We see a significant relationship between the language assessment by the interviewer and the use of the written translation. In other words, the less a respondent spoke German, the more likely the written translation was used. Nevertheless, a small share with strong German language skills also used the written translation. We assume that this is due to the fact that a written translation was provided in every case per default. Therefore, also those with high proficiency might have used it to balance out remaining difficulties. Furthermore, there was a share of respondents with low German proficiency who did not use the written translation at all. Presumably those are respondents who were

not able to rely on their mother tongue, who did not speak English or who were illiterate and therefore not able to read.

In around 58% of the interviews, the written translation was used in the entire questionnaire. Connected with an average of 1.4 on the scale of helpfulness of the written translation (see above variable number c), we conclude that this written mode was necessary and extremely useful.

Table 4 Respondent's German language proficiency, as rated by interviewer, over use of written translation, in percent

	Use of written translation						
German Language proficiency	with every question	with two thirds	with half of the questions	with less than half of the questions	not at all	Total	N
very well	4.4	1.5	1.1	1.8	2.5	11.2	509
quite well	6.0	2.8	1.8	1.9	2.5	15	678
okay	11.9	3.9	2.5	1.3	2.5	22.1	1,000
quite bad	15.9	2.1	1.4	1.2	2.4	22.9	1,038
very bad	19.9	1.6	1	1.4	4.9	28.8	1,302
Total	58.1	11.8	7.8	7.6	14.7	100	
N	2,630	535	352	344	666		4,527

Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, own calculations

A similar pattern is detected when analyzing the audio files of the translations, in relation to the respondent's German language proficiency (see Table 5). The less a respondent spoke German, the more likely it was that the audio files were used. The mean assessment shows a score of 1.6 (for the scale, see above variable number e), given by those who gave another answer than "not at all". We therefore consider the audio files to be helpful as well. Nevertheless, we detect some contradictory patterns. On the one hand, as mentioned before, respondents with low German proficiency tended to use the audio "tool". On the other hand, there was also a high share of respondents with low proficiency who did not use the audio "tool" at all. This might be due to the fact that the research partners were not able to provide all the languages that were needed and therefore the audio files, in these cases, were redundant.

In sum, the two translation modes of the questionnaire (written and audio) were assessed as very helpful by the interviewers, even though they were used to quite different degrees. Especially the written translation stands out with having been used in almost every interview; it was also assessed by the interviewers as a bit more helpful than the provided audio files. The vast difference in usage is clearly due to the fact that the written translation was presented as a default while the audio files had to be activated by the interviewer or the respondent.

But in both cases we also detect contradictory patterns such as respondents with high German proficiency choosing these translation "tools" and respondents with low proficiency not choosing them. Besides the aforementioned reasons, I would like to repeat that the variables rely on information of the interviewers and that the questions were designed to ask for a raw estimation. Some ambiguities might also be due to this particular design.

Table 5 Respondent's German language proficiency, as rated by interviewer, over use of audio files, in percent

	Use of audio translation						
German Language proficiency	with every question	with two thirds	with half of the questions	with less than half of the questions	not at all	Total	N
very well	1.1	0.3	0.2	0.6	9.0	11.2	509
quite well	0.2	0.7	0.4	1.2	12.4	15	678
okay	0.8	1.4	1.1	2.2	16.6	22.1	1,000
quite bad	1.2	1.7	1.2	2.3	16.6	22.9	1,038
very bad	3.9	2.3	1.1	2.7	18.8	28.8	1,302
Total	7.2	6.3	4	9.1	73.4	100	
N	326	286	181	411	3,323		4,527

Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, own calculations

As mentioned before, Kantar Public also provided professional interpreters to help during the fieldwork. Nevertheless, we observed that also many informal interpreters helped during the interviewing process. The term "informal" refers to the fact that the research partners did not provide these interpreters. We need to be aware of the fact that the use of interpreters might have created some bias. To control for such a distortion, questions on the presence of an informal interpreter were included in the interviewer questionnaire.

a) Due to language barriers, did other people help with translating the questions?
   Haben wegen Sprachschwierigkeiten andere Personen bei der Übersetzung der Fragen geholfen?
   1 (yes, a professional interpreter); 2 (yes someone different); 3 (no, nobody).[34]
b) [asked when informal interpreters were used] In which language did the other person translate?
   In welche Sprache hat die andere Person übersetzt?
c) [asked when informal interpreters were used] How old is the other person, approximately?
   Wie alt ist die andere Person etwa?

