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Questionnaire translation in cross-cultural survey research

Translators, their background, and relevant competencies from the perspective of international research teams

Abstract

Cross-cultural social science research largely depends on data that is collected using questionnaires in different languages. To ensure comparability, it is essential that questionnaire translations are produced according to the best possible quality standards and by qualified personnel. National teams participating in international survey programs apply different methods when translating questionnaires into their local languages. However, little is known about what these methods look like in practice and who is involved in the translations. This paper presents the results of an online survey among the participating national teams of 13 international survey programs, focusing on the following questions: *Who translates in large-scale cross-cultural survey programs, and what is their background? Why do national teams choose these translators, and which competencies matter most to them? What is the role of different translation competencies in questionnaire translation, and in what ways can professional translators add value to this process?*

1 Introduction

The goal of cross-cultural social science research is to study and compare different societies and their attitudes, values, and behaviors. To this end, surveys are often conducted across different countries using questionnaires in different languages. But in order to draw valid conclusions from surveys that are administered across cultures, the questionnaires need to be comparable (Braun/Harkness 2005: 95). Being comparable means that the content or meaning of the source questions and response options must be maintained as much as possible despite the differences in language systems and cultures of the populations that are to be examined. In case of cultural references that are non-existent in some countries, cultural adaptations might become necessary (Behr/Shishido 2016). Another challenge is that the same stimulus as well as the form and specific measurement properties (e. g. question words, time references or quantifiers in response scales) need to be kept constant across all languages involved (Harkness et al. 2010). Any deviations in meaning or measurement properties can have a direct impact on the response distribution and thus on data quality. On the other hand, the questionnaire needs to be clear, fluent and easily understandable to the respondents

(Lenzner 2012). This is especially important, if the target population (that is, the sample drawn to complete the questionnaire in the target culture) consists of the general population and thus includes people of low educational background. Questions that are difficult to understand may directly impact the response quality (i. e. respondents may break off the questionnaire or reply by “Don’t know” answers more often) (Lenzner 2012). To keep these survey specific requirements in balance – comparability and close translation on one side and comprehensibility or fluency on the other side – translations should be carried out according to high methodological standards.

Much research has been done within the past decades to optimize these translation methods in the domain of questionnaire translation across different disciplines (Harkness 2003; Acquadro et al. 2008; Behr 2009; Harkness et al. 2010; Hambleton/Zenisky 2011; Choi et al. 2012; Chidlow/Plakoyiannaki/Welch 2014; Epstein/Santo/Guillemain 2015; Behr/Shishido 2016 etc.). Many guidelines and best-practice recommendations have been published based on this research, such as:

- European Social Survey Translation Guidelines (European Social Survey 2020)
- Guidelines for Best Practice in Cross-Cultural Surveys (Survey Research Center 2016)
- ITC Guidelines for Translating and Adapting Tests (Second Edition) (International Test Commission 2017)
- Principles of Good Practice for the Translation and Cultural Adaptation Process for Patient-Reported Outcomes (Wild et al. 2005)
- AAPOR/WAPOR Task Force Report on Quality in Comparative Surveys (Lyberg et al. 2021)

Moreover, empirical research is increasingly being done on the different steps recommended for the translation procedures in cross-cultural research (Epstein et al. 2015; Behr/Braun 2022; Dorer 2023; Zavala-Rojas et al. 2024).

Among the different approaches for questionnaire translation that have emerged across various disciplines, the so called “TRAPD model” (Harkness 2003) has been the method recommended in the domain of the social sciences up to now (Behr/Dept/Krajčeva 2018: 7; Leitgöb et al 2023: 21). TRAPD is endorsed, for example, in the *Guidelines for Best Practice in Cross-Cultural Surveys* (Survey Research Center 2016), and in the *WAPOR/AAPOR Task Force Report on Quality in Comparative Surveys* (Lyberg et al. 2021). The model consists of the following five steps: **t**ranslation – **r**eview – **a**djudication – **p**retest – **d**ocumentation. At the core of this method, which is often applied in different variations and sequences, two parallel translations (or split translations to save cost) are produced independently and later discussed and reconciled in a meeting, preferably by an interdisciplinary team consisting of the original translators as well as “survey researchers or study managers” (Lyberg et al. 2021: 61). Janet Harkness as well as the WAPOR/AAPOR report specify that the translators involved in this process should be “skilled practitioners” (Harkness 2003: 36), while the *Guidelines for Best Practice in Cross-Cultural Surveys* mention that it may be difficult to find “trained translators” and that “in this case, proficient bilinguals may be the only personnel available”

(Survey Research Center 2016: 298). The fact is that, beyond the different translation and review methods applied in cross-cultural survey research, the personnel involved in the translations also play a crucial role (Harkness 2003: 44; Behr 2009: 59).

1.1 Status quo

However, little is known about the personnel used by national teams implementing cross-cultural survey programs in their respective countries, even though transparent survey documentation should be an integral part of survey research (Survey Research Center 2016; Behr/Dept/Krajčeva 2018). Some survey programs publish reports, thus offering a small insight into their local translation procedures and the people who translated: examples include the ISSP Study Monitoring Report (Sapin et al. 2022), the ESS Quality Report Round 9 (Ghirelli et al. 2022) and the East Asian Social Survey Study Monitoring Questionnaires (East Asian Social Survey 2018). Moreover, publicly available methodology or translation guidelines do not always provide much detail on who should translate and which background, qualifications, and experiences these translators should have (see Appendix 1).

From the publicly available guidelines of the survey programs included in this study, only four explicitly recommend the involvement of professional translators or skilled practitioners, i. e. the translation guidelines of the ESS (2020), the ISSP (International Social Survey Programme 2018), the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) (OECD 2019), and the Survey of Health, Aging, and Retirement in Europe (Harkness 2005). The ESS specifies the use of at least two translators who “should be skilled practitioners, ideally with a degree in Translation Studies or Linguistics and/or having worked as professional translators for many years” (European Social Survey 2020). The ISSP recommends the use of interdisciplinary translation teams made up of professional translators as well as survey methodologists in their guidelines (International Social Survey Programme 2018), but does not specify whether this also relates to the initial translation step or only to the subsequent review steps. Other programs remain rather vague and recommend that “someone who understands both the technical terms as well as both languages” (ICF International 2012: 18) or simply “bilingual translators” (OECD 2024) should translate. The guidelines of the Afrobarometer even discourage from hiring professional translators as those seem to “focus more on ‘formal’ or ‘academically correct’ versions of the local languages, rather than on the day-to-day use of the language” (Afrobarometer 2022: 23). And finally, many survey programs do not specify who should produce the questionnaire translations at all.

1.2 Focus on the translator

This exploratory study therefore focusses on the *people* producing the initial questionnaire translations (i. e. the first drafts of the translations, prior to any review or checking steps) in various large-scale cross-cultural survey programs. As such, it can be located within the framework of Translator Studies, which, according to Chesterman “covers research which focuses primarily and explicitly on the agents involved in translation...”

(Chesterman 2000: 20). By collecting macro-level data from the national teams participating in survey programs, this study is taking a closer look at these agents: *Who translates in large-scale cross-cultural survey programs, and what is their background? Why do national teams choose these translators, and which competencies matter most to them? What is the role of different translation competencies in questionnaire translation, and in what ways can professional translators add value to this process?* The results will serve as an empirical basis for further research on the ideal competencies and experiences needed to deliver high quality questionnaire translations and thereby inform cross-cultural studies in developing their methodological guidelines and choosing adequate personnel for optimized translation procedures.

1.3 Translation competence

To understand the results and analysis in sections 3 and 4 of this paper, it is important to know more about translation competence and what it encompasses. Different models have been developed over the years to explain which competencies are needed to produce translations successfully, i. e. the European Master's in Translation Competence Framework 2017 (EMT expert group 2017), the ISO 17100 standard (ISO 2015) and the translation competence model developed by the PACTE Group (PACTE Group 2005, 2017). For this paper, the author chose the latter, as it focusses on the translation process itself and the respondents' replies could easily be categorized using this empirically validated model.

