

The Sociolinguistics of Survey Translation


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Roadmap of the Talk

- ✚ Survey translation practice and research
- ✚ Basic concepts of sociolinguistics
- ✚ Sociolinguistic paradigm of translation: A proposal
- ✚ Two Census Bureau multilingual projects
 - ✚ 2010 Census Form in five languages
 - ✚ American Community Survey letters and brochures in 10 languages
- ✚ Possible solutions and future research

Example 1: Original English Receipt

 **By my signature below I confirm that I have received \$40 as payment for participating in a study** to test the language used in letters and brochures from the American Community Survey. This interview is being conducted by RTI and RSS for the U.S. Census Bureau. This payment is given in appreciation of the time spent reviewing the survey materials and answering questions about wording and meaning.

Example 2: Chinese Translation

- ✚ Today I myself participated in a study conducted by RTI and RSS. This study is to evaluate the language used in letters and brochures for the American Community Survey. This study is conducted by RTI for the U.S. Census Bureau. During this interview, I reviewed the survey materials and answered questions about wording and meaning. **Now I have received \$40 as payment of appreciation for my participation.**

Background of Survey Translation

✦ Challenges

- ✦ Increasing diversity in the U.S. population
- ✦ In 2004, 12% of the U.S. population was foreign-born (2004 Current Population Survey)
 - ✦ 53% Latin America, 25% Asia, 14% Europe
- ✦ Need for translating survey instruments and documents
 - ✦ To ensure quality of data from non-English-speaking households
 - ✦ To encourage survey participation from non-English-speaking populations

Challenges in Survey Translation

- + “Asks the same questions and offers the same response options.” (Harkness and Schoua-Glusberg 1998:92)
- + Previous studies focus on word meaning, and complex mappings between words in different languages

Traditional Translation Process

- ✚ Translation → Review → Revision → Finalizing
- ✚ Conducted by bilinguals (translators and reviewers)
- ✚ Usually resolve translation issues at the *lexical and syntactic* levels
- ✚ Issues at the *pragmatic* level are more subtle and difficult to overcome
- ✚ And will affect data quality and will hinder survey participation

Recent Development in Survey Translation

- ✦ TRAPD (translation, review, adjudication, pretesting, documentation) (Harkness et al., 2003, Forsyth et al., 2007)
- ✦ U.S. Census Bureau Translation Guidelines (Pan and de la Puente 2004, 2005)
 - ✦ Committee approach in translation
 - ✦ Pretesting of translation with respondents who speak target languages

Questions to Consider

- # What makes something a good translation?
- # How to “translate” a context in which a text is produced?
- # How to transfer concepts from one culture into other cultures that may not share the same value system?
- # What components should be included in the assessment of translation?
- # What specific guidance can be provided to translators and reviewers?

Sociolinguistics

✚ Basic notion:

- ✚ Language use is not random
- ✚ Is indexical of one's social class, status, gender, generation, region of origin

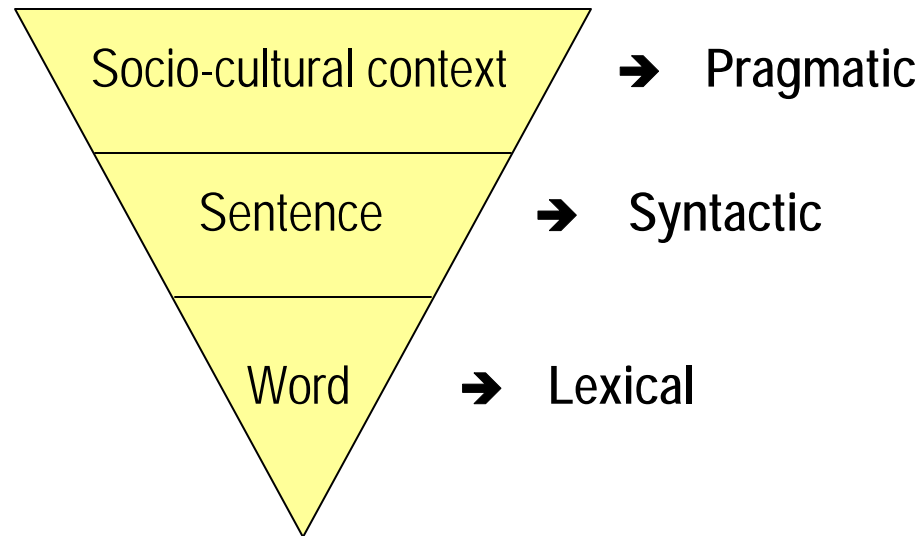
✚ Studies:

- ✚ Relationship between language and society
- ✚ Social function of language

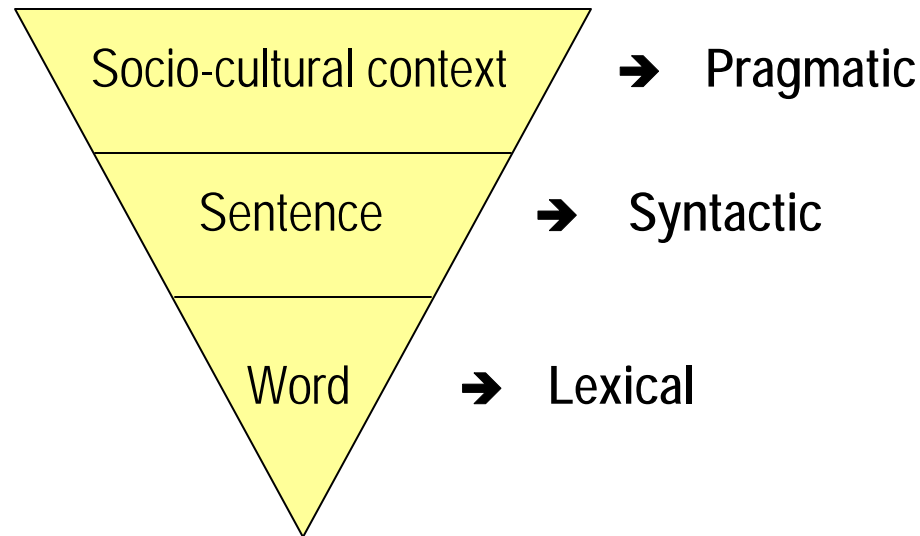
✚ Examines:

- ✚ Linguistic features
- ✚ Situation (who, where, when, what, how, and why)
- ✚ Context (textual, cultural, and social)

