

Brita Dorer

Translating answers to open-ended questions in a multilingual survey context

Challenges and recommendations

Abstract

Questionnaires are a specific text type with its own challenges for translation. Translating answers to open-ended questions, where respondents answer in their own words and not with a predefined set of answers, is a particular endeavour. This paper is about translations of answers to open-ended questions with the aim of developing recommendations for this task. Embedded in a web survey project, answers about respondents' understanding of the terms "left" and "right", provided in Canada, Spain and the US, were translated into German. I analysed these translations, in cooperation with native speakers from all three countries, and coded my findings into a translation error and issue coding scheme. Context plays a crucial role for such translations, and it is important that the translators have a very good knowledge and understanding of the country to which the answers refer and of the topic (in my case the political and social landscape in the respective country).

1 Introduction

Questionnaires are an important tool for gathering data about various types of information from predetermined groups of populations. Fields of interest range from social sciences across marketing to technical topics. Questionnaires are also used in translation studies, for instance for measuring translator's competences or experiences. Examples are the PACTE Research Group (2014), Kuznik and Olalla-Soler (2018) or Schaeffer et al. (2020).

Within the field of survey research, one distinguishes between many different types and designs of questions, varying with regard to several aspects. Presenting these would exceed the scope of this paper. For an overview of different types of questions and questionnaires, see, for instance, Fowler Jr and Fowler (1995), Schuman and Presser (1996), Bradburn, Sudman and Wansink (2004), Saris and Gallhofer (2014).

One important feature of a survey question is whether it provides a closed-ended or open-ended answer format. In closed-ended questions, the respondents have to express their answers by selecting from amongst a pre-defined set of answer options provided.

In open-ended questions, the respondents formulate their answers in their own words. Both question design forms have traditionally been used in surveys, although closed-ended questions have for a long time been more frequently used than open-ended ones (Schuman/Presser 1996: 79; Singer/Couper 2017: 116; Neuert et al. 2021: 3).

There are advantages and disadvantages to either of these two question formats, which will only briefly be discussed here.

The main advantage of open-ended questions lies in the fact that respondents are completely free to provide any answer they feel appropriate, without having to match them into existing answer schemes. In this way answers, but also rationales behind providing an answer, can be made that may be lost if pre-fixed answer categories do not allow to match all potential responses of the sampled target population. So the scope of answers and level of detail are higher in the case of open-ended answer schemes (see, e. g., Saris/Gallhofer 2014: 112).

This advantage is at the same time also a disadvantage, as a precondition of open-ended questions is that respondents have the capability and skills of expressing their answers and thoughts in their own words, whether in written or oral form. The main disadvantage of open-ended question formats, however, lies in the analytical effort needed to analyse the resulting data. Orally provided answers need to be transcribed, and these transcripts, as well as answers to open-ended questions provided in written modes, need to be coded and then analysed quantitatively and/or qualitatively. But text data is still hard to analyse with quantitative methods (He/Schonlau 2021: 104). In this paper, I am focussing on the translations in case such answers are given in multilingual survey projects.

‘Probing’ is a specific type of open-ended questions applied to learn more about the respondents’ understanding of questions or specific terms, or about how they have formed their answers, to name a few examples. This is achieved by ‘probing’ respondents immediately after they have provided an answer to a question (be it open- or closed-ended) about specific elements of this question, borrowing from the methodology of cognitive interviewing. Cognitive interviewing is a qualitative method applied in survey research that can be described as “[...] the administration of draft survey questions while collecting additional verbal information about the survey responses, which is used to evaluate the quality of the response or to help determine whether the question is generating the information that its author intends” (Beatty/Willis 2007: 287). This technique, thus, consists in asking respondents first to answer a survey item, and then to elaborate on specific aspects of this item, such as about their understanding of particular terms, how they had formed their answer or how difficult they found understanding and answering a question. This is usually administered by semi-structured interview protocols in which the interviewers follow a certain structure, but can adapt their questions depending on the respondent’s answers (Miller et al. 2011: 804). The technique of ‘probing’, which can be part of cognitive interviews, may thus be used to enhance the validity of questions in the source language as much as the equivalence of translated items in multilingual settings (Schuman 1966) where it should help uncover equivalence issues between different questionnaires translated into different languages (Behr 2015).

Open-ended questions had long been less used than closed-ended formats, mainly due to the efforts required to analyse the resulting textual data. However, recently, this has been changing more and more. Partly because the wealth of research using open-ended questions is being rediscovered; partly because technological advancements help analysing the answers provided: On the one hand, orally given answers can now more easily be transcribed using automated speech recognition techniques (Neuert et al. 2021: 4), and semi-automated as well as automated coding of the answers is becoming more powerful (Schonlau/Couper 2016b; He/Schonlau 2021). For instance, Luebker (2021: 36) shows in his study that, despite the additional cognitive load for the respondents, the addition of non-mandatory probing questions in the end adds wealth to data gathered in closed-ended format.

Please note: While in my study I only analysed open-ended *probing* questions, my findings should also apply to open-ended questions in a broader sense, as the mechanism of asking a question in an open format applies in both cases. Also in the recent literature, probing questions are treated as an example of open-ended questions (see, e. g., Neuert et al. 2021: 3–5).

Coding is a time- and resource-intensive step, whether done manually by human coders only, or as semi-automatic (Schonlau/Couper 2016a) or fully automatic coding (He/Schonlau 2021). Thus, the cost needs to be considered in particular when used for large samples (see e. g. Fowler Jr/Fowler 1995: 178) whereas for (semi-)automated coding relatively large samples are required for training the learning algorithms (Behr et al. 2020).¹

When answers to open-ended questions are provided in different languages, this process of a standardized and methodologically sound analysis of all answers becomes even more challenging because translation and inter-cultural comparability come into play (the challenge to compare and correctly analyse answers to open-ended probing questions in multilingual settings are also discussed by Schuman 1966: 218ff and Behr et al. 2020). The process of translating answers to open-ended questions is the topic of this paper.

With the growing importance and methodological rigor of developing and carrying out cross-national and thus multilingual survey research, translating answers to open-ended (probing) questions is becoming a more and more important research topic. An example is cross-national cognitive pretesting of source questionnaires to be later translated into various languages and fielded in various different cultures, such as pursued in

¹ Neither automatic nor semi-automatic (or automated) coding were applied in either of the two coding exercises in this paper: neither in Coding 1 (answer-related coding in the “left-right study”, some years ago, object of this paper) nor in Coding 2 (translation errors and issues-related coding in my study, my analysis). Therefore, I do not explain these approaches any further in this paper.

This paper refers to two different coding events:

Coding 1 (answer-related coding in the “left-right study”, some years ago, object of this paper)

Coding 2 (translation errors and issues-related coding in my study, my analysis)

For avoiding confusion about which coding event I refer to, I will always mention one of them (Coding 1 or Coding 2).

the European Social Survey (ESS) (Fitzgerald/Zavala-Rojas 2020: 509–510). Here, during the development of the English source questionnaire, draft questions are asked in different participating countries – translated in the respective languages – and probing questions are added, asking the respondents about specific information on these questions (such as understanding of specific terms or how respondents have made their answer). The answers to these probing questions are provided in the different national languages. For feeding back to the source questionnaire development in English, these probing answers need to be translated back into English. Precision of this translation is of utmost importance so that no information crucial for the source text development is lost in the translation step (European-Social-Survey 2021).