According to the PACTE Group, translation competence is the “underlying knowledge system needed to translate,” it is “expert knowledge” that is “basically procedural knowledge (and not declarative)” and consists of a set of “5 sub-competencies and psycho-physiological components” (PACTE Group 2005: 610). These five sub-competences are: Bilingual sub-competence, Extralinguistic sub-competence, Knowledge of translation, Instrumental sub-competence, and Strategic Sub-competence (PACTE Group 2017). Bilingual sub-competence concerns linguistic aspects in the source and target languages. Extra-linguistic sub-competence concerns general world knowledge, knowledge about the cultures involved as well as subject specific knowledge. Translation knowledge relates to the acquired methods and theories of translation as well as knowledge about the profession. Instrumental sub-competence has to do with information retrieval and the use of translation technologies. Strategic sub-competence plays a key role in the translation process: “it is responsible for solving problems and the efficiency of the process” by “activating the different sub-competencies and compensating for deficiencies, identifying translation problems and applying procedures to solve them” (PACTE Group 2005: 610). While many people have (different levels of) foreign language competence and extra-linguistic knowledge, the following three sub-competencies have proven to be specific to Translation competence: Knowledge of Translation, Instrumental sub-competence as well as Strategic sub-competence (PACTE Group 2005; PACTE Group 2017). They could therefore be grouped under the term

translation expertise. The PACTE Translation Competence model will be used in the following to categorize the survey responses.

2 Methods

2.1 Sample and data collection

To find answers to the research questions, we, the project staff, approached major large-scale survey programs and conducted a web survey amongst their participating national teams (fielded between 6 March and 11 May 2023). The national teams being the units of analysis, we invited the principal investigator or another member of each team to answer our questions. It was a precondition that each survey respondent must have been involved in the translation procedures during the most recent round of their survey. *Being involved* was defined in the questionnaire as having “organized or managed the national translation process [...] and/or [being] actively involved in translating or reviewing the translations”.

The overall goal of the survey was to collect macro-level data on the diversity of translation procedures and personnel used across different national teams participating in survey programs throughout the world. To streamline the project and keep the survey manageable, we decided to concentrate on large-scale programs conducting cross-cultural surveys in the fields of the social sciences, education, and public health. We focused on large-scale survey programs as they often serve as blueprints for smaller programs. We also made sure to include programs with extensive translation guidelines (e. g., ESS) as well as those without guidelines referring particularly to translation. We included global programs (e. g. World Values Survey WVS) as well as more regional survey programs from Europe, Asia, and Africa (e. g., Afrobarometer, East Asian Social Survey [EASS], ESS). Finally, for a more comprehensive picture of methods and procedures used, we tried to reach out to cross-cultural survey programs that are academic and publicly funded as well as to those that are more commercially organized.

Respondents needed to be able to reply to quite detailed questions on individual translation method choices. We therefore reviewed the methodological and/or translation guidelines of the respective studies (see Appendix 1) to make sure they organize their national translation procedures locally. We excluded survey programs that seem to rely on a single survey agency to produce all translations, considering that this would not help us to enlighten individual country choices. To exclude memory effects and ensure that respondents would still remember details on their translation procedure, we did not contact survey programs whose latest round of data collection, and hence the translation procedure, took place more than five years ago. We also did not contact regional studies from South America since most South American countries use one Spanish source for their surveys and their need for interlingual translations is minor. Nonetheless, we have countries from North and South America as well as Australia covered by global studies like the World Values Survey (WVS) or ISSP. Initially, we approached the headquarters

or key contact persons of 15 survey programs, asking for their endorsement for our research project. Two programs decided not to participate. We were able to send out a personalized survey invitation directly to the participating countries of ten survey programs. In case of returned emails, we tried to recontact the countries using alternative contacts. For two survey programs, contact information of national teams were not publicly available online. In this case, we asked the headquarters or key contact persons to forward our survey invitation to their participating countries themselves. In sum, 385 national teams were invited to participate in our survey. After three weeks, we sent one reminder to those national teams who had not yet responded and for which we had email addresses (thus, reminders were not sent to national teams directly approached by headquarters). Ultimately, we received survey responses from 153 teams from 13 studies, including one team that answered the survey anonymously, thus not indicating any survey program (response rate: 40 %).

Using a data protection leaflet, we made sure that survey programs and participants knew we were not aiming at collecting personal data nor publishing information on translation procedures of individual countries and programs. We assured them that information gained from the survey would be published in an anonymized way and without a possibility to identify participating countries. Furthermore, study names would be anonymized in all data analyses. The same data protection information was visible on the landing page and informed consent was obtained before the start of the survey.

2.2 The questionnaire

The questionnaire contained detailed questions on the translation procedures and personnel used by different countries participating in a diverse set of survey programs. In preparation for this, we carried out a profound literature review on different methods and best practices in the field of questionnaire translation across different disciplines (Harkness 2003; Wild et al. 2005; Blom et al. 2006; Sireci et al. 2006; Acquadro et al. 2008; Harkness et al. 2010; Koller et al. 2012; Epstein et al. 2015; Behr/Shishido 2016; Survey Research Center 2016; Eremenco et al. 2018; Repke/Dorer 2021), and reviewed the methodological and translation guidelines of the survey programs we were going to involve (see Appendix 1). Furthermore, practical working experience in the field of questionnaire translation and validation across various disciplines as well as anecdotal evidence from the research community helped us in the choice of topics. Literature on the methodology of questionnaire translation, translation competence and expertise, as well as the status of professional translators guided us while developing the questions on views and attitudes towards translation and translators (Tirkkonen-Condit 1990; PACTE Group 2003; Dimitrova 2005; Dam/Zethsen 2008; Behr 2009; PACTE Group 2017; Schaeffer et al. 2020; Dorer 2022 etc.).

The survey was presented to all participants in English. We asked fact-finding questions enquiring on the general conditions of the most recent translation procedure (source language, number of target languages, time, and budget, etc.), the translators involved, reasons for choosing them, the review and checking steps implemented and

the translation technologies used during this process. Our main focus, though, was on the people who produced the initial translations, i. e. those who created the first drafts before any review or checking steps. More concretely, we asked about the background of each of the initial translators, their qualifications, language proficiency and experience as well as questions on their performance. Finally, a few questions on general views and attitudes towards translation and professional translators helped to contextualize the findings (research data and questionnaire available under: Behr/Efu Nkong 2024).

The questionnaire was pretested at three different stages with national coordinators, team members, or translation experts from the Afrobarometer, CSES, ESS, ISSP, PIAAC, SHARE, and WVS since one of our main challenges was to ensure the questionnaire was going to be suitable in terminology and procedures for all the diverse survey programs we were going to include. Our pretests included (a) a dry run of an early paper draft with two test persons, (b) answering the web survey and subsequent focus groups with seven test persons from different study programs and countries, and (c) a pretest to check the timing with two test persons.

3 Results

3.1 Survey respondents

Overall, 153 persons completed the survey. Thus 153 national teams from 13 different study programs were represented (for a list of participating study programs see Appendix 1).

The median response time was 28 minutes. 27 persons dropped out of the survey, but 12 of these seem to have forwarded the e-mail invitation to another person within the team to complete. Two persons were screened out since they had not been involved in the translation procedures during their latest survey round [Q1].¹ 99 respondents (70 %) had a background in the social sciences, 15 respondents (11 %) had a background (also) in languages/linguistics/translation [Q3]. In the following, when reporting on detailed translation procedures, the results will be based on $n = 146$ persons, thereby *including* late dropouts in the survey who still answered the detailed translator questions, but *excluding* respondents who had been involved in translation procedures earlier than 2018. The latter only received questions on views and attitudes towards translation and translators in general but not on the specific translation procedures employed in their study.

¹ All questions relevant for this article (Q1 – Q34) can be found in Appendix 2.

3.2 Who produces the initial questionnaire translations in cross-cultural survey programs?

Of the 146 national teams who responded to this survey, 46 national teams (32 %) produced only *one single initial translation* of the source questionnaire [Q4]. Of those, 26 teams (57 %) had this translation done within the research team or by another (external) researcher.² 13 teams (28 %) hired a professional translator for this task and six teams (13 %) another kind of language specialist (one single translation was done by a student) [Q6]. On the other hand, 100 national teams (68 %) produced *two or more initial translations* per target language. In 73 of those teams, the translators worked separately [Q5], a procedure that would correspond to the TRAPD scheme and corresponding best practice recommendations.

As Figure 1 indicates, out of the 146 participating national teams, 64 teams (44 %) had their initial questionnaire translation(s) exclusively done by researchers, that is, mostly within the research team. Either the survey respondent him/herself or one or more other member(s) of the team produced the initial version(s). In some cases, external researchers were asked to translate. Nine of the respondents or other team members who produced translations had a main or additional qualification as translators/linguists [Q3]. 42 teams (29 %) exclusively hired professional translators for the initial translation step. And only 28 teams (19 %) relied on a mixed set-up for the initial translation phase.