Sociolinguistic View of Quality Translation



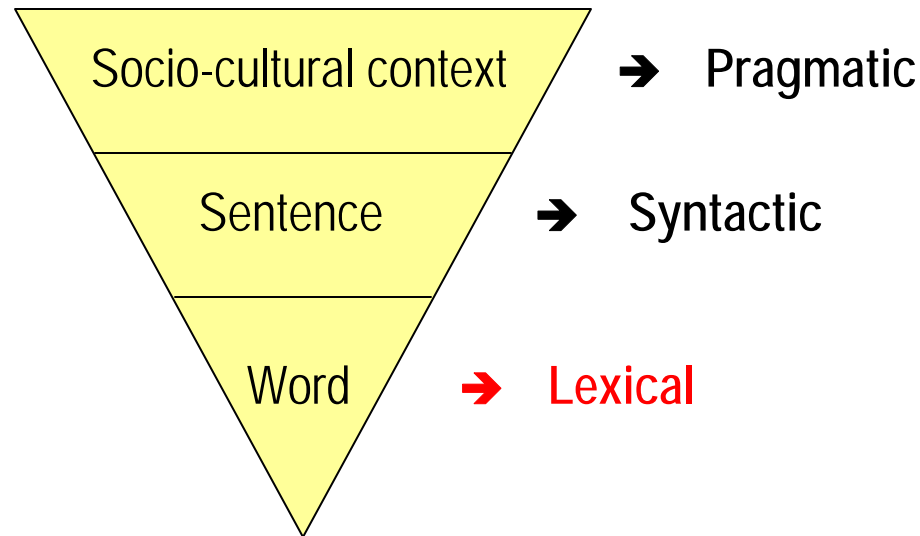
Chinese Translation of the ACS Name



American Community Survey

Chinese translation: 美国社区调查

Chinese Translation of the ACS Name

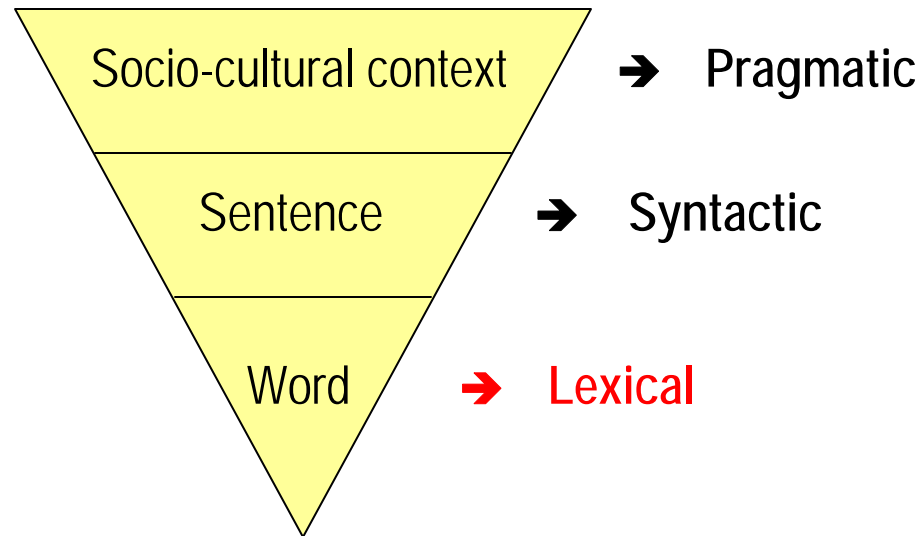


American Community Survey



美国

Chinese Translation of the ACS Name



American Community Survey

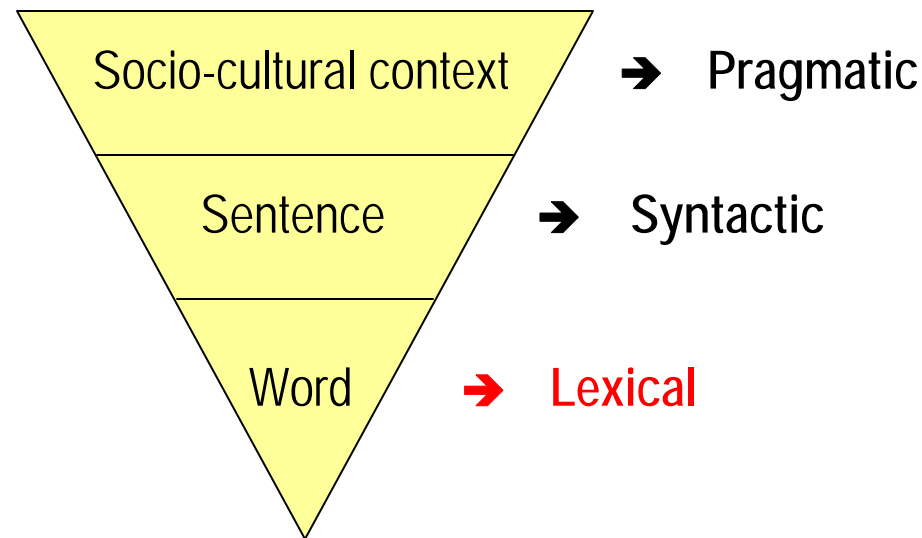


美国



社区

Chinese Translation of the ACS Name