What is specific about translating answers to open-ended questions? And what needs to be kept in mind when carrying out such translations in the best-possible manner? This is the topic of this paper. Behr (2015: 284ff) describes the process of translating answers to open-ended online probing questions within a research project and gives recommendations for this process. (NB: The project discussed in Behr 2015 provides the data basis for the research presented in this paper.) However, while Behr (2015) mainly deals with the translation process, this paper looks into the translations provided and analyses translation errors made. To my knowledge, this is the first research study in which translations of answers to open-ended probing questions (that is, the text resulting from the translation process) are systematically analysed and errors identified and categorized from a translation studies perspective (on the detection and discussion of the translation errors and issues in the context of the “left-right study”, see below and Scholz, Dorer and Züll forthc.). In qualitative research, translation has so far mainly been a topic in connection with translating answers in qualitative interviews or transcripts of focus group sessions. Focus groups are a qualitative method applied in social research and survey research for gaining insight into people’s understanding and thought processes. Opposite to cognitive interviews (see above), focus groups do not consist of one interviewer asking one respondent, but of a group of selected people, guided by a conversation leader, that are asked to talk about certain topics or features, such as a policy decision or a survey question. Similar to cognitive interviews, also focus groups usually follow semi-structured scripts that help the conversation leader to achieve that the focus group members discuss about certain points. The group members’ utterances are a very rich pool of information about how members of the population think about certain topics (Fowler Jr/Fowler 1995: 105–110). Similar to translating answers to open-ended questions, context poses a major challenge to translators also in these translation tasks (see, for instance, Resch/Enzenhofer 2012: 84–87), and translators are instructed to carry out documentary rather than instrumental translations (see, e. g., Wettemann 2012: 110).

While answers to open-ended questions as a specific text type have not been the subject of translation-related research so far, another text type that, in some respect, poses similar challenges for translation has: There is growing research on the use of machine translation for translating social media texts, such as weblogs or SMSs. These are also classified as “user-generated content” (UGC) (Carrera/Beregovaya/Yanishevsky

2009: 1) and can as such be compared to answers to open-ended questions: both are frequently characterized by incomplete syntax, text chunks provided without context, and the use of informal language (Wang/Ng 2013), idiolects or sociolects. Utterances are mostly made spontaneously and usually not much care is taken to proofread or correct these texts before they go live: “[...] most human generated text, particularly in the realm of social media, is full of typos, slang, dialect, idiolect and other noise which can have a disastrous impact on the accuracy of MT” (Vaibhav et al. 2019: 1). Moreover, the often incomplete, incorrect, informal nature and the lack of context characterizing these texts make a standardized translation approach almost impossible. Yet, to my knowledge, no systematic classification of translation errors and issues of translated social media texts has been established that may be used as a basis for my study.

There is growing research on how to best translate questionnaires and survey questions for cross-cultural, and thus multi-lingual, research (Harkness 2003; Harkness/Villar/Edwards 2010; Behr/Shishido 2016), but little is known about the mechanism of translating answers to open-ended questions. What types of problems and errors can be observed in translations of this text type? Which approaches would be best suited for optimizing this translation process? This paper should contribute to filling this gap.

My research is embedded in another study, to be called “left-right study”, which investigated error types of coding – Coding 1 (answer-related coding) – answers to open-ended ‘probing’ questions in cross-cultural survey projects (Scholz/Dorer/Züll forthc.): Three different error sources were identified: (1) missing clarity and missing context in respondents’ mostly short written answers, (2) translation errors and issues, and (3) coding errors and issues.

In this paper, the focus is on the second error type, i. e., translation errors and issues. My research questions are (a) which are these translation errors and issues detected in translating answers to open-ended probing questions; and (b) how can such translation errors and issues be avoided in the future?

I shall analyse these translation errors and issues more closely, by developing a coding scheme, coding the translation errors and issues found, and validating my coding by double-coding. Then, based on the results of this coding process (Coding 2), I shall deduce recommendations on how to carry out translations of answers to open-ended questions in the future.

2 Data

This paper takes a closer look at two probing questions that were asked directly after closed-ended questions were answered in a web-administered survey (“web probing”); the topic of these items is the respondents’ understanding of the terms of political “left” and “right” (wording see Table 1 below).

The answers had been provided by respondents in Canada and the US in English language and in Spain in Spanish language, nationals of these countries aged 18–65.

Gender, education and age quotas were used to obtain a balanced, albeit not representative sample of the general populations in these countries (Behr et al. 2014). The answers to the two probing questions listed in Table 1 were provided in an online survey in 2011, and the translations of these three language versions into German were carried out in the context of the web project in 2011.² In this paper, I shall analyse the translations of the answers to the web probing questions on the political terms ‘left’ and ‘right’ from English (provided in Canada and the US) and Spanish (provided in Spain) into German.

Country	Question wording
Canada and U.S.	<p>Survey question</p> <p>Many people use the terms “left” and “right” to designate different political positions.</p> <p>We have a scale here that runs from left to right. Where would you position your own political views on this scale?</p> <p>Probing question</p> <p>We have just asked you to place yourself on a scale from left to right. Now please tell us what ideas you associate with the term “left”. And what ideas do you associate with the term “right”?</p>
Spain	<p>Survey question</p> <p>Mucha gente usa los conceptos “izquierda” y “derecha” para designar posiciones políticas diferentes.</p> <p>Aquí tenemos una escala que va de izquierda a derecha. Si piensa en sus opiniones políticas, ¿dónde las situaría en esta escala?</p> <p>Probing question</p> <p>Le acabamos de pedir su clasificación en la escala de izquierda a derecha. Por favor, indique qué asocia con el concepto “izquierda”. ¿Y qué asocia con el concepto “derecha”?</p>

Table 1: Question wording of the left-right questions in the two languages of the study, English and Spanish (texts only)

Translation of the answers to the open-ended probing questions

The translations of the answers to the probing questions from English and Spanish into German – thus the text analysed in this paper – had been carried out by German native speakers: the translations from English had been carried out by a BA student in translation studies with no professional translation experience being an intern at GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences (where the project was carried out), translations from Spanish by a professional translator who had lived in Spain for 13 years.

² For more information on the project (CICOM) see Behr et al. (2020).

The translators were instructed to avoid cultural adaptations, to avoid optimizing wording, and to preserve vagueness and inconsistencies in order to have translations as close to the source text as possible. In sum, they were instructed to produce a documentary rather than an instrumental translation.³ The translators were instructed to add comments in all cases where mere translation did not seem sufficient to mirror the content expressed in the source languages. For instances, where individual words given as answers could be translated in different ways, depending on the context, the translators were invited to explain this and add an appropriate comment to their translation. Word-by-word translation was not desired and typos in the source language were not to be commented on any further.⁴

Coding 1 in the “left-right study” (Coding 1, answer-related coding)

The “left-right study” was carried out by Scholz, Dorer and Züll between 2017 and 2020, building on the answers provided in the earlier study in 2011: in this “left-right study”, the answers to the probing questions on ‘left’ and ‘right’ were coded on the basis of the German-language coding scheme (for Coding 1) developed by Züll and Scholz (2012) comprising more than 250 categories reflecting associations with the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’.⁵ Two approaches were used and compared to each other: Approach 1 consisted in coding the answers in their original languages (English and Spanish) by bilingual coders into the German-language coding scheme developed by Züll and Scholz (2012); Approach 2 consisted in first translating the answers into German and then coding the German translations into the same coding scheme by a German native-speaking coder (the Coding 1 process is described in more detail in Scholz/Dorer/Züll forthc.). The translations analysed in this paper are those produced for Approach 2.