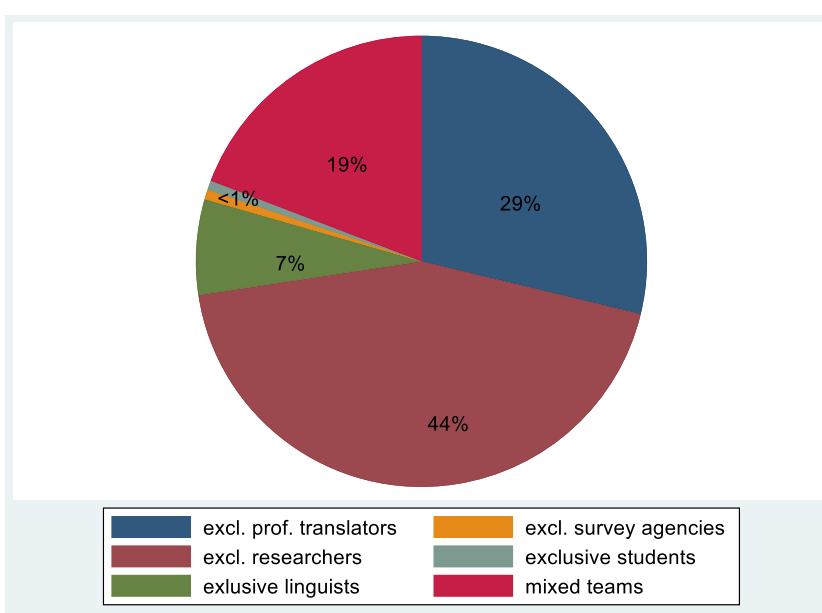


Fig. 1: People producing the *initial* questionnaire translations in cross-cultural survey programs

² “Researcher” here means any non-linguist researcher in the field of the survey, e. g. a social scientist or economist.

Not all of these mixed teams included professional translators or linguists, though: 6 teams rather relied on researchers combined with students to produce the translations. Out of the 146 teams, there were 10 teams (7 %) who exclusively used language specialists who were not professional translators, e. g. language teachers or journalists. Only one team had their initial translation done exclusively by students and one team exclusively by a survey agency (without having any further information on the translators involved).

3.3 Review and checking steps

In most cases, the initial translation step was followed by a thorough review procedure. The survey asked about the review steps implemented by the participating national teams using a multiple-choice question. On average, respondents picked four review steps from the list provided in the survey. The review step which was most frequently selected was the team-based reconciliation/review meeting (72 %). The next most selected review steps were quantitative pretests³ (44 %), review or proofreading by an additional person (38 %) and verification by an external agency⁴ (33 %) [Q7].

From the 64 teams relying exclusively on researchers for their initial translations, 50 teams (78 %) performed a *team-based* reconciliation/review meeting afterwards; 11 of those involved professional translators or linguists during this team-based review, for proofreading or in other types of review steps (not counting back translators) [Q7a-d]. Deducting those and 9 translating team members who were translators/linguists themselves from the 64 teams who relied exclusively on researchers during the initial step, 44 teams remain (out of 146), who seem to not have included any professional translator or linguist in their translation procedure at all.

3.4 Background of the translators

Of all 97 professional translators involved in the initial translations step, 31 % were part of an agency (translation agency or survey agency), 49 % were independent freelance translators and 20 % in-house translators [Q6, Q8]. No further details were known concerning 16 of the agency translators [Q9]. From the 81 professional translators whose details were known, 56 (69 %) had a degree in translation (for nine translators this particular information was not known to the survey respondents) [Q10]. Of the translators having a degree in translation, there was only one novice (=less than three years of experience). All others, including 16 translators without a formal translation degree, had a minimum of three years of professional translation experience (53 % more than ten years, 5 % not known) [Q11].

³ The translated questionnaire is given to a sample of the target population for a quantitative test before the actual release.

⁴ A procedure implemented by specialized linguistic agencies; different language versions of measurement instruments are checked for their equivalence by professional translators experienced in this field.

From the 139 researchers who translated, 55 were respondents to this survey [Q6]. 42 of those respondents (79 %) indicated social sciences as being their main field of study, 13 (25 %) economics/business, five (9 %) translation/languages and very few natural sciences or education [Q3]. It should be mentioned here that the respondents had an option to choose more than one field of study. From the 84 other members of the research teams or external researchers who produced initial translations, 61 (75 %) were reported to have social sciences as their main field of study, nine (11 %) education as well as four (5 %) economy/business and translation/languages, respectively [Q16]. Concerning their general translation experience, seven (5 %) of all team members (including respondents who translated themselves) and external researchers were reported or did report themselves not to have had any previous translation experience at all, 70 (51 %) were reported to “have done a few translations before” and 56 (41 %) were reported to “regularly work on translations (e. g. several times per year)” (six non-response). This was defined as relating to questionnaire translations but also to any other kind of translations [Q17].

It should not be surprising that the survey respondents described 96 % of the professional translators involved as having a high proficiency in the *source* language (of those, 19 % were natives) [Q12]. Among the members of the research team (including the respondents who translated themselves) and external researchers, 84 % were considered or considered themselves to have a high source language proficiency (of those, 4 % natives). 16 % were described as having only an intermediate source language proficiency [Q18]. Concerning the *target* language proficiency, respondents described 98 % of the professional translators as natives [Q13]. This was the case for 89 % of the translating team members and researchers. Two percent of the latter were described as having only an intermediate proficiency in the target language [Q19]. It should be mentioned that being a native speaker of the target language is normally a prerequisite for producing a valid questionnaire translation and is recommended in most guidelines. Another requirement usually mentioned in the guidelines for cross-cultural survey translations is that translators should be living in the country of the target language population at the time of the translation. This was the case for 97 % of all personnel translating questionnaires across the responding national teams, with no major difference between the groups of professional translators or researchers [Q24].

In international guidelines it is often recommended that translators working in the domain of survey research should have experience in the field of questionnaire translation or design. According to the survey respondents, most of the professional translators involved in the translation procedures of the participating study programs and whose details were known (n=81) had experience in translating questionnaires: 47 % reportedly had “worked on a few questionnaire translations before” and 41 % “regularly work on questionnaire translations” (12 % non-response) [Q14]. When it comes to subject matter knowledge (topics of the survey, such as immigration or health) amongst professional translators, 57 % were reported to have “some translation experience in the subject matter.” 15 % of the professional translators even had a “formal training in the subject

matter (e. g. university degree)” and 12 % had no previous knowledge in the subject matter at all. In 16 % of the cases, this information was not known to the respondents [Q15]. As described previously, most of the members of the research team and external researchers who translated questionnaires were social scientists, economists, or other specialists in their respective field. Hence, 91 % of them indicated that they had previous knowledge in the subject matter and 92 % had experience in the field of questionnaire design [Q20, Q21].

Finally, there were 19 translators involved in the initial translation step whose qualifications were summarized under “linguists” for the purpose of this survey. Seven of them (37 %) had a degree in languages, but not in translation, eight (42 %) were teachers and three (16 %) were journalists [Q22]. The six students who produced initial translations were students of the social sciences (in one case the field of study was not indicated) [Q23]. Since linguists and students played a minor role in the translation procedures of the participating national teams, the analysis will focus on the two groups of professional translators and team members/external researchers producing initial versions of questionnaire translations.

3.4.1 Reasons for the choice of translators

The survey results indicate that almost half of the participating national teams prefer to have their initial translations done exclusively by members of the research team or other (external) researchers, even though best practice and some guidelines recommend the involvement of at least one “translation practitioner” (Harkness 2003, 2005) or professional translator (European Social Survey 2020).² Why is this the case?

The *Guidelines for Best Practice in Cross-Cultural Surveys* mention that it might not always be possible to apply the recommended procedures due to availability of “trained translators” (Survey Research Center 2016: 298). Other studies doing research on the implementation of best practice also find that recommended procedures are not always feasible (Vujcich et al. 2021). In this survey, a multiple-choice question was used to find out about the reasons why some national teams choose professional translators and why others choose team members/other researchers in their field to produce the initial translations (see Fig. 2 and 3).

Figure 2 shows that “good experiences with professional translators producing questionnaire translations in the past” was a major reason for choosing professional translators given by 48 teams (72 %). This may be linked to the relevance of “translation experience” which was selected by 37 teams (55 %) as a reason. “Best practice recommendations in literature” (61 %) as well as “requirements by the respective study guidelines” (37 %) also led to choosing professional translators in many cases. While “availability,” “financial reasons” or “bad experiences with other personnel” did not seem to play a major role [Q25].