American Community Survey



美国

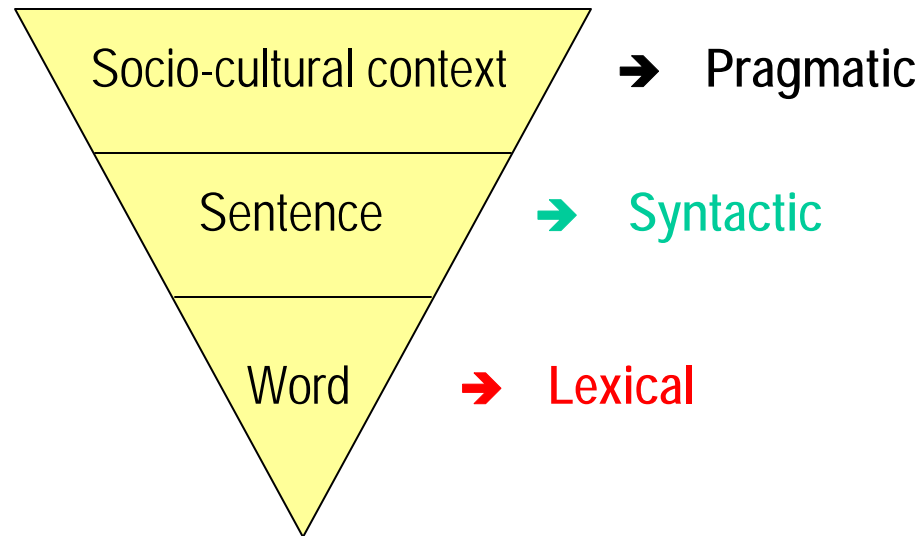


社区



调查

Chinese Translation of the ACS Name



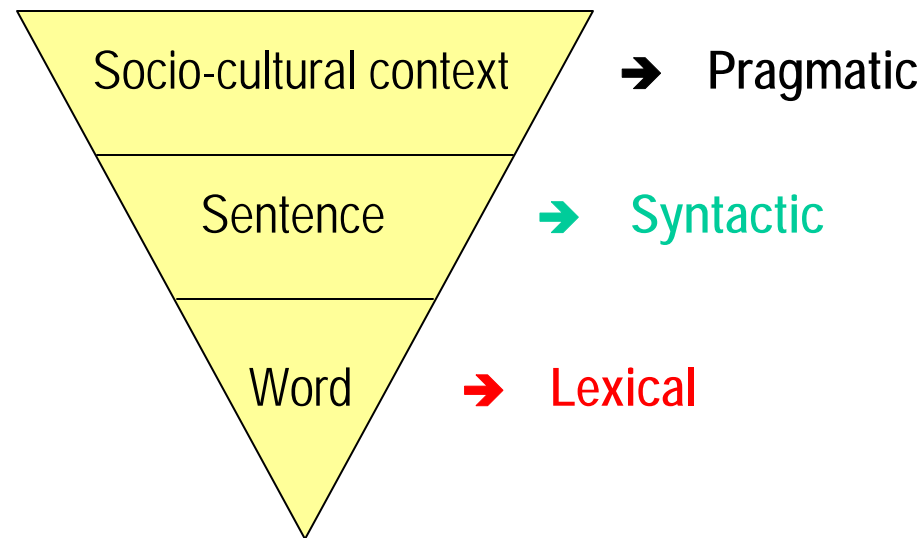
American Community Survey



(1) 美国



Chinese Translation of the ACS Name



American Community Survey



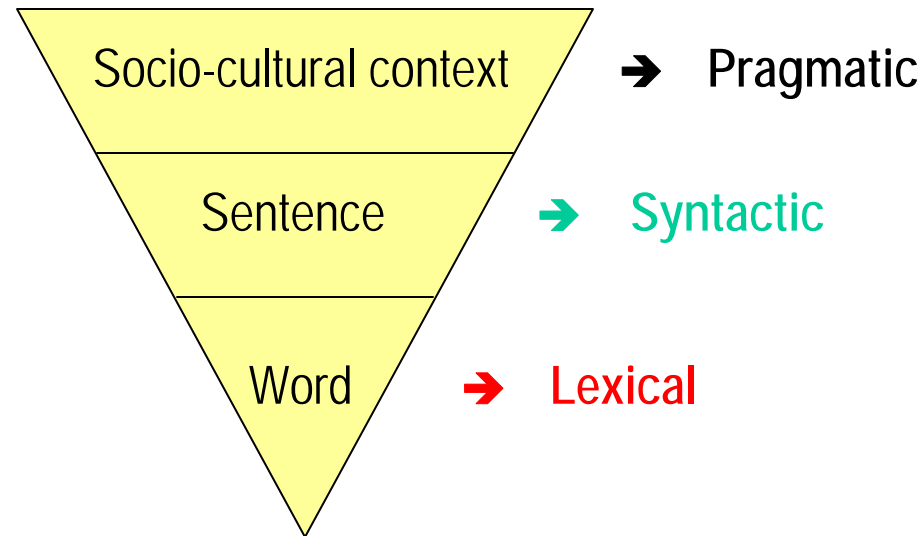
(1) 美国



(2) 社区



Chinese Translation of the ACS Name



American Community Survey



(1) 美国