The codings resulting from Approach 1 and Approach 2 (in Coding 1) were compared to one another. Out of overall 9686 codings made (all three language combinations, left and right), 416 codings showed a disagreement in the codes provided in Approach 1 versus Approach 2. For this paper, I analysed whether these 416 coding disagreements (from Coding 1) had been caused by the fact that the answers had been translated (see Figure 1). Other reasons for coding differences, such as missing clarity and missing context in respondents’ mostly short written answers, or coding errors and issues due to different coding approaches by the coders, are dealt with in Scholz, Dorer and Züll (forthc.) and go beyond the scope of this paper.

The method that I applied to determine this will be presented in the next section.

³ According to Nord (1997/2018: 46), a documentary translation focusses on producing a “kind of *document*” of the source-culture sender’s message in the target language under source-culture conditions, that is, without focusing on the target culture’s communication habits; an instrumental translation, however, aims at producing an “*instrument*” for transferring the source culture’s communication in the target culture’s communication habits.

⁴ The translation instructions are available from the author on request.

⁵ Please note that this is the scheme for Coding 1 – and not the Coding 2 scheme later used by the author for Coding 2 (coding translation errors and issues).

3 Method

For determining whether coding disagreements in Coding 1 (i. e., where the codings of the answers to the open-ended question on the meaning of ‘left’ and ‘right’ differed between the coding provided by Approach 1 and by Approach 2) had been caused by translation, I first looked out for the obvious translation errors that I could determine by myself: for instance, translation errors such as translating ‘negation’ in the sense of ‘negotiation’, or clear omissions or additions of words in the translation.⁶

For more sophisticated translation issues, I worked with “country experts” in all three language versions: senior researchers (linguists, translation scholars, and/or social scientists) coming from and living at least partly in the three countries in which the answers had been given: Canada, Spain, and the US.⁷ I then classified the translation errors and issues found into the coding scheme (for Coding 2) on translation error sources, developed by myself and described below.

I only analysed and counted translation errors and issues that were related to a Coding 1 disagreement. The overall dataset may contain many more translation errors

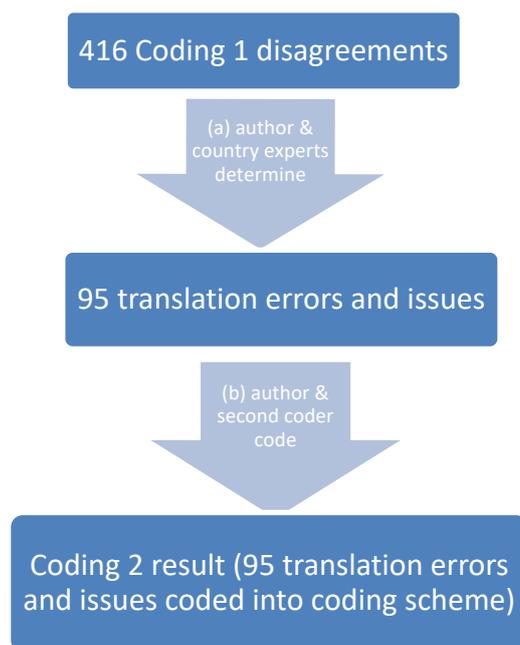


Figure 1: Processes (a) determining translation errors and issues from 416 coding disagreements (in Coding 1), and (b) coding these (in Coding 2)

⁶ I am a translation scholar and trained translator for English, French and Italian, with German mother tongue, with an advanced understanding of Spanish. For these obvious translation errors, I felt in a position to carry out this task on my own, as my training and background were sufficient for doing so.

⁷ The exact qualification and background of these ‘country experts’ can be provided upon request. NB: The country experts were not part of any translation task, but only informed the author and her second coder for their coding decisions (Coding 2).

and issues, but where they did not result in a coding disagreement, these were beyond the scope of this paper.

Figure 1 shows the processes (a) determining which Coding 1 disagreements had been caused by translation, and (b) coding (Coding 2) these translation errors and issues into the Coding 2 scheme developed by myself.

Translation error and issue coding scheme (Coding 2)

For categorizing the 95 translation errors and issues, I developed a new coding scheme (Coding 2 scheme) on translation errors and issues inductively (cf. Kuckartz 2012/2014: 59). Based on this scheme, I coded all translation errors and issues, and a second coding was done by an equally qualified second coder (see below).

In general, all translation errors and issues need to be seen against the instructions that the translators had received: In some cases, I coded a translation as an ‘error’ or ‘issue’, although it would have been in line with the requirements of the translation instructions. The reason for this discrepancy is that the translators mainly had to follow the translation instructions, and these aimed at the production of documentary translations (that is, to explain the utterances made by the respondents in the web probing study, as explained above). This becomes relevant in particular where the translators encountered terms that, without context, could have different meanings and thus translations: Here, in several cases, the translators would leave both options separated with a slash (“xx/xx”), and ideally explain this translation issue in an accompanying comment. While in general educational or professional translation settings, it is usually classified as an error if a translator does not clearly decide for one translation and instead leaves two or more options, listed, e. g., by a slash (this may be classified as an “ambiguous translation”, such as included in the Multidimensional Quality Metrics [MQM] framework under “accuracy”, Lommel/Uszkoreit/Burchardt 2014 or DFKI 2015: s. v. *accuracy*) in this study it should be classified not as a ‘translation error’, but as a ‘translation issue’ only (see below) because the translators were, in these cases, following the translation instructions, explaining the breadth of scope of meaning of the source text: here the fact that translation was involved was the reason for a coding disagreement (in Coding 1) between the original and the translated answers.

Below, I shall endeavour to describe the error scheme (definition of the error categories) and the coding rules as used by the two coders in my study (Coding 2).

Category 1 (in Coding 2): General translation error

Translation error understood in a broader sense, such as: *wording error* (choosing the wrong wording or phraseology in the target language); *terminological error*, in particular regarding political terms that are not correctly translated; *oversight errors*, *lack of diligence*; translation errors due to *missing context*; two or more options are provided with a slash and *at least one of these options is a wrong translation*.

To be *excluded* from this category: (1) cases where the translator fixes the source text, that is, makes sense in his/her translation while the source text did not make sense;

(2) where translators leave two or more translation options with a slash (xx/xx) and all options are correct.

Category 2 (in Coding 2): Translator makes sense where there is no sense in the source

This category should be used where a translator alters the meaning of the source text in his/her translation in a way that the translation makes sense while the source text did not make sense. This is the case when the translator tries to “fix” the source text. This may include grammatical as well as meaning-related corrections of the source text. It is irrespective of whether the translated version is considered a correct or wrong translation.

Excluded are typos in the source language, which can be left unattended in the translations, as long as the meaning of the source text was clear and is not altered by this translation approach.

Category 3 (in Coding 2): “Translation issue” (Coding 1 disagreement triggered by translation)

This category does not refer to translation errors, but to correct translations. This category should refer to cases where the Coding 1 disagreement has been caused by the fact that a translation was involved, even though the translation as such is not wrong. Partly this refers to the fact that every translation introduces at least a slight shift in meaning or scope of meaning between the source and the target text (see below).

This category should *not* include cases where the difference was caused by the translator trying to make sense where there is no clear meaning in the source text (such cases should be coded as category 2 above).

And this category should *not* refer to translation errors as coded under category 1.

An example for category 3 is where translators did not decide and left two translation options separated by a slash (xx/xx) and all these options are correct.