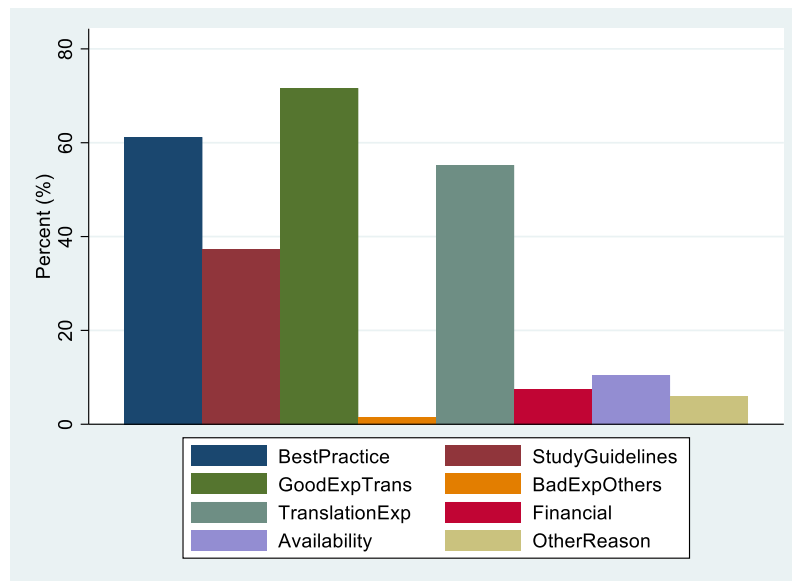


Fig. 2: Reasons for choosing professional translators (n=67, multiple-choice question)

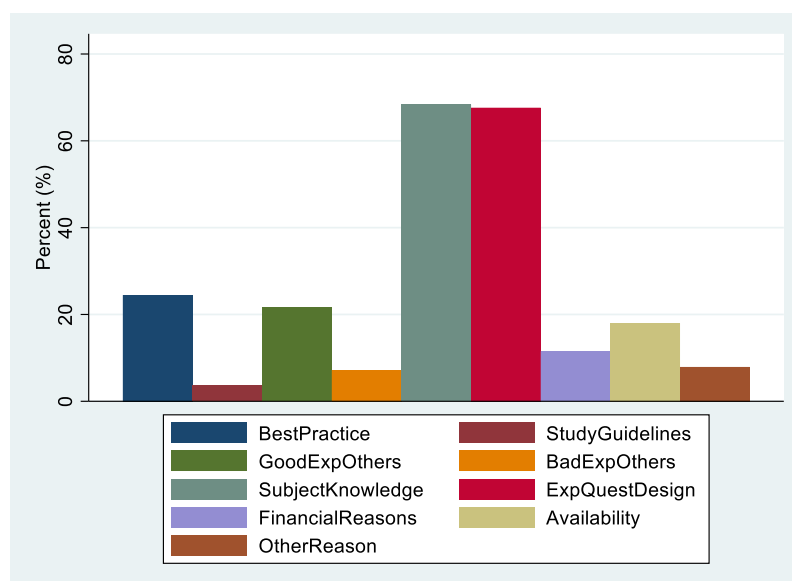


Fig. 3: Reasons for choosing team members/other (external) researchers (n=139, multiple choice question)

In Figure 3 we can see that teams relying on members of the research team or external researchers to produce the initial questionnaire translations emphasized mainly on their competencies and experience in the field: 68 % of those teams gave “Researchers are familiar with this type of social science research” and “Researchers have experience

regarding questionnaires” as reasons.⁵ “Study guidelines” and “best practice recommendations” played a minor role for those who prefer to have the translations done within the team or by external researchers. 25 teams (18 %) marked “availability” as a reason (“other personnel were not available for the translation”) and 10 teams (7 %) reported having had bad experiences with professional translators, agencies or other team members previously [Q26, Q27].

Financial reasons were hardly selected as a reason for choosing a certain type of translator in both groups. But a question on whether a specific translation budget was available to the teams or not [Q28] revealed some interesting results when compared to their choice of translators: Figure 4 shows that those who did *not* have a specific budget for translation mainly produced their translations within their own team (75 % compared to 13 % of those teams who had a translation budget available).

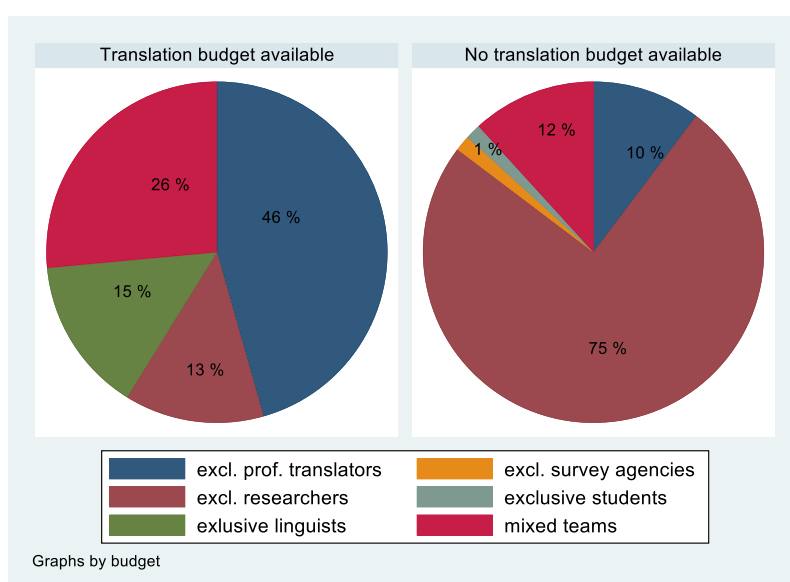


Fig. 4: Correlation of translation budget and choice of translators

The analysis shows that major factors influencing the choice of questionnaire translators from the perspective of international research teams seem to be the competencies of the people translating, best practice recommendations and study guidelines as well as – whether that is a conscious or unconscious factor – an available translation budget. Good or bad experiences with individuals performing the translation task also play a role in the set-up of a successful translation team and do not necessarily depend on the qualification or background of that person. But for the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on

⁵ It needs to be mentioned here that the reasons provided as response options for researchers did not include “translation experience” while the reasons for using professional translators did not include “are familiar with this type of social science research” and “have experience regarding questionnaires”.

the different competencies the two groups of professional translators and researchers bring into play.

3.4.2 Zooming in on competencies

In recent years, researchers in survey methodology have been trying to understand which sub-domains of translation competence are particularly important in the field of questionnaire translation (Behr 2018; Dorer 2022). Behr and Shishido (2016) have summarized what is expected of competent questionnaire translators:

Translators should have an excellent command of both source and target language and culture [...]. Other requirements include a combination of (questionnaire) translation experience, knowledge of the study topic and of questionnaire design principles.

(Behr/Shishido 2016: 271)

In the previous section, we have observed a divide between the participating national teams when it comes to their choice of translators and the competencies they expect: Some national teams consider translation experience particularly important for producing a good initial questionnaire translation, while others attach greater importance to the background knowledge in the survey topics and questionnaire design. To find out more about the importance they attribute to each of these competences, the last part of the survey contained some additional questions on views and attitudes.

First, the respondents were asked to rank three fields of expertise according to their importance for producing a good questionnaire translation [Q29]. From the 137 respondents who answered this question, 70 respondents (51 %) ranked “translation experience” first, 41 respondents (30 %) put “subject matter knowledge” first and 26 respondents (19 %) chose “experience in questionnaire design” as being the most important field of expertise. On first sight, this seems to indicate that thorough translation experience (*≈ strategic sub-competence*) is highly valued. On the other hand, and in terms of the PACTE model, when looking at subject matter knowledge and experience in questionnaire design as both falling under *extra-linguistic sub-competence*, the fields of *extra-linguistic sub-competence* and *strategic sub-competence* (translation experience) were equally selected by about 50 % of the respondents as being most important. But comparing the two main groups producing questionnaire translations, Figure 5 clearly indicates a difference in their perception of which field of expertise is most important to them: Those who have worked with professional translators during their last round of translations value translation experience considerably higher and see less importance in questionnaire design and subject matter knowledge than those who have exclusively relied on team members and/or external researchers.