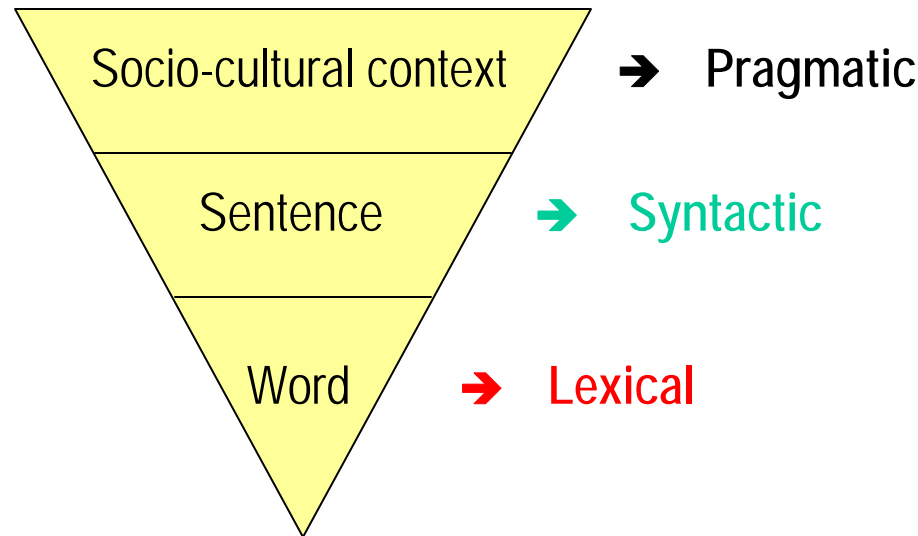


(2) 社区



(3) 调查

Sociocultural Context and Interpretation of Translated Items



American Community Survey



(1) 美国



(2) 社区



(3) 调查

Chinese interpretation: **American Social Investigation**

Chinese reaction: **“I don’t need to participate.”**

How to Ensure Translation at the Pragmatic/Functional Level?

+ Instead of asking:

+ “Is this a correct term?”

+ “Is this a good translation?”