Intercultural Coding 1 errors in the source language

In addition, apart from the above scheme, there is a category for coding differences caused by the fact that the Coding 1 in the source text was carried out by native speakers of the source language, but not the relevant language version. The coder for Spanish was not from Spain, but from South America, and the coder for Canada was from the US. (The reasons for the coders in Coding 1 not being in all cases from the country in which the responses had been given are the following: for budgetary reasons, it would have been very difficult to find and train professionals, that is, graduated political or social scientists, from all countries involved, that is, also from Canada and Spain. The two student assistants, Master students in political sciences with knowledge about the left-right concept, English and Spanish mother tongue and a very good level of German, were a good compromise between resources available, topical background, and language skills.)

This code can be conferred in addition to the translation-related categories 1–3 as it refers to the source text, and should be provided in a separate column (see Coding 2 rules below).

Coding 2 rules

- Double coding is not allowed. This means, every utterance is only coded into 1 category (categories 1–3).
- “Intercultural Coding 1 errors” can be attributed in addition to categories 1–3.
- Repeated instances of the same error or issue are coded in every case where they occur.
- Coding units: the unit of coding is one “unit of sense”. That means, each coding unit needs to make sense on its own, even if taken out of the context of the entire answer provided by a respondent. A coding unit may be an individual word (e. g., ‘election’) or an expression (e. g., ‘voting behaviour’) (Kuckartz 2012/2014: 82).

Coding 2 process

I coded the 95 translation errors and issues based on these categories 1–3 as well as the Intercultural Coding 1 errors category, and an equally qualified second coder coded the same material. For each translation error or issue, we discussed our codings and agreed on a final coding (Coding 2), following the methodology of consensual coding agreement (Kuckartz 2012/2014: 49).

4 Results

The results of categorizing translation errors and issues (categories 1–3), listed separately by the three countries Canada, Spain and US and by “left” versus “right”, are provided in Table 2 below. The category “Intercultural Coding 1 errors” is provided in Table 3.

The translators in 2011 had received translation instructions. These are not considered in this study because the purpose of this paper is not to discuss these instructions, but to give recommendations on translating answers to open-ended probing questions in general. Thus, when translators did not follow the translation instructions correctly, this was not considered as an error in this Coding 2 process.

Translation	Coding 1 disagreements due to translation errors or issues (categories 1–3)
US-EN-German left	26
US-EN-German right	9
Canada-EN-German left	13
Canada-EN-German right	3
Spain-German left	20
Spain-German right	24
TOTAL	95

Table 2: Coding 1 disagreements due to translation errors or issues (categories 1–3)

Table 2 shows the number of codings (from Coding 2) where the Coding 1 disagreements between Approach 1 and Approach 2 had been triggered by translation. The overall number of Coding 1 disagreements was 416. In Table 2, categories 1–3 are summed up, but broken down into the 3 countries Canada, Spain and US and by left vs. right.

Translation	Intercultural Coding 1 errors in source language
Canada-EN-German left	4
Canada-EN-German right	0
Spain-German left	5
Spain-German right	3
TOTAL	12

Table 3: Intercultural Coding 1 errors in the source languages

An overview of how the different translation errors and issues apply across the three language pairs is provided in Table 4.

Translation Error Category	Language version	Number of occurrences
CATEGORY 1 General translation error	EN-US right	3
	EN-US left	22
	ES right	20
	ES left	17
	EN-CAN right	3
	EN-CAN left	11
	TOTAL	76
CATEGORY 2 Translator makes sense where there is no sense in the source	EN-US right	1
	EN-US left	2
	ES right	0
	ES left	1
	EN-CAN right	0
	EN-CAN left	0
	TOTAL	4
CATEGORY 3 Different Coding 1 triggered by translation/ translation issue	EN-US right	5
	EN-US left	2
	ES right	4
	ES left	2
	EN-CAN right	0
	EN-CAN left	2
	TOTAL	15

Table 4: Coding 2: Translation error or issue categories (categories 1–3), separated by the 3 language versions and by left vs. right

What these numbers mean will be discussed in the following section, with some examples of Coding 1 disagreements.

5 Discussion

To be able to develop recommendations for translating answers to open-ended probing questions, first of all, potential reasons for the errors and issues should be discussed. For this purpose, a closer look at the errors made in categories 1–3 as well as the category of intercultural coding errors is needed.

Category 1 (in Coding 2): General translation errors

With 76 out of 95, this is the largest category within the errors and issues determined. This may be explained by the fact that it includes several sub-categories (that is, error types) that would be difficult to break down into different categories as they are in several cases interwoven (see below). At the same time, it shows how important it is to avoid such errors in the future. This is elaborated in the Recommendations section below.

Errors coded under category 1 (in Coding 2) are of various natures, often those traditionally understood as ‘translation errors’, such as wording and terminology errors, over-

sight errors and lack of diligence, missing context. Some examples may serve to illustrate the importance of this category.

First, the study revealed several *oversight errors* or *errors due to lack of diligence* by the translators. An example of lack of diligence detected in the Spanish-German translations of “right” was the utterance ‘negación de los derechos’ (negation of rights⁸) translated in the sense of ‘negociación de derechos’ (negotiation of rights); examples of oversight errors are words provided in the source version but omitted in the translations.

Such errors do happen even to very skilled and experienced translators, as to a certain extent, they are a matter of human nature, and therefore steps to double-check, assure and control translation quality are usually implemented in high-quality translation processes (Krenzler-Behm 2011: 171).

The following examples coded as category 1 (in Coding 2) consist in *errors in finding the correct wording in the target language*.

Spanish, “right”: The Spanish term ‘creencias’ means ‘what you believe in’, but not necessarily with regard to religion. However, it was translated as ‘Glaubensbekenntnis’ (creed/confession of faith) – and the code provided for this German translation in Coding 1 was *Religiös* (religious), while in Spanish, no code was provided to this term in Coding 1. So here the addition of a religious layer to the translation has probably caused a coding in the translated version in Coding 1 that was not in line with the proper meaning of the term in Spanish.

US-English, “right”: The English term ‘private practice’ (the complete answer read [sic]: “Ideas I associate with the right are military, private practice, and christianity, and old fashioned”) refers to the practice of a profession, such as medical doctors or lawyers, run independently and not as an employee. It was translated as ‘Privatpraxis’ which in Germany refers exclusively to a medical doctor where he/she can invoice according to privately determined rates. In US-English, this utterance was coded in Coding 1 as *Privatisierung* (privatisation), whereas in German it was coded in Coding 1 as *Gesundheitspolitik/Gesundheitssysteme* (health politics/health systems). So here the Coding 1 disagreement appears to be directly linked to a terminological error made by the translator.

Although the translators did overall provide a high level of translation quality, these examples would typically be an indication of an insufficient preparation or training of the translator, or also an insufficient understanding of the cultural situation and context in the source and target cultures. Another reason for such errors passing through may have been the lack of a translation quality check. For instance, a skilled translator should know that the words ‘private practice’ in the US context and ‘Privatpraxis’ in Germany do trigger different associations. The translators did not provide any comments in either of these two cases (‘creencias’ or ‘private practice’).

