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 for 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

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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

- Socio-cultural context ➔ Pragmatic
- Sentence ➔ Syntactic
- Word ➔ Lexical
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

US Census Bureau
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

US Census Bureau
Chinese Translation of the ACS Name

Socio-cultural context ➔ Pragmatic
Sentence ➔ Syntactic
Word ➔ Lexical

American Community Survey

(1) 美国 (2) 社区 (3) 调查

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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

- Linguistic rules
- Cultural Norms
- Social Practices
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
  - ...
  - ...

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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
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
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
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Survey Purpose</th>
<th>Sponsor</th>
<th>Data Uses</th>
<th>Mandatory</th>
<th>Confidentiality</th>
<th>Response Burden</th>
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“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

<table>
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<th>Portuguese</th>
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<td>☹️</td>
<td>☹️</td>
<td>?</td>
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</table>

- 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
  - \( \rightarrow \) supporting details, reasons

- Asian letter style:
  - Background information
    - (facework, reasons, details)
  - \( \rightarrow \) 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**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
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<td>?</td>
<td>😞</td>
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<td>😞</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

- **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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Perception of Power difference</th>
<th>Politeness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American English</td>
<td>Government-citizen (not big)</td>
<td>Standard Politeness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Government-citizen (big)</td>
<td>Need to emphasize the official tone and reduce politeness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>Government-citizen (relatively big)</td>
<td>Need to add politeness to make the request</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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 ...
  - Prestest translation with speakers of target languages
Concluding Remarks

Linguistic rules

Cultural Norms

Social Practices
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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