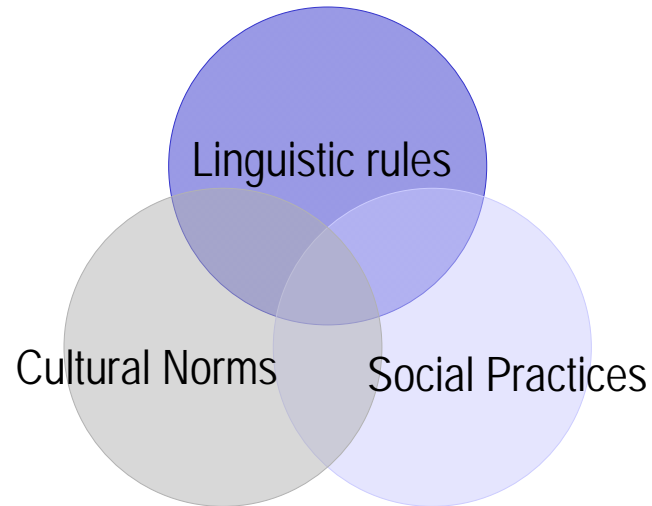
+ Ask:

+ “How do our respondents interpret the translated term/question?”

+ “How do our respondents react to the translated term/question?”

+ How to get there? What to look for?

The Sociolinguistics of Survey Translation



Guiding Principles

- ✚ Linguistic rules
 - ✚ Words
 - ✚ Word order
 - ✚ Sentence structures
- ✚ Cultural norms (same concept, but different ways of expressing it)
 - ✚ Different ways of communication
 - ✚ Politeness rules
 - ✚ Discourse structure
- ✚ Social practices (no equivalence, or different concept or practice)
 - ✚ What is a survey?
 - ✚ What is a foster child?
 - ✚ What is a nursing home?

Two Multilingual Projects

- + Cognitive testing of the 2010 Census Form in five languages (2010 Census form project)
- + Cognitive testing of the translation of American Community Survey letters and brochures in multiple languages (ACS project)

Distinct Features of the Two Projects

- + 2010 Census form project
 - + Questionnaire (self-administered)
 - + 10 basic demographic questions
 - + Questions, instructions, and answer categories
- + ACS project
 - + Survey documents (letters and brochures)
 - + Legally required messages
 - + Confidentiality
 - + Mandatory nature of the ACS
 - + Data uses
 - + ...
 - + ...

Similarities Between the Two Projects

- + Translation from English into the target languages
- + Multiple languages
 - + Census form project (English, Chinese, Korean, Russian, and Vietnamese)
 - + ACS project (English, Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Russian, Arabic, French, Portuguese, Polish, and Haitian Creole)
- + Research design and methodology

Cognitive Interviews

- + 2010 Census Form project

- + 108 cognitive interviews conducted with monolingual speakers in:

- + English, Chinese, Korean, Russian, and Vietnamese

- + Three research sites (Washington DC, Chicago, North Carolina)

- + ACS project

- + 256 cognitive interviews conducted with monolingual speakers in ten target languages

- + Three research sites (Washington DC, Chicago, North Carolina)

Steps of the Cognitive Testing

1. Organized a panel of language experts (3-5) in each target language
2. Adopted the “committee approach” in translating interview protocols
3. Trained language experts to conduct cognitive interviews
4. Conducted cognitive interviews in target languages
5. Panel of language experts analyzed results from cognitive testing according to our guidelines
6. Recommended changes based on cognitive testing findings and language expert discussions

2010 CENSUS FORM PROJECT

Overview of Findings (1): Linguistic Issues

- ✚ Word-for-word translation
- ✚ Complex sentence structure
- ✚ Difficult wording
- ✚ Formal register (e.g., written variety instead of spoken variety of a language)

Overview of Findings (2): Socio-cultural issues

+ Cultural norms

- + Age counting

- + Logic in reasoning

+ Social practices

- + Lack of equivalent concept or practice in target culture

- + Unfamiliarity with a survey questionnaire

 - + Question format

 - + How to mark an answer

Issues with Cultural Norms: Age Counting

- ✚ “What is Person 1’s age and what is Person 1’s date of birth?”
- ✚ Issues:
 - ✚ More than two thirds of the Korean respondents had difficulty writing their age
 - ✚ Korean’s age counting convention is different
- ✚ Recommendation
 - ✚ Clarify that this question is asking for American way of counting age
- ✚ Recommendation accepted