A recurrent example of a translation error coded as category 1 (in Coding 2) that was obviously caused by the fact that the translator did not consider the *context* (and possibly

⁸ Unless stated otherwise, all translations provided in this article are the author’s.

the culture of the source text) sufficiently in the translation is the term ‘Democrat’: In the US, the English term ‘Democrat’ refers to a member or supporter of the US Democratic Party – though I found that respondents often wrote the term in lower case ‘democrat’ in response to the open-ended survey question. In the answers provided across the study, respondents mentioned all three words ‘democratic’, ‘democrat’, and ‘Democrat’. In many cases the German translation for both ‘democrat’/‘Democrat’ (whether spelled in lower or upper case, as translators were instructed to disregard that) and ‘democratic’ was ‘demokratisch’, which is the adjective referring to democracy (‘democratic’ in English). The answers ‘democrat’, ‘Democrat’ and ‘democratic’ provided by English-speaking respondents in both Canada and in the US were coded in Coding 1 as *Democratic Party* for the US and *CA: Bloc Québécois* (Canadian party, similar to the Democratic Party in the US) for Canada by the US-American coder. In German the translation ‘demokratisch’ (‘democratic’) was coded in Coding 1 as *Demokratie* (‘democracy’).

Besides being an Intercultural Coding 1 problem in the English source language for the Canadian responses (discussed below), this wording error – translating the English words ‘democrat’/‘Democrat’ as ‘demokratisch’ (democratic) instead of ‘Mitglied/Anhänger der US-amerikanischen Democratic Party’ (member/supporter of the US Democratic Party) – also bears an intercultural problem in the translation: had the translator correctly considered the cultural context in the US, the translations would have been more differentiated, ideally translating ‘democratic’ as ‘demokratisch’ and ‘democrat’/‘Democrat’ as ‘Mitglied/Anhänger der US-amerikanischen Democratic Party’ (member/supporter of the US Democratic Party). In this way, this translation error could have been avoided and the Coding 1 would presumably have been closer to the US context and US Coding 1.

So the translation of ‘Democrat’ is an example where within category 1 (of Coding 2), different aspects are interwoven and thus a more fine-grained differentiation within category 1 would seem inappropriate: In other contexts, translating ‘Democrat’ as ‘demokratisch’ could still be accepted as a correct translation, in particular when applying a relatively free translation approach (on free versus adaptive translation approaches in survey translation, see, for instance, Repke and Dorer 2021). However, in this context, in which (a) only the translated word in isolation will be coded in the target language in Coding 1, and (b) in the context of discussing the political left-right discourse with regard to the US, the importance of differentiating the German adjective ‘demokratisch’ from the supporters or members of the US Democratic Party would have been an important precision in the translation decision-making process.

A Spanish example for showing the importance of translating within the correct context: in the answers to the probing question about “right”, the term ‘apalancamiento’ was coded in Coding 1 as ‘uncodable’ by the Southern-American coder, presumably because this term does not have a clear meaning in the Columbian context. The Spanish country expert described the term ‘apalancamiento’ as “[...] the opposite of mobilising: not fighting for anything social. [It] is used as a metaphor for this ‘doing nothing for social fights’. That’s a metaphor common in Spain. [...]”. It was translated into German as ‘Rumlungern // Verhältnis von Eigenkapital zu Fremdkapital’ (colloquial expression for ‘to

loiter around' // ratio of equity capital to debt, leverage effect), and coded in Coding 1 as *Kein/gegen Leistungsprinzip* (no/against any performance principle/achievement principle) by the German coder.

On the one hand, this example again also involves an Intercultural Coding 1 error in the source language (see below).

On the other hand, this translation bears several problems in itself: both German translations ('Rumlungern' as well as 'Verhältnis von Eigenkapital zu Fremdkapital') as such are erroneous translations and show that the translator did apparently not know the meaning of this term for Spain. The fact that several translation options are provided with a slash was accepted within the original translation project requiring documentary translations (see above).

So, in sum, errors classified in Coding 2 under category 1 can be of varying nature: category 1 includes several types of errors, such as oversight errors or context errors. In some cases, only one such error was applicable (e. g., one wording error); in other cases, more than one such error was applicable, for instance, an oversight error in combination with a context error. Partly they would be connected to any translation activity, also outside of surveys, partly they are particularly relevant for this particular text type (on the importance of text type see Reiß 1976/1983; Dorer 2020: 42–45).

Category 2 (in Coding 2): Translator makes sense where there is no sense in the source

With 4 out of 95, this is the smallest category.

The issues detected under category 2 in Coding 2 are again to be seen against the translation instructions: The translators in 2011 had been told, on the one hand, to ignore obvious typos or punctuation errors in their translations – and also not to correct uncertainties present in the answers provided ("Wenn Satzelemente fehlen, Bezüge unklar sind oder Ähnliches, dann verbessern Sie das nicht, sondern erstellen bitte eine Übersetzung unter den gegebenen Bedingungen und erläutern kurz im Kommentarfeld, was nicht stimmt." – If parts of sentences are missing, references are not clear or similar, please do not correct this on your own, but please prepare a translation under the given circumstances and briefly explain in the comments field what is not correct.). However, there are several instances where the translators went beyond these instructions and did modify the meaning compared to the utterances in the source language.

An example is taken from *US-English*, "right": The answer provided was "I think most at least uses common since when it comes to ideas" which includes several errors in the source language: the grammar is not correct as 'most' would require the verb to be in plural, 'since' should presumably mean 'sense' and would thus only be a typo.

In the translation instructions, translators were instructed to ignore any spelling and other obvious linguistic mistakes, so these things would not have been an issue. But, in addition, the overall statement in English does not convey a real meaning, because it is not clear what 'ideas' should refer to. Thus, in English this answer was coded in Coding 1

as ‘non codable’. The German translator corrected the grammatical and spelling errors, presuming that ‘common since’ should have been ‘common sense’, and thus created a statement that can at least be interpreted in a certain sense: “Ich denke, dass die meisten zumindest gesunden Menschenverstand einsetzen, wenn es um Ideen geht” (I think most use at least common sense when it’s about new ideas.) and made the comment “Aussage unklar” (statement unclear). With this translation, the German coder in Coding 1 was able to make more sense of the statement, coding it as *Progressiv* (progressive).

The German word ‘*Idee*’ rather refers to creating or developing *new* ideas, whereas the English term ‘*idea*’ is broader, also referring to a thought, understanding, notion or opinion. This may have been the reason why the German phrase triggered the connotation of progressive thoughts, oriented towards the future (in the sense of ‘having new ideas’), whereas the English expression did not have a clear meaning to the US-English coder in Coding 1.

Category 3 (in Coding 2): “Translation issue” (Different coding triggered by translation in Coding 1)

With 15 out of 95, this category is not of highest relevance, but nevertheless refers to an important element of any translation activity that must not be underestimated in this text type.

This category refers to cases where a translation is not wrong, but still introduces a slight imbalance between the source and target text: one always needs to consider that there is an effect of any translation that can, in one way or the other (losses or differences in the scope of meaning), be detected when comparing the texts in the source and in the target language: “Translation does inevitably involve some loss, since it is impossible to preserve all the ST [source text] nuances of meaning and structure in the TL [target language].” (Munday 2016: 92)

An example is taken from *US-English*, “*left*”: The English term ‘affirmative action’ can have several correct translations into German (the entire answer provided was: “big government, affirmative action, more taxes, more government intrusion into personal life, more laws, more general interference, dreams that can never make it in the real world – unrealistic”). In this study it was translated as *Förderung von Minderheiten* (support of minorities) and so the German coder in Coding 1 chose the code *Minderheiten* (minorities). The English coder in Coding 1 on the other hand, chose the *Gleichheit* (equality) code when affirmative action was mentioned in English. Another correct German translation would have been *positive Diskriminierung* (positive discrimination), a term that is also used in the public debate in Germany, and in this case the German coding may have been closer to the code provided by the English coder in Coding 1.