For more details, the respondents were asked what they thought were the five most important skills for producing a good initial questionnaire translation [Q30]. Both groups (those who have used exclusively professional translators during their last round of translations and those using exclusively team members/researchers) chose “High proficiency in the source language” (*source lang. prof.*) and the “Ability to understand

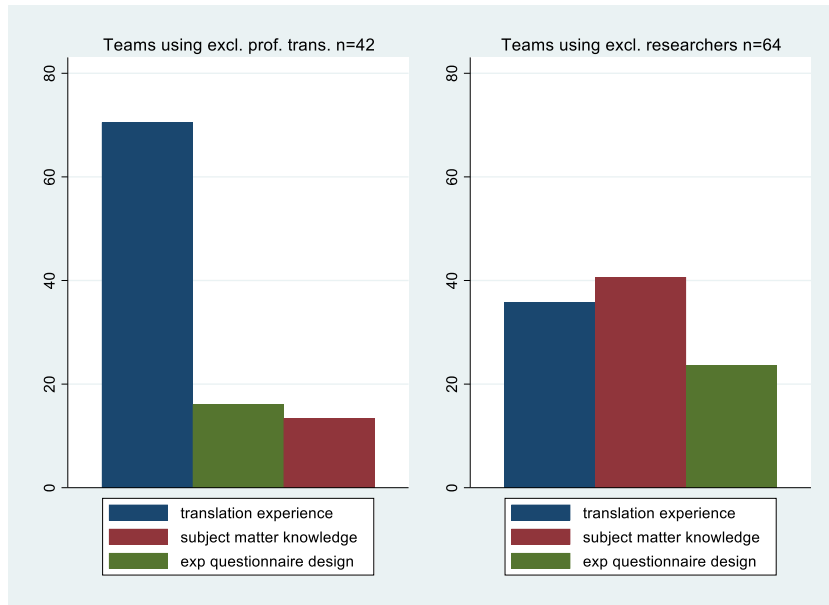


Fig. 5: Teams ranking the importance of 3 fields of expertise in questionnaire translation (in percent)

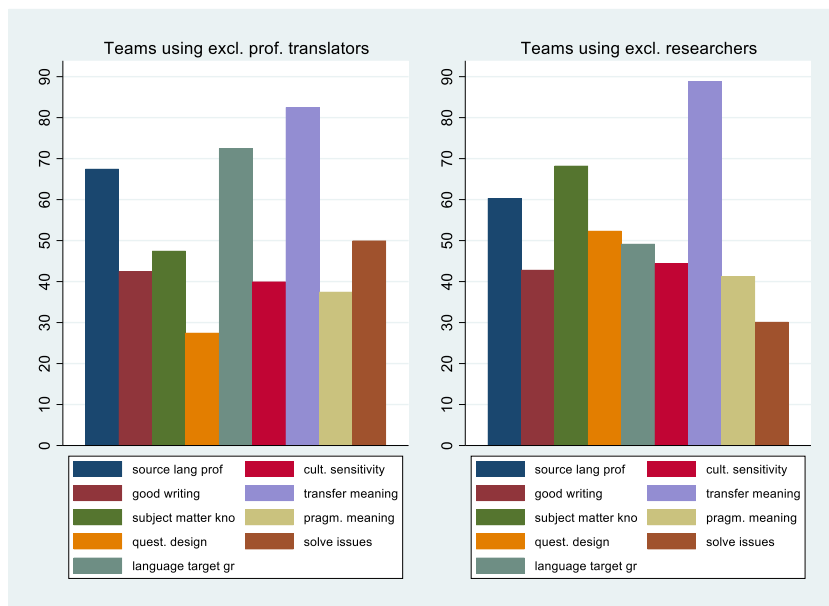


Fig. 6: Views on the five most important skills in questionnaire translation (in percent)

items and correctly transfer meaning to target language” (*transfer meaning*) amongst the five most important skills. Apart from that, the views of the two groups differed, as Figure 6 shows: “Knowledge in the subject matter of the survey (e. g. social science topics)” (*subject matter kno.*) as well as “Knowledge in the field of questionnaire design” (*quest. design*) were amongst the most important skills for those who had relied on their own

team members or external researchers to produce translations. While teams who had worked with professional translators during their last round of translations rated “Ability to use language level suitable for target group” (*language target gr.*) as the second most important skill (marked by 73 % vs. 50 % of those using researchers) and selected “Ability to find good solutions for translation challenges” (*solve issues*) amongst the five most important skills (marked by 50 % vs. 30 % of those using researchers).

In terms of the PACTE model on translation competence, it becomes clear that those who have brought translation experts into their team see a higher value in *bilingual sub-competence* (thus especially putting the emphasis on the target language competence) as well as *strategic sub-competence*, while those who rather rely on researchers feel that *extra-linguistic sub-competency* plays a more important role. The option “Ability to find good solutions for translation challenges” (*solve issues*) was chosen least by the latter, even though *strategic sub-competence* is considered as the most important translation sub-competence in translation research (PACTE Group 2017). Apparently, this ability seems to not be recognized as much by people who are not professional translators themselves or have not had much experience in working with professional translators.

Finally, an open-ended question was asked only to those who did *not* use professional translators (n=84) during their last round of translations what they feel would be the advantages and disadvantages of involving professional translators in the translation procedures [Q32].⁶ Only very few respondents related this question to practical aspects like higher cost for hiring external translators or time restrictions. Again, it can be clearly observed that almost all respondents who received and replied to this question named factors relating to different competencies of translators. Using the categories of the PACTE Translation competence model to organize the responses, 37 respondents (44 %) named various aspects of *Strategic sub-competence* of professional translators (namely translation experience, accuracy, and efficiency) as being advantageous and 9 respondents (11 %) naming aspects of *Translation knowledge* (i. e. professional skills, awareness of specific translation problems). Thus, overall, about 55 % of the respondents expected that different aspects of specific translation competence or translation expertise would be advantageous when working with professional translators. 22 respondents (26 %) expected aspects of the translator’s *bilingual sub-competence* (general, source, and target language competence) to be an advantage.

Concerning possible disadvantages when working with professional translators, 43 national teams (51 %, n=84) of the same group worried about a potential *lack of extra-linguistic sub-competence* (i. e. subject matter knowledge, experience in the field of questionnaire design, and cultural awareness) when working with professional translators. Six teams (7 %) feared a *loss of consistency* across study rounds, which is an important factor in continuous studies that are regularly implemented in the target

⁶ Some of these respondents had worked with professional translators at an earlier time, others had never worked with professional translators before [Q31]. When comparing these two groups, no major differences were observed.

population, but also within a questionnaire, and can, for example, be jeopardized by an excessive use of synonyms. The importance of consistency is very specific to questionnaire translation and could, in a way, also fall under the category of *extra-linguistic sub-competence*. Only translators who have a certain experience in this field and/or are provided with an adequate amount of background information on previous survey rounds will be able to keep items consistent. Another five respondents (6 %) mentioned a *lack of bilingual sub-competence*, relating to the target language and the fact that the language register used by professional translators can be too formal or academic for the target group. And another five respondents (6 %) would expect a general lack of accuracy and quality in the work of professional translators. Again, this confirms the same tendency: Overall, about 58 % of the teams not working with professional translators expect that a lack of *extra-linguistic sub-competence* would be a major disadvantage when working with them.

Within the framework of this study, it was not possible to evaluate the actual performance of the translators involved by comparing their translation products. To get an impression, the survey contained a question on how satisfied the national teams were with the initial translation product of their respective translators [Q33]. The responses were quite similar and all very positive across the diverse translators and translation teams. In an attempt to obtain more details, respondents were asked to assess the performance of their translation staff concerning the following five questionnaire specific translation skills on a scale running from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5):

- this translator transferred the meaning correctly
- this translator had good writing skills
- this translator used a language level that was suitable for the target population
- this translator considered the measurement properties of items
- this translator recognized cultural differences that may require adaptation [Q34]

Here again, no significant differences between the different *types* of translators were observed. But individual levels of experience *did* seem to play a role: When comparing the results for researchers with different levels of general translation experience, the following pattern became apparent, as shown in Figure 7.

Researchers who “regularly work on translations (e. g. several times per year)” more often scored higher on the “skill-scores” (index of all items together based on means) than those who had done only “a few translations before.”⁷ A Kruskal-Wallis H test shows a statistically significant difference in skill assessments between the two groups, $\chi^2(1, n=71) = 4.118, p = 0.0424$ with the group that regularly works on translations scoring higher.

⁷ In this question, “translation experience” was defined as “questionnaire translation, but also any other translation experience”.

