On Translation

Translation is an art in which words in one language are converted into linguistic expressions in another. The challenge is ensuring the same quality of written expression is used in both languages and that the meaning of the words is equivalent. This second requirement is different to making the words the same.

Literal translation aims to ensure that expressions in the target language use exactly the same words as the source language. This is usually validated by a back-translation procedure in which the target language expression is translated back into the source language to ensure the words that come out are the same. The problem with this approach is that there are multiple ways to say the same thing in any language meaning that the exact phrasing is less important than the intended meaning which can be expressed in multiple ways. Related to this is the challenge that languages often have different syntactical rules meaning that literal translation can create awkward expressions that do not have elegance in the target language.

Furthermore, words in any language often have associated connotations besides the primary denotation. Documents that are written in colloquial language will use terminology that ought not to be literally translated because those words in the target language will not have the same meaning or resonance to people of the target language.

Hence, the goal of translation is to ensure the same meaning is communicated taking into account the context, audience, topic, and genre in which the translation is to be used. Achieving this is much more an art than a science. It is worth noting that if you can't achieve semantic or functional equivalence, it is appropriate to consider that the problem lies in the origin language version. It might be possible to change the wording of the source language to still have the same meaning but allow for a more fluent and correct expression; this is called decentering the translation process and may be difficult if you are not able to adapt the source language version.

Nonetheless, this judge-rating technique can be used to check how similar in meaning an expression is in two languages. We used this technique to develop the Chinese-Teacher Conceptions of Assessment and the Chinese-Student Conceptions of Assessment inventories.

Give bilingual people pairs of sentences or paragraphs and ask them to rate if they mean the same thing and how sure they are. For example:

  a. "4" = very close
  b. "3" = pretty close
  c. "2" = kind of close
  d. "1" = not close

For items with an average score of raters less than 3.0 then those items must be investigated to see if you can detect why raters did not think they were equivalent.

It's also good to ask raters how equivalent their competence is in each of the 2 languages:

How good is your Target Language?   **1.** Barely Understand   **2   3   4   5   6** Native User

How good is your Source Language?   **1.** Barely Understand   **2   3   4   5   6** Native User

I'd always use an odd number of judges but preferably no less than 3. That way I can always say there is a majority agreement.

Suggested Readings

Jin, D., & Nida, E. A. (2006). *On translation: An expanded edition*. City University of Hong Kong Press.

International Test Commission. (2018). ITC Guidelines for Translating and Adapting Tests (Second Edition). *International Journal of Testing*, *18*(2), 101-134. https://doi.org/10.1080/15305058.2017.1398166

Werner, O., & Campbell, D. T. (1973). Translating, working through interpreters, and the problem of decentering. In R. Naroll & R. Cohen (Eds.), *A Handbook of Method in Cultural Anthropology* (pp. 398-420). Columbia University Press.

Sample Technique Uses

Brown, G. T. L., & Wang, Z. (2016). Understanding Chinese university student conceptions of assessment: cultural similarities and jurisdictional differences between Hong Kong and China. *Social Psychology of Education*, *19*(1), 151-173. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-015-9322-x

Brown, G. T. L., Hui, S. K. F., Yu, F. W. M., & Kennedy, K. J. (2011). Teachers' conceptions of assessment in Chinese contexts: A tripartite model of accountability, improvement, and irrelevance. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *50*(5-6), 307-320. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2011.10.003

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