Another example is taken from *Spanish*, “*left*”: The Spanish answer ‘Gobierno con sentido social’ was translated as ‘Eine Regierung mit Sinn für die Gesellschaft’ (a government with a sense for society). The Spanish term ‘sentido social’ rather means ‘a sense for social matters’ and was coded in Coding 1 as *Das Volk* (the people), whereas the German translation was coded in Coding 1 as *Sozialstaat* (social state/welfare state).

This translation is not erroneous, but had it been closer to the meaning of ‘social matters’, the coding in Coding 1 in both languages may have been more similar.

One more good example for the English language is the term ‘*government*’: the translation of the English word ‘government’ into many target languages causes well-known translation issues. In general, it can be translated with three meanings: (a) a country’s ruling body, cabinet of ministers, (b) the state, and (c) the public administration apparatus (see, e. g., Merriam-Webster 2021: s. v. *government*). In this study, the term *government* appeared both in the Canadian and in the US answers. In one case in US-English, the German coder followed the German translation and coded in Coding 1 as *Staat* (‘state’), while the English coder in Coding 1 chose the code *Regierung* (‘government’ in the sense of the ruling body of ministers). Either decision for one of the options ‘*Staat*’ or ‘*Regierung*’ is reducing the scope of meaning compared to the English source word ‘government’. So in this study, had the translator selected one of the two translations, the German coder in Coding 1 would have been guided to code ‘*Regierung*’ or ‘*Staat*’, depending on the translation provided – while the English coder may have coded either of them as both are included in the meaning of the English term ‘government’ or alternatively, he/she may not have provided a code at all since the scope of meaning is not clear in English. Here the translation shaped the way of coding in Coding 1, without any error being involved.

In the three above examples, shifting the scope of meaning between both the source and target language is inevitable because the linguistic systems between source and target languages work differently in this respect. Often this category is linked to polysemous words where the breadth of meaning differs between languages, and as long as no further information or context (on the importance of context for translation see below) is provided to the translators, each decision will involve a slight imbalance between source and target.

Category 3 (in the Coding 2 scheme) shows in a way the limits that will always be present as soon as translation comes into play (see also Munday’s quote above) – and even more, when utterances need to be translated and then coded: if one source term has several correct translations, the translator needs to take a decision for one of them. And even if several such decisions are correct conceptually, with each of them the coder in the target language is intuitively guided towards different codes from within the coding scheme, because for attributing a code, the semantic meaning of the translation is the only term the coder uses for the coding, so this will shape the coding decision.

Although category 3 (in the Coding 2 scheme) is not referring to translation errors, but to coding disagreements triggered by translation, this category should be included in this study and its discussion because it shows the high relevance of the layer that translation adds to any multinational research, even if translations are correct.

Translation in context

While wording, terminology errors as well as lack of diligence and oversight errors are common to any translation activity and thus easier to avoid, an important finding within

category 1 (in Coding 2) is the importance of context for translating answers to open-ended probing questions. Translation needs context (on the importance of context for translation, see, for instance, Nida (1964: 100ff, 243); House (2006), Melby and Foster (2010)).

In this study, context matters in two respects:

In category 1, as seen above, some translation errors may have been avoided had the translators better kept in consideration the context in which they were translating, that is, the right-left discourse in the countries Canada, Spain, US. An example is the term 'independentismo' provided as answer when asked about associations with the term 'left' in Spain: The German translator translated this as 'Unabhängigkeit' (*independence*). But according to the Spanish country expert, this term has a clear meaning in the political context in Spain, that is, fighting for regional independence. So, while the translation in the sense of 'independence' may be correct in some contexts, in the context of political debates in Spain, the spontaneous understanding is different.

In category 3 in Coding 2 in some cases translators did not know about the context that would have been necessary for providing a correct translation, and thus in these cases it cannot be concluded that they did make a mistake, thus the categorization as translation issue rather than translation error. An example from my study: in US-English, one answer to the question about associations with the term 'left' reads "union, equality, caring". When only these three words are provided without any more explanation or context, the term "union" cannot be clearly interpreted in English. In this case, in Coding 1 the US-American coder coded this term as 'non codable'. The German translator translated this term more narrowly in the sense of *Gewerkschaft* (trade union), and this was also the code provided in German in Coding 1. However, as "union" can have several meanings in English, such as a partnership or something more like unity, it is difficult to know which meaning was in the respondent's mind and should thus be activated. In English, if the respondent had wanted to use the term "union" in the sense of "trade union", he or she might have put it in plural and not singular form, saying "unions, equality, caring" – but it is also possible that he/she did mean to say this but employed quick or careless writing in response to the open-ended probe. This fact should thus not be used as a clear-cut determinant for the translation. The translation as such was thus not wrong, but it eliminated one of the possible meanings. Here, without knowing the respondent's intended meaning, it was impossible for the translator to understand what exactly the respondent had in mind and thus to correctly translate this word. These cases are to be classified as 'translation issues' as they show the limits of translation in this text type.

In this respect too, the text type of answers to open-ended questions shows similar translation problems as the text type of social media texts: As outlined above, one of the problems when social media texts should be translated by machine translation systems is the missing context. When utterances in the source language are made without providing any context explicitly, but only implicitly – for example when individual words, incomplete sentence, or word snippets are provided as answers to open-ended questions, or in brief SMS messages, where the context may be included in other messages or, in the

case of the open-ended questions, in the question, or, in the worst case, only in the person's mind – then it is impossible to create translations that correctly capture the intended meaning of the utterances in the source language, if not by pure accident.

Intercultural Coding 1 errors in the source language

In my work with the country experts, besides translation we discovered another source for Coding 1 disagreements between Approaches 1 and 2: 'intercultural coding errors'. Although this had not been in the focus when setting up this study, an interesting finding materialized in the course of this research: When coding the answers in their source language in Coding 1, in two of the three language versions, the coders were from the same language, but not from the country in which the answers had been provided (that is, not from the same 'language version'): the Spanish coder was from Columbia and not Spain, and the English coder was from the US and not from Canada. So according to Grosjean (2015) they were 'bilinguals', but no 'bicultural bilinguals' as they did indeed each use both languages (German and English/Spanish) in their daily life, but were not constantly immersed in both cultures (Germany and Canada/Spain).

In some cases, I could, in collaboration with the country experts, determine that answers provided by respondents were not correctly coded in Coding 1 in the source language presumably because the words had a specific meaning in the source country context that was apparently unknown to the coders. This triggered a coding in the source language in Coding 1 that was surprising for native speakers of the source language version. And in some cases, in Coding 1, the coding in the source language was thus not correctly mirroring the meaning of an utterance in the source country context, while the translated utterance was correctly coded as the German translation captured the correct meaning in the source country.

Examples

In English, the example of the terms 'Democrat' and 'democratic' mentioned above was also an issue of Intercultural Coding 1 in the source language: answers provided in Canada that contained the terms 'Democrat' or 'democratic' were coded in Coding 1 as *CA: Bloc Québécois* (Canadian party, similar to the Democratic Party in the US). This was probably caused by the US-American coder thinking of the US context. However, the terms 'Democrat' and 'democratic' in Canada do not refer to a specific party, but rather to being the opposite of 'conservatism'. So here the mother language version of the coder obviously influenced his/her coding also in other variants of the same source language.