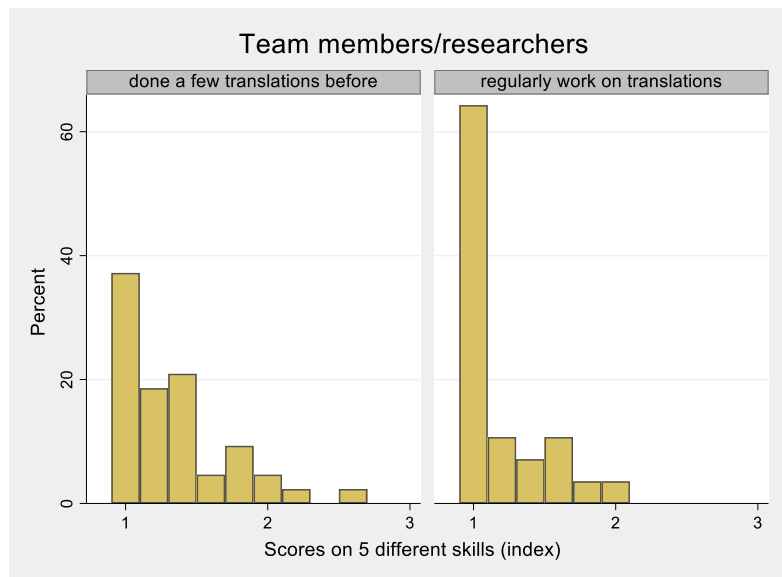


Fig. 7: Distribution of “skills-scores” (index) achieved by team members/researchers, depending on translation experience

Similarly, we can observe a significant difference between professional translators who had done “a few *questionnaire* translations before” and those who “regularly work on *questionnaire* translations (e. g. several times per year)”. The graphs in Figure 8 show that the more experience translators had in the specific field of *questionnaire* translation, the more they received the highest scores on the “skill-scores” by the respondents who

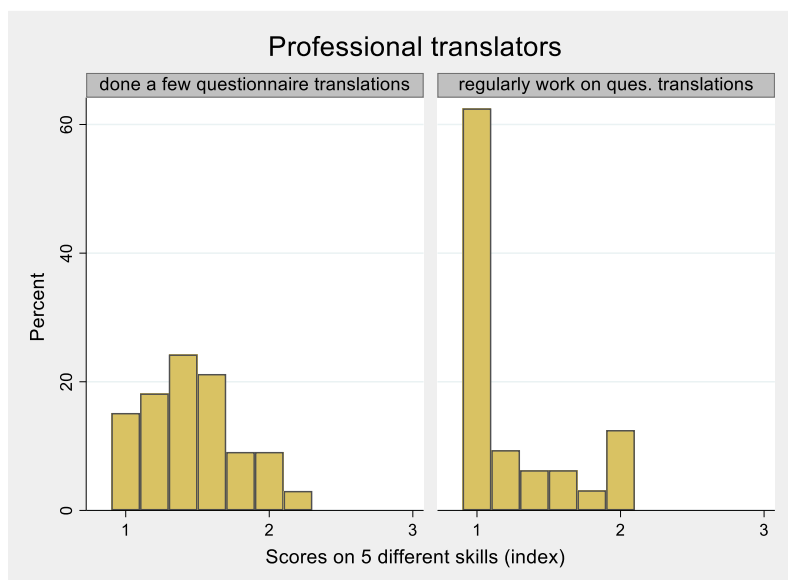


Fig. 8: Distribution of “skills-scores” (index) achieved by professional translators, depending on questionnaire translation experience

hired them. Here as well, the Kruskal-Wallis H test shows a statistically significant difference in skill assessments between the two groups, $\chi^2(1, n=65) = 9.721, p = 0.0018^8$ with the group that has more experience in questionnaire translation scoring higher.

These results indicate a possible correlation between general translation experience as well as experience in the specific field of questionnaire translation and successful performance across five different skills that can be considered relevant for questionnaire translation.

4 Discussion and conclusion

This survey has provided an insight into the status quo of translation procedures applied by different cross-cultural survey programs worldwide and the people involved in these procedures. The initial translations of questionnaires are often produced exclusively by members of the research team or other (external) researchers (44 %, mostly social scientists), or exclusively by professional translators (29 %) and in some cases by interdisciplinary teams (19 %). In many cases only one initial translation is produced (32 %). International best practice recommending at least two independent initial translations produced by at least one “translation practitioner” (Survey Research Center 2016) are not necessarily taken into consideration.

Why is this the case? Teams working with professional translators often refer to positive experiences they have had with them in the past or mention that the use of professional translators is required by their individual study guidelines or best practice recommendations. Those choosing to work exclusively with researchers mainly do so because of their competencies such as subject matter knowledge and experience in the field of questionnaire design while translation expertise or strategic sub-competence seem to play a minor role. Adding to this, about half of the national teams who participated in this survey do not have a specific translation budget available, and many of them (45 %) would rather produce their translations internally, especially if they do not see any additional value in hiring external professional translators.

The questions on views and attitudes show a divide between the respondents to this survey. Those not working with professional translators tend to consider subject matter competence and/or experience in questionnaire design more important, while those working with professional translators value translation expertise higher. According to the TRAPD model, translation expertise *and* familiarity with “questionnaire design principles, as well as the study design and topic” (Harkness 2003: 36) are required and should all be represented in the translation and/or review team. But which role do each of these competencies play?

There is no doubt that, compared to researchers themselves, external translators will lack subject matter knowledge concerning the topics of the survey and the meaning

⁸ It was not possible to test the influence of other competencies (e. g. subject matter competence) due to unequal distributions of experience levels within the groups.

behind the concepts to be measured. This lack of context could lead to misinterpretation of ambiguities, wrong terminology or a language register that is not adequate for the target group. After all, context (or subject matter knowledge in this case) “has a depolysemizing effect in comprehension [...] [and] a multiplying effect when reformulating the content during production” (Rydning/Lachaud 2010) and can therefore lead to a higher quality in translation (Kim 2006). To some extent, a lack of background knowledge may be compensated by appropriate supportive materials (e. g. translation guidelines, concept elaborations, annotations, preparatory meetings). Also, professional translators have been trained and are experienced in compensating a lack of extra-linguistic sub-competence by their instrumental sub-competence (i. e. research strategies). Still, as proposed in the TRAPD procedure, it is necessary that researchers themselves form part of the translation and/or review team to control the process. Further research is needed to measure the actual impact of relevant subject matter knowledge on the questionnaire translation product itself.

Experience in the specifics of survey research and questionnaire translation (and thus knowledge relating more to the text type or genre, rather than the topic) seem to be even more decisive. If translators have no experience in translating questionnaires, they might deviate too much from the source text, not pay attention to certain stimuli nor to consistency across items and, in the end, destroy the measurement properties of the questionnaire. There is hardly any research yet concerning the impact of questionnaire translation experience on the translation product. But the results of the “skill-score”-questions seem to indicate a correlation between the satisfaction with a professional translator’s skills and the amount of experience he or she has with this particular text type. These findings point into the same direction as the findings of Dorer (2022: 5) in her study on expertise in questionnaire translation. She created an “index of expertise in questionnaire translation” based on three factors: years of experience in questionnaire translation, training as translator, and training in questionnaire translation. Using this index in a translation experiment, she found “a link between the translators’ expertise and both the translation product and process” (Dorer 2022: 18).

Translation expertise and especially strategic sub-competence (the most important translation competence according to the PACTE Group (2017) often seem to be considered less than extra-linguistic sub-competencies, especially by those teams not working with professional translators. The ability to solve translation issues by using partly automated strategies acquired through long-term translation experience and in some cases by using “translation creativity” defined as “creative thinking aimed at recognizing and solving translation problems” (Rezvani/Ataee 2012) is probably less obvious. The analysis suggests that the more general translation experience a non-professional translator has, the higher scores he or she achieves in the “skill-score”-questions. We can also observe that survey respondents working with professional translators tend to value their translation expertise and solution finding more than those not having worked with professionals. Walde and Völlm (2023) made a similar experience when trying out the TRAPD method for the translation of a forensic mental health

questionnaire, but integrated professional translators for a final review only at the very end of the process. After this experience, one of their conclusions was that “since the professional translators added reasonable thoughts and ideas, it appears useful to include them in the team of initial translators so they can participate in the review discussion” (Walde/Völlm 2023).

How can a professional translator contribute to the successful translation of questionnaires for cross-cultural survey programs? A professional translator has been trained and is sensitized to recognize and deal with the particularities of the source and the target languages and the differences in these two language systems. Strategic sub-competence in the sense of partly automatized strategies to solve problems and reformulation strategies to create “contextual equivalence” is more developed in professional translators (Rydning/Lachaud 2010). But apart from that, an external translator automatically plays the role of a neutral reader or even a proofreader of the source (Rezvani/Ataee 2012; Risku/Pein-Weber/Milošević 2016), without having much additional background knowledge on the concepts of the survey and as such somehow representing the target group of the survey. Having a different background than the group of researchers, he or she might “identify areas that others may overlook” (International Test Commission 2017). Thanks to this different perspective, an external translator can report back to the team about ambiguities in the source or possible connotations in the target culture (Harkness 2003). Some survey programs have introduced a process called “advance translation” (Dorer 2023) or “translatability assessment” as it is called in the clinical context (Acquadro et al. 2018), both aimed at recognizing possible translation problems before the actual translation process into several languages is launched. This method could give linguists the opportunity to already get involved in the questionnaire development process, and “enhance translatability and (inter)cultural portability” (European Social Survey 2020)². Finally, the different interpretations and perspectives on meaning (ideally by several translators) can be a valuable input during the joint and interdisciplinary review meeting. Because just as in the questionnaire development and pretesting phase, an interdisciplinary approach during the translation and review process allows “negotiating meaning through intersubjective understanding” (Buschle/Reiter/Bethmann 2022).

