Advance Translation as a Means of Improving Source Questionnaire Translatability? Findings from a Think-Aloud Study for French and German

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In large-scale multilingual surveys, the source questionnaire is known to be the cause of a number of translation problems or errors during the final translation phase. For minimising such problems, the European Social Survey (ESS) has carried out, since its 5th round in 2009, systematic 'advance translations' in order to detect such problems before finalising the source text. For doing so, translation teams, consisting of both translators and survey researchers, carry out translations of a pre-final version of the source questionnaire, with the purpose of spotting translation problems. These comments are considered when finalising the source text. The problems pointed out range from intercultural adaptation issues to, for instance, grammatical or syntactical structures requiring complicated translations into a specific target language that may have a negative impact on the comparability between all resulting final translations when fielded. Changes in the source text triggered by advance translation range from rephrasing source text elements to adding footnotes to explain source text terms.

The author tested the usefulness of this method in a series of think-loud tests: experienced questionnaire translators translated 22 items – in their version before and after the advance translation – into French and German. The think-aloud protocols were analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The usefulness of advance translation for enhancing the translatability of the source text was confirmed in this think-aloud study.

This paper describes the method of advance translation, some typical source questionnaire issues detected, as well as the think-aloud study and its results. Conclusions will be drawn on questions like: does the success of advance translation depend on the source text problems detected or on the changes made because of advance translation? Does the interplay of languages of advance translation and think-aloud study matter? Is think-aloud a valid method for evaluating advance translation?