Another example from Canada is the term 'state' that, in Canada, always refers to the national level, because the administrative level below the nation in Canada is formed by provinces and not by states, such as in the US. Where the English utterance was 'state', the US-American coder in Coding 1 selected the category *Föderalismus* (federalism), whereas the German coder selected the category *Der Staat* (The state).

In Spanish, an example is the utterance ‘independentismo’ (see above for a translation error) that was coded as ‘non-codable’ by the Latin-American coder; however, according to the Spanish country expert, this term is very common in Spain, referring to pursuing the idea of independence, and in Spain this is in particular related to regional autonomy. The country expert stated that it is very unlikely that a Spanish-speaker from Spain would not know how to understand this term, in particular in a political context in connection with the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’.

These examples show that some of the Coding 1 disagreements were also triggered by the coders of the answers in the source languages coming from different countries, that is being ‘bilinguals’, without being ‘bicultural bilinguals’ in the sense of being immersed in both the source and target cultures. Although this does not involve translation issues as such, it should nevertheless not be left apart when analysing answers in intercultural and thus multilingual studies using open-ended probing questions.

6 Recommendations

Several interesting lessons can be learned from this study. These may later be applied to other projects in which answers to open-ended (probing) questions need to be translated and then analysed in cross-cultural and multilingual settings.

Probing questions in multilingual projects are used to assess the validity and equivalence across the different language versions and thus the resulting data. Applying a methodologically sound translation approach for translating these answers is thus of utmost importance.

Recommendations when translating answers to open-ended probing questions: Translators and coders

Translators and coders from the correct language version

Most of the time, answers to open-ended questions will be analysed by coding them into a pre-defined coding scheme. In this case, both the translators and coders (coding the answers provided into a coding scheme)⁹ need to be familiar with the current language use not only in the language, but also country in which the answers are provided. According to Grosjean (2015), they should be ‘bicultural bilinguals’, meaning, not only bilingual, but also bicultural, that is, being constantly immersed in both the culture of the source and of the target language version. This is even more important in country-specific contexts such as a political topic, for instance, the left-right continuum, as the language used depends largely on the discourse in the respective country and on everyday language use of the population in this country. Ideally, they are native speakers of the source lan-

⁹ As the Coding 1 (answer-related) process is not the focus of this paper, requirements for coders other than being ‘bicultural bilinguals’ are not discussed in this paper. On the general Coding 1 (answer-related) process, please refer to Scholz/Dorer/Züll (forthc.).

guage version from which they work: the source language version for the translator and the language version of the answers to be coded by the coder.

Well-trained, experienced, and briefed translators and coders

The translators should ideally have received specific translator training or, at least, have several years of experience as professional translators. Ideally, they have experience in similar topical fields as the one in which the answers to open questions are provided (such as political sciences in the case of my study). But this latter recommendation may be difficult to meet in practice, as a combination of experiences in both survey translations and a particular topic relevant for the open-ended questions may be difficult to find.

For this reason, any translator that has not yet gained experience in translating answers to open-ended (probing) questions should receive instructions and be trained on the specificities of this text type, and also on the specific research study he/she will be involved in.

Ensure that the source language and source culture knowledge of the translators are very good, or, if needed, that they do enough research to learn from other sources what possible answers provided do mean in the context of the particular study at hand.

If one translator or coder cannot fulfil all requirements, it is possible to work in small teams where the team composition could depend on the profile of each participant; for instance, for a topic such as in this study, by linguists, social scientists and/or communication scholars living in the source country or at least following public discourse there closely. The composition of such translation and coding teams may follow the idea of the best practice in questionnaire translation, the so-called ‘team approach’ or ‘committee approach’, consisting in an interdisciplinary mix of experts in translation/linguistics and experts in survey research/social sciences (on the committee or team approach as best-practice method for translating questionnaires in cross-cultural survey research, see, for instance, Harkness/Pennell/Schoua-Glusberg 2004; Harkness/Villar/Edwards 2010, Behr/Shishido 2016). In the case of survey translation, also native speakers of the source language may be included in the teams or even be hired to translate these text types (see Behr 2015, for discussion).

It is in particular on topics such as a political context (understanding of the left-right continuum) that it is important that the translators are familiar with the current discussions and discourse about such topics in the source country (on the importance of discourse for translation, see, for instance, Hatim 2009). This goes beyond simple language knowledge and translation experience but refers to a specific jargon and the way in which such topics are being discussed in the public debate.

Well-prepared and briefed coders

Like for the translators, it is important that also the coders who shall code the answers to open-ended questions receive training on the specific coding study and get familiar with the coding scheme and coding instructions at hand. But as the scope of this paper

is the translation and not the process of coding the answers to open-ended questions, this should not be focussed on any further in this paper.

Translation quality assessment and control/assurance

As the quality of translated answers to open-ended (probing) questions is decisive for the coding result and thus the data analysis, it is recommended to add at least one measure to assess and assure/control for translation quality. By “translation quality assessment” I refer to approaches for assessing, evaluating or measuring the quality of a given translation, a key model for assessing translation quality being the one developed by House (2015). For the terms “translation quality control” and “translation quality assurance”, different definitions can be found. In general, “quality assurance” is more proactive and focussing on the processes in place, such as making sure resources, guidance material and workflow are prepared in a way to enable high-quality translations to be produced (Gouadec 2010: 271; Biel 2011); borrowing from other disciplines, such as software solutions, “quality control” is rather product-oriented and reactive (SaMSolutions 2021), in the sense of controlling the quality of a particular translation that has already been produced.

For assuring a high quality of translations of answers to open questions, an idea may be to work in translation teams (see above). If possible, have not only one, but at least two persons working on the translations, by for instance cross-checking each other’s work or discussing the translations; this is to avoid idiosyncratic translation decisions.

If working in teams is not possible, at least some quality checks for the translation work should be applied, such as at least following the 4-eyes-principle, that is, having a second person double-checking all translations (Krenzler-Behm 2011: 171).¹⁰

Translation instructions

For translating answers to open-ended probing questions, translators need to be supported by clear guidelines. Otherwise, they will be at a loss about what to do, for instance, in case of missing context or incomplete and unclear source text. Also, these instructions need to contain information about the type of text they are translating and its specificities (see above), and they may contain a list of typical examples.

Resulting from category 3 in my Coding 2 scheme, with later coding in mind, an important instruction is that translators should carry out a documentary translation and be as clear and open as they can about where they see the limits of translating this text type and where they feel any translation would contribute to distorting the coding result between source and target language. Where the translators or translation teams decide that a clear “one-to-one translation” is not possible because it cannot be clearly stated what the respondent had in mind, as the source text may have different meanings depen-

¹⁰ Similar quality assessment, assurance as well as control measures should ideally be implemented also for coding the answers provided – for instance, having a second coding or inter-coder reliability check. But as the scope of this paper is the translation and not the process of coding answers to open-ended questions, this should not be focussed on any further in this paper.

ding on the context, it is important that the translator(s) bring in their expertise and clearly document this. This would most easily be done by adding comments to the translations.

Translators should also be instructed that deciding for a stylistically optimised final translation will be less important than faithfully mirroring the source text and leaving elements, such as several translation options listed by a slash, in combination with comments outlining doubts about the proper translation.

In addition, find a way to ensure that the translation instructions are duly followed and met by the translators (on instructing translators see e. g. Repke/Dorer 2021: 6–7); this may be achieved by making sure this extra work is included in the remuneration for this translation exercise, or by the project team doing spot-checks about correct understanding of the instructions. Also, it may be considered to train the translators and show them what kind of comments is needed and useful for the researchers.