This study has its limitations: It cannot be representative of all national teams participating in cross-cultural surveys as the overall number of national teams participating in such studies worldwide is unknown and contacts are often not available. Apart from that, the project staff had to preselect and even exclude some studies for different reasons mentioned in section 2.1. Admittedly, this preselection may have biased the results. Nonetheless, participating countries of 13 major academic social science studies that are also referenced in *Survey methods in multinational, multiregional, and multicultural contexts* (Harkness et al. 2010) have participated in this survey. In the end, we had to depend on those countries responding to the survey. This led to a relatively small sample size and an unequal distribution of countries participating from each study and across continents. While national teams from all continents participated, European countries

were somewhat overrepresented (58 % of those responding to this question) [Q2]. Still, this survey allows an insight into the diverse practices across different major academic survey programs and possibly reveal some methodological patterns.

Secondly, the survey respondents may have had difficulties to remember details on their last translation procedure or did not have the necessary information about their translators. Also, the attitudes towards translation and translators may not necessarily reflect the opinion of the whole team, but rather individual impressions of the respondents. Since all of them have been actively involved in one or more of their latest translation procedures, one can expect, though, that their views represent the views and experiences of their team to a certain extent.

Thirdly, the results suggest that a translator's individual level of experience plays a role in their performance, but within the scope of this study it was not possible to compare their translation products. This was an explorative survey study to find out more about translation procedures and personnel involved in cross-cultural survey projects in order to prepare for further empirical research on how (or whether) background, competencies and experiences of initial questionnaire translators impact the quality of the translation product and thus the data quality in cross-cultural research (ongoing work). Having empirical evidence on these different factors could underpin international best practice guidelines and convince more survey programs and national teams to implement them. And more consistent procedures across cross-cultural survey programs would enhance comparability and facilitate cooperation and exchange.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Overview of translation guidelines and methodology reports as published by participating survey programs

Survey program (reference)	Recommended procedure for the initial translation step	Translation personnel (qualifications and background)	Recommended procedure for review step(s)	Review personnel
Afro-barometer (Afro-barometer 2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • first step is adaptation • initial preparatory meeting with the translators • then translation into local languages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • experienced translators • not necessarily professional translators but people who are experienced doing translations based on everyday use of the languages, (e. g. journalists, radio moderators) • some professional translators use style that is too formal or academic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • synchronization meeting between national investigator (NI) team and all translators • translators produce second draft of translations • back translation by independent team • second meeting between the back translators and the original translators • pre-testing • final checks of the translations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NI or national team oversee translation procedure and pre-testing • review and finalize translations after the pre-test
Asian Barometer (Asian Barometer 2022)	N/A	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • blind back-translation by a different translator, correction of discrepancies 	N/A

Survey program (reference)	Recommended procedure for the initial translation step	Translation personnel (qualifications and background)	Recommended procedure for review step(s)	Review personnel
Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) (CSES 2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> national teams translate to their native languages national teams translating into the same language should collaborate 	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> independent back-translation 	N/A
EASS East Asian Social Survey (East Asian Social Survey 2018)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
European Social Survey (ESS) (ESS 2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> interdisciplinary team approach (TRAPD) at least two translators per questionnaire parallel or split translations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> skilled and experienced practitioners (ideally with a degree) who have received some training or briefing on translating questionnaires should translate into their native language, live in target country 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> interdisciplinary team-meeting: translators, reviewer, adjudicator + other experts translation verification and assessment SQP Coding Pre-testing harmonization between language variants documentation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> at least one reviewer with very good translation skills, familiar with questionnaire design, study design and topic the adjudicator must understand research subject, survey design, be proficient in languages

Survey program (reference)	Recommended procedure for the initial translation step	Translation personnel (qualifications and background)	Recommended procedure for review step(s)	Review personnel
Generations and Gender Programme GGP (Generations and Gender Programme 2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • team approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • professional translators not mandatory • people who produce the translations should have a very high proficiency in English and be native speakers in the target language • some expertise in social science survey research required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • revision • pre-test 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • same requirements as for translation personnel
International Social Survey Programme ISSP (International Social Survey Programme 2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • at least two independent translations of the source questionnaire 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • translation team should have expertise in the areas of translation as well as survey methodology/questionnaire design 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • review and adjudication by a third person • final version is checked for internal consistency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • same requirements as for translation personnel
PIAAC (OECD 2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • adaptation prior to translation • preparatory meeting • double translation by two independent translators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • professional staff: translators should be skilled practitioners, translating into their first language and experienced or trained in questionnaire translation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • team review (questionnaire) • reconciliation by a third translator and expert review (test material) • verification by external agency • post-verification review • layout corrections • documentation of all steps • field test 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • team review: translators, domain experts, experts in survey translation • reconcilers should have strong language skills and know about questionnaire translation, questionnaire design, and subject matter • verifiers: native speakers, highly proficient in source language; trained

Survey program (reference)	Recommended procedure for the initial translation step	Translation personnel (qualifications and background)	Recommended procedure for review step(s)	Review personnel
PISA (OECD 2024)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • translatability assessment • adaptation • use of translation and adaptation notes • use of CAT tools • double-translation: two translators independently translate the source versions (English & French) • training session for translators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • competent bilingual in-country translators • should be able to use CAT tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reconciliation by a third person • sentence-by-sentence verification by experienced independent verifiers • documentation • field trial 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • verifiers must be experienced independent verifiers, trained to assess linguistic equivalence
SHARE (Survey of Health, Aging and Retirement in Europe) (Malter/Börsch-Supan 2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • team approach (TRAPD procedure) in a simplified form • formalized translation process, linked closely to questionnaire development (translate, verify and re-translate) • translations can be used to review source questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • translators should be skilled practitioners who have received training on translating questionnaires -they translate into their 'first' language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • first review of first drafts • second review of a later draft • all-country pilot test • documentation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • translators are included in review meeting • reviewers must have the same translation skills as the translators but are familiar with questionnaire design principles, and study design/topic • at least one reviewing person with linguistic expertise • adjudicators should understand the research subject, know about the survey design, and possibly be proficient in both languages

Survey program (reference)	Recommended procedure for the initial translation step	Translation personnel (qualifications and background)	Recommended procedure for review step(s)	Review personnel
The Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) program (ICF International 2012)	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • someone who understands the technical terms as well as both languages translates the questions -use of language institutes or local language radio moderators to produce the translations is not recommended (wording can be too formal or stilted or too imprecise) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -back translation by an independent translator (possibly someone who is not familiar with the subject matter) • any discrepancies should be resolved • pretest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • back translation to be checked by the two translators together with survey technical staff
WVS World Values Survey (World Values Survey)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “modern translation techniques” involving 2 translators and a mediator 	N/A	N/A	N/A

Appendix 2

Wording of relevant questions (excerpt, not in the original sequence)

[Q1] Have you ever been involved in the process of questionnaire translation in your study?

Being involved can mean that you organized or managed the national translation process in your study and/or you were actively involved in translating or reviewing the translations yourself. Here, we are only interested in the translation of questionnaires, not in the translation of assessment instruments that measure competencies, such as literacy.

1 Yes, I have been involved

2 No, I have never been involved

[Q2] In which continent is your national study center located?

1 Africa

2 Asia

3 Australia & Pacific Islands

4 Europe

5 North-America

6 South-America

98 Prefer not to say

[Q3] Please specify your main field(s) of study:

Social sciences (sociology, political science, psychology)

Education

Economics, business

Languages, linguistics, translation

Natural sciences, mathematics

Other: Please specify

Prefer not to say

[Q4] How many people produced an initial translation for your target language?

By initial translation, we mean the first draft of the translation before any review or checking steps. If several translators worked together on the initial translation, count each translator who was involved. Do not include any reviewers or back translators in your count.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 or more

[Q5] Did the initial translators work separately when producing the initial translation(s), that is, without cooperating or exchanging views on translation challenges?