Issues with Social Practices: Word and Meaning

- + Same word but different concept
 - + e.g., nursing home, foster children (Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Russian)
- + No equivalent concept in target languages
 - + e.g., mobile home
- + Recommended changes
 - + Use two terms for ‘nursing home’ = ‘care center and elderly home’
 - + Add a phrase ‘government-sponsored’ for ‘foster children’ = ‘children under government-sponsored foster care’
 - + Use descriptive phrase for ‘mobile home’ = ‘a home that is mobile’
- + Recommendations accepted

Social Practice Issues: Form Navigation

- ✚ Did not mark anything
- ✚ Marked “X” in every choice box for NONE or NO choices
- ✚ Or marked “X” for NO category, and “✓” for YES category.
- ✚ **“Is this person of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?”**
 - ✚ X No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
 - ✚ ✓ Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano
 - ✚ ✓ Yes, Puerto Rican
 - ✚ ✓ Yes, Cuban
 - ✚ ✓ Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin

ACS MULTILINGUAL PROJECT

Messages in ACS Survey Documents

1. Survey purpose
2. Survey sponsor
3. Data uses
4. Confidentiality assurance
5. Mandatory nature of the survey
6. Response burden estimate
7. Request for survey participation

Definitions

- + Messages that worked well
 - + Good understanding
 - + Intent, scope, or request conveyed
- + Messages that showed potential problems
 - + Partial understanding or literal understanding
 - + Intent, scope, or request NOT conveyed
 - + Negative impact on respondents
- + Messages that were very problematic
 - + No understanding at all
 - + Failed to convey

Comprehension/Interpretation Issues

Language	Survey Purpose	Sponsor	Data Uses	Mandatory	Confidentiality	Response Burden	Participation Request
English	?	👍	👍	👍	👍	👍	👍
Spanish	?	?	👍	?	👍	👍	👍
Chinese	👎	👍	👍	?	?	👍	👎
Korean	?	👍	👍	👎	?	👍	👎
Russian	?	👍	👍	?	👍	👍	👍
Vietnamese	👎	👍	👍	👎	?	👍	👎
Arabic	👍	👍	👍	👍	👍	👍	👍
French	👍	👍	👍	👍	👍	👍	👍
Haitian-Creole	?	👎	👍	👍	👍	👍	👍
Polish	👍	👍	👍	👍	👍	👍	👍
Portuguese	👍	👍	👍	👍	👍	?	?

Survey Participation Request: ACS Introductory Letter

 “Dear Resident:

The U.S. Census Bureau is conducting the American Community Survey. A Census Bureau representative will contact you to help you complete the survey. I would appreciate your help, because the success of this survey depends on you.”

Survey Participation Request

	Language			
	Chinese	Korean	Vietnamese	Portuguese
Problem severity	?	?	?	?

- ✦ Cultural norms (Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese)
 - ✦ Where is the main point of a letter?
 - ✦ Letter writing style
 - ✦ Discourse structure
- ✦ Social practice (Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Portuguese)
 - ✦ What is a survey?
 - ✦ Who should respond?

Cultural Norms: Communication Style

- ✚ Where is the main point of the letter?
 - ✚ Asian letter writing style vs. American English letter writing style
- ✚ American English letter style:
 - Main point
 - supporting details, reasons
- ✚ Asian letter style:
 - Background information
 - (facework, reasons, details)
 - main point

Social Practice

- + What is a survey?
- + What do I do with it?
- + “It doesn’t apply to me!”

Mandatory Message

+ [In the ACS Introductory Letter]

+ “You are required by U.S. law to respond to this survey (Title 13, United States Code, Sections 141, 193, and 221).”