34 German Translation: 1 (ja, ein professioneller Dolmetscher); 2 (ja, eine andere Person); 3 (Nein, niemand)

d) [asked when informal interpreters were used] Is the other person male or female?
Ist die andere Person männlich oder weiblich?
e) Into which language did the interpreter translate?
In welche Sprache hat der Dolmetscher übersetzt?
f) How old was the interpreter, approximately?
Wie alt war der Dolmetscher in etwa?
g) Was the interpreter male or female?
Ist der Dolmetscher männlich oder weiblich?

Table 6 Use of interpreters, in percent

Type of interpreter	Percent
Professional interpreter	1.7
Informal interpreter	34.1
No interpreter	64.3
N	4,527

Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, own calculations

As Table 6 indicates, we see that the professional interpreters barely played a role during fieldwork in contrast to informal interpreters. In about one third of the interviews, help from an informal interpreter was sought. This figure is a reason to look deeper into the question about who sought such help in order to give some recommendations on how to deal with these cases.

By taking a look at which nationals used informal interpreters the most, we can report that respondents from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq were the most frequent users, which is most likely due to the many dialects that are spoken in the Arabic world and the high proportion of their group in the refugee population. This argument is supported by the fact that most of the informal interpreters interpreted into some form of Arabic. This information was provided by the interviewer (see question e in the aforementioned list). For the analysis of the survey data, we should consider taking these numbers into account and to control for an interpreter bias in the (multivariate) analysis. A problem with using interpreters is the fact that they might have a strong effect on the respondent's behavior. Therefore, it is important to consider the questions regarding the interpreter's characteristics especially when it comes to sensitive questions on for example religion or gender. It might be intimidating to answer questions about relationships, role concepts, and values when not only the interviewer but also a third party is present who might be part of the family or the circle of friends. Additionally, we are not able to control whether the given translation actually matches the semantic meaning of a given item.

Furthermore, on first sight it seems legitimate to conclude from this relatively high usage of informal interpreters that it is worthwhile to include more, especially Arabic, dialects in future surveys. However, due to obvious budget constraints research projects are not able to provide all the necessary languages. Therefore, it is more promising and more

inclusive to provide a wide range of languages instead of focusing on only one (and its dialects) so that we do not, unintendedly, narrow down the target group.

So far, in our assessment of the German language proficiency of the respondents we have relied on the information provided by the interviewer. However, the problem with the interviewer assessing the language skills is that it is unclear in reference to whom or what the assessment has been carried out. To tackle this problem, I compared the external evaluation with an assessment as undertaken by the respondents themselves. In the questionnaire, the research partners provided a language module testing German language skills in reading, writing, and speaking.[35] The three variables on the language competencies were strongly correlated, which is indicated by a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.93; therefore, I was able to produce an additive index. If we correlate this index of the assessment with the interviewer evaluation of the respondent's German language proficiency, a correlation of .58 is measured. Therefore, we have an indication that our measurement of language abilities, by the interviewers and by the respondents themselves, is appropriate.

4 Conclusion

In sum, we can conclude that different modes of translation (written and audio) are highly valuable when conducting interviews with refugees. Using these different modes, the research partners were able to reduce a response bias in respect to language barriers. Even though we are not able to assess the translation itself, by applying an interviewer questionnaire we can control and test for emerging biases during the interview. Especially with panel data this is quite important in order to improve further waves. Even though we are in need to revise our instruments constantly, for future waves it is likely that the respondents improve their German-language skills and therefore the need for bias control will decline.

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35 Scale: 1 "very well" to 5 "not at all"

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