Carry out documentary translation, add comments and consider them in the coding process

As mentioned above, an important instruction for translating answers to open-ended questions is that translators carry out a documentary translation and add comments in case they feel, for instance, that their translation is not fully reflecting the source text, in case of uncertainty or also when interpreting the source text.

It is of equal importance to ensure that these comments are considered when coding the partly translated answers. Otherwise, this important information will be lost for the coding and thus analysis process (also in the team approach or TRAPD, it is recommended that the translators add comments to their translations as “valuable information for the review session”, Harkness 2007: 83).

7 Conclusions and outlook

My study is located at the intersection of translation studies and cross-cultural survey research, where I analysed the translations of answers to open-ended probing questions. In a connected study involving answers to open-ended probing questions provided in three countries (Canada, Spain, US), two approaches for coding answers provided were compared to one another: Approach 1 consisted in coding the answers provided in the original languages (English and Spanish) by bilingual coders (social scientists) into a central German-language coding scheme. Approach 2 consisted in first translating these answers into German and then coding the translated answers into the same coding scheme by a German-native speaking coder (social scientist). This coding event should be called “answer-related coding” or “Coding 1”. Comparing the codes attributed in Approach 1 and 2 resulted in 416 disagreements between the codings provided in these two approaches.

In collaboration with “country experts” from Canada, Spain and the US, I determined that in 95 out of the 416 disagreements between the codings following Approach 1 and the codings following Approach 2, the reason was that the answers had been translated.

For analysing these translations, a second coding event was carried out, coding the translation errors and issues, called “Coding 2”: In consensual double-coding, myself and a second equally qualified second coder (both translation scholars) coded these 95 cases into a translation error and issues coding scheme developed inductively by myself.

My research questions were (a) which are these translation errors and issues detected in translating answers to open-ended probing questions; and (b) how can such translation errors and issues be avoided in the future?

The translation error and issue coding scheme (used for Coding 2) contains three categories: (1) Classical translation errors, such as oversight, word or grammatical errors; (2) Cases where the translator constructed sense where the source did not make any sense; (3) Translation issues – cases where the translation was not wrong, but the fact that translation was involved triggered the fact that there was a disagreement in the Coding 1, the answer-related coding.

Out of the 95 cases, 76 disagreements in the answer-related Coding 1 had been caused by classical translation errors, in 4 cases, the translators made sense where the source text did not make any sense, and in 15 cases, the translation as such was not incorrect, but the disagreement between the codes attributed in Approach 1 and Approach 2 could nevertheless be attributed to the fact that the text was translated, owing to the fact, that with every translation there is at least a small shift in meaning; I called this third category ‘translation issues’.

In my work with the country experts, we discovered that, in addition to the translation errors and issues, in altogether 12 cases, in the answer-related Coding 1, the coding in the source language was not correct because the coders were not from the country in which the answers were provided (the Spanish coder being from South America and the English coder being from the US). According to Grosjean (2015), they were thus bilinguals, but no bicultural bilinguals.

Based on the nature of the translation errors and issues that I determined, I developed a list of recommendations for future projects translating answers to open-ended (probing) questions: Translators and coders – that are to translate resp. code answers to open-ended questions – should meet certain criteria in terms of training and preparation for this specific task. In particular, they should be briefed about the specific text type as well as the topic of the probing questions. They should provide a ‘documentary translation’, that is, provide as much information about the answers given in the source language and source country as possible. When a clear and unambiguous translation mirroring the same ‘scope of meaning’ that is expressed in the source language is not possible because it cannot clearly be stated what the respondent had in mind, the translators should document this. And it is important that such comments be considered when the translated answers are coded and then analysed. Context plays an important role in

this type of translation, so a high level of familiarity with the broader topic in which the questions are embedded, on the one hand, and with the particular language version as used in the contexts relevant for each study, on the other hand, is crucial. General quality assurance measures, such as correctly instructing translators and systematically integrating quality assessment and control steps, are even more important when translating this text type than many others: already seemingly small translation errors can introduce serious errors in the coded translated answers and thus distort the resulting cross-cultural survey data.

An interesting similarity to the attempt to translate social media texts by machine translation can be drawn: in both text types, in many cases the absence of a clear context makes it impossible to develop correct translations. Both in the practical translation industry and in translation studies, it is a well-known fact that “translation needs context”. My study provides a plastic example of this statement.

To my knowledge, this is the first time that translations of answers to open-ended probing questions were systematically analysed from a translation point of view. My study is an in-depth analysis of the translation errors and issues detected in the “left-right study” in which I was involved (Scholz/Dorer/Züll forthc.). While in our joint paper we analysed the overall approach of coding answers to open-ended probing questions, in this paper I only focus on the translation errors and issues when such answers are translated, thus only a fraction of the larger project, but analyse them in-depth from a translation studies perspective.

My method to work with “country experts” for all three countries involved proved to be appropriate as one person could hardly be familiar with the language use in terms of political left-right issues, in three countries in the country language versions.

To learn more about the dynamics of this particular translation type – translating answers to open-ended (probing) questions – further research would be needed to enhance the understanding of this translation process and to further refine the recommendations to be provided for this process: It would be rewarding to study the translations of answers to open-ended probing questions in other language combinations, on different topics, using different instructions, for instance, by putting more focus on adding comments where a “one-to one” translation is not possible and incorporating these comments in the process of coding these (translated) answers. And also, it should be considered to study the effect of translation quality assessment, assurance and control measures included in the process. It would be interesting to see whether the translation error and issue coding scheme developed by myself still holds or whether new translation error or issue types emerge in other constellations.

Open-ended questions are known to deliver useful data, and in particular probing questions in combination with closed-ended questions in web surveys have become more and more popular as a supplementary means to yield information that would otherwise not be captured (Luebker 2021). There is a constant need to refine methodologies for carrying out and analysing such open-ended and probing techniques. For instance,

automated coding of answers provided using several statistical models is increasingly studied and providing increasingly better results (He/Schonlau, 2021). In multilingual survey projects in which these answers are provided in more than one language, in many cases these answers need to be translated (if not a central coding scheme for coding all answers already exists in these languages). The findings from my study and my recommendations for the translation process, but also for selecting human coders (for coding the answers) from a cross-cultural perspective, should contribute to facilitating and improving the process of translating answers to open-ended (probing) questions and may thus, in the long run, strengthen the use of open-ended (probing) question techniques.

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Leona Van Vaerenbergh
University of Antwerp
Arts and Philosophy
Applied Linguistics / Translation and Interpreting
O. L. V. van Lourdeslaan 17/5
B-1090 Brussel
Belgien
Leona.VanVaerenbergh@uantwerpen.be

Klaus Schubert
Universität Hildesheim
Institut für Übersetzungswissenschaft
und Fachkommunikation
Universitätsplatz 1
D-31141 Hildesheim
Deutschland
klaus.schubert@uni-hildesheim.de

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Author

Brita Dorer is senior researcher at GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences (Mannheim, Germany), specialized in the translation of questionnaires for cross-cultural surveys, and heading the Questionnaire Translation Workpackage of the European Social Survey (ESS). Her scientific interests include the evaluation and quality enhancement of questionnaire translation, translatability and cultural portability of source questionnaires, close versus adaptive translation, machine translation, and translation process research / cognitive translation studies.

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