Mandatory Message

	Language				
	Spanish	Chinese	Korean	Russian	Vietnamese
Problem severity	?	?	☹	?	☹

✚ Linguistic issue

- ✚ Poor translation (Vietnamese)

✚ Cultural issue

- ✚ Level of politeness (Korean)
- ✚ Different perception (Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese)

✚ Social practice

- ✚ Confusion of cognitive interview with ACS (Spanish, Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese)
- ✚ Law vs. government (Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese)

Politeness Across Languages

- ✚ English group
 - ✚ “Boilerplate,” formulaic, but not necessary polite or not polite
- ✚ Chinese group
 - ✚ Very polite
- ✚ Korean group
 - ✚ Not polite enough
- ✚ Russian and Spanish
 - ✚ Standard government document, non-polite

Comparison Between Groups

Language	Perception of Power difference	Politeness
American English	Government-citizen (not big)	Standard Politeness
Chinese	Government-citizen (big)	Need to emphasize the official tone and reduce politeness
Korean	Government-citizen (relatively big)	Need to add politeness to make the request

Adjustment of the Translation

- ✦ ACS introductory Letter

- ✦ “You are required by U.S. law to respond to this survey.”

- ✦ Korean translation

- ✦ “Your survey participation conforms to the U.S. law and we ask you a favor to respond to this survey.” – focus on politeness

- ✦ Chinese translation

- ✦ “As stipulated by U.S. law, you must answer this survey.” – focus on government tone

- ✦ Recommendations accepted

Summary

- + Translation of survey instruments and documents
 - + More than translating words and sentences
- + Linguistic issues
 - + Mistranslated terms
 - + Unnatural grammatical structure
 - + Poor translation: Relatively easy to fix
- + Cultural norms
 - + Multiple aspects
 - + Communication style
 - + Politeness rules
 - + Discourse structure
 - + More challenging
 - + Involving re-structuring
- + Social practice issues
 - + Even more challenging!!

Possible Solutions (1)

+ Linguistic issues

- + Team-based approach to translation and review
- + Careful review procedures involving multiple parties

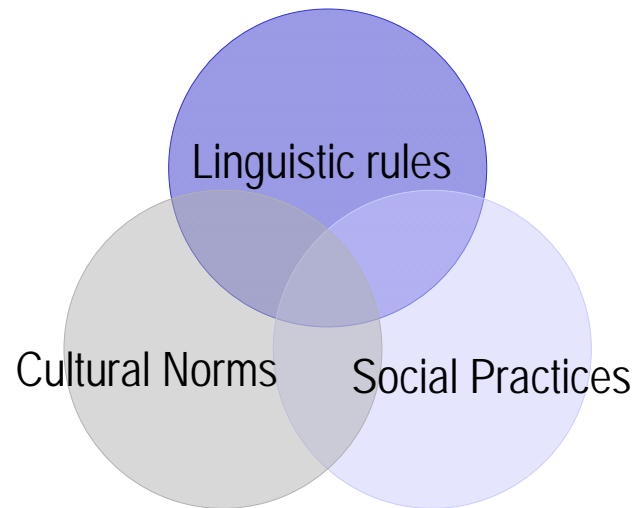
+ Cultural norms

- + Ask: “How is X done in Situation__ in Culture __?”
- + Culturally appropriate expressions
- + Communication style
- + Discourse structure
- + Politeness strategies

Possible Solutions (2)

- + Issues with social practice
 - + Descriptive phrases instead of existing terminology
 - + Background and contextual information
 - + Explanations
 - + Clear instructions
- + *Finally ...*
 - + Pretest translation with speakers of target languages

Concluding Remarks



Future Research

- ✚ Develop methods to address translation issues with linguistic rules, or cultural norms, or social practices
- ✚ Discourse-oriented approach to survey translation
- ✚ Cultural implications of presentation of messages
- ✚ Replacing translations with in-language redrafting

Thank You!

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