- 1 Yes, they worked separately
- 2 No, they worked together
- 97 Don't know

[Q6] You indicated that more than one person produced an initial translation of the questionnaire. Please answer the following questions for one translator at a time. Start by answering the questions on the translator who produced 'initial translation A'. Who produced this initial translation A of the questionnaire?

- 1 Professional translator (freelance or in-house)
- 2 Translation agency
- 3 Survey agency
- 4 Yourself
- 5 A member of the research team (not yourself)
- 6 Other researcher (who is not part of the research team)
- 7 Other linguist or language specialist (e. g., teacher, journalist)
- 8 Layperson from the target population
- 9 Student
- 10 Other, please specify:

[Q7] Which review or checking steps did you implement in your most recent translation process after the initial translation?

Please select all that apply. Think of formalized but also of less formalized review or checking steps you implemented. These could apply to the entire questionnaire or parts of it.

One person performed a reconciliation of two or more initial translations

Team-based reconciliation or review meeting

Review or proofreading by an additional person

One-on-one discussion with the initial translator(s) (written or oral)

Verification, i. e. additional linguistic quality checks by an external agency

Backtranslation and evaluation of backtranslation

Comparison between different language-versions used within a country

Comparison with other countries using the same or related languages

Cognitive interviews with members of the target population

Focus group (i. e., group meeting with members of the target population)

Layout check (e. g. checking the layout of the translated paper version)

Quantitative pretest, pilot study or field test

If you wish to provide further details on your review process, please specify:

None of the above

[Q7a] You selected: “Who performed the reconciliation of two or more initial translations?”

1 One of the initial translators

2 An additional translator or linguist

3 Member of the survey agency

4 Member of the research team (including yourself)

5 Other researcher who is not part of the research team

6 Student

7 Other, please specify:

[Q7b] You selected: “Who participated in the team-based reconciliation or review meeting?”

Please select all that apply and specify the number in each case, e. g. '2' for two initial translators participating. The numbers in the boxes should sum up to the total of participants in the review meeting. Count each participant only once.

The people who produced the initial translation(s):

Other linguist(s) or language specialist(s):

Member(s) of the survey agency:

Member(s) of the research team:

Other researcher(s) who are not part of the research team:

Layperson(s) from the target population:

Student(s):

Other, please specify:

[Q7c] You selected: “Who reviewed or proofread the translation?”

Please select all that apply.

Member(s) of the research team (including yourself)

External expert(s) in the subject-matter of the survey

Other translator(s) or linguist(s)

Member(s) of the survey agency

Student(s)

Other, please specify:

[Q7d] You selected: “Who discussed the translation with the initial translator(s)?”

Please select all that apply.

Member(s) of the research team (including yourself)

Other researcher(s) who are not part of the research team

Other translator(s) or linguist(s)

Member(s) of the survey agency

Student(s)

Other, please specify:

[Q8] Was this translator a freelance translator or an in-house translator?

- | | |
|----|----------------------|
| 1 | Freelance translator |
| 2 | In-house translator |
| 97 | Don't know |

[Q9] Do you have detailed information on the translator(s) used by the agency?

- | | |
|---|-----|
| 1 | Yes |
| 2 | No |

[Q10] Did the translator who produced the initial translation A have a degree in translation?

- | | |
|----|------------|
| 1 | Yes |
| 2 | No |
| 97 | Don't know |

[Q11] How much translation experience did this translator have approximately?

- | | |
|----|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | 0-3 years |
| 2 | More than 3 years, up to 10 years |
| 3 | More than 10 years |
| 97 | Don't know |

[Q12] How would you judge this translator's proficiency in the source language, that is the language of the source questionnaire?

- | | |
|----|--|
| 1 | Native speaker |
| 2 | High proficiency, but not native speaker |
| 3 | Intermediate proficiency |
| 4 | Low proficiency |
| 97 | Don't know |

[Q13] How would you judge this translator's proficiency in the target language?

- | | |
|----|--|
| 1 | Native speaker |
| 2 | High proficiency, but not native speaker |
| 3 | Intermediate proficiency |
| 4 | Low proficiency |
| 97 | Don't know |

[Q14] Did this translator have any previous experience in questionnaire translation?

- | | |
|----|--|
| 1 | No experience at all |
| 2 | This translator had worked on a few questionnaire translations before |
| 3 | This translator regularly works on questionnaire translations (e. g. several times per year) |
| 97 | Don't know |

[Q15] Did this translator have any experience or knowledge in the subject matter (topics of the survey)?

Please select all that apply.

- | |
|---|
| No experience/knowledge in the subject matter |
| This translator had some translation experience in the subject matter |
| This translator had formal training in the subject matter (e. g. university degree) |
| Don't know |

[Q16] Please specify the main field of study of the member of your research team who produced the initial translation A.

- | | |
|----|--|
| 1 | Social sciences (sociology, political science, psychology) |
| 2 | Education |
| 3 | Economics, business |
| 4 | Medical studies, natural sciences |
| 5 | Translation/linguistics |
| 6 | Other, please specify: |
| 97 | Don't know |

[Q17] Did this team member have any previous translation experience? This could be questionnaire translation, but also any other translation experience.

1	No experience at all
2	This team member had done a few translations before
3	This team member regularly works on translations (e. g. several times per year)
97	Don't know

[Q18] How would you judge this team member's proficiency in the source language, that is the language of the source questionnaire?

1	Native speaker
2	High proficiency, but not native speaker
3	Intermediate proficiency
4	Low proficiency
97	Don't know

[Q19] How would you judge this team member's proficiency in the target language?

1	Native speaker
2	High proficiency, but not native speaker
3	Intermediate proficiency
4	Low proficiency
97	Don't know

[Q20] Did this team member have any knowledge or previous experience in questionnaire design?

1	Yes
2	No
97	Don't know

[Q21] Did this team member have any experience or knowledge in the subject matter (topics of the survey)?

1	Yes
2	No
97	Don't know

[Q22] Please specify the background of this linguist.

1	Degree in language (but not in translation)
2	Teacher
3	Journalist
4	Other, please specify:
97	Don't know

[Q23] Please specify the main field of study of the student who produced the initial translation A.

1	Social sciences (sociology, political science, psychology)
2	Education
3	Economics, business
4	Medical studies, natural sciences
5	Translation/linguistics
6	Other, please specify:
97	Don't know

[Q24] At the time when the translation process took place, was this team member living in the target country?

By target country, we mean the country in which the survey is fielded.

1	Yes
2	No
97	Don't know

[Q25] Why did you choose a professional translator to do the initial translation A of the questionnaire?

Please select all that apply.

Best practice (current scientific standards and recommendations in literature)

Study guidelines or sponsors request the use of professional translators

Good experiences with professional translators producing questionnaire translations in the past

Bad experiences with other personnel producing questionnaire translations in the past

Professional translators have translation experience

Financial reasons (e. g. other personnel would have been more expensive)

Availability reasons (e. g. other personnel were not available for the translation)

Other reasons, please specify:

[Q26] Why did you choose a member of your research team to do the initial translation A of the questionnaire?

Please select all that apply.

Best practice (current scientific standards and recommendations in literature)

Study guidelines or sponsors request the use of researchers

Good experiences with researchers producing questionnaire translations in the past

Bad experiences with other personnel producing questionnaire translations in the past

Researchers are familiar with this type of social science research

Researchers have experience regarding questionnaires

Financial reasons (e. g. other personnel would have been more expensive)

Availability reasons (e. g. other personnel were not available for the translation)

Other reasons, please specify:

[Q27] Who have you had bad experiences with in the past?

Please select all that apply.

Professional translator(s) (freelance or in-house)

Translation agency

Survey agency

Member(s) of the research team

Other researcher(s) (who are not part of the research team)

Other linguist(s) or language specialist(s)

Layperson(s) from the target population

Student(s)

Other

Prefer not to say

[Q28] In your study, did you have a translation budget specifically for hiring professional translators, external experts, etc.?

1 Yes

2 No

97 Don't know

[Q29] According to you: How important are the following fields of expertise for producing a good questionnaire translation? Please rank them in order of importance.

Please rank by clicking on the most important field first, and the subsequent ones afterwards. You can change your selection by re-clicking on all the fields.

Subject matter knowledge

Translation experience

Knowledge in questionnaire design

[Q30] Now we refer to more specific skills: In your opinion, what are the five most important skills for producing a good initial questionnaire translation?

Please select the five most important skills according to you.

High proficiency in the source language

Good writing skills in the target language

Knowledge in the subject matter of the survey (e. g. social science topics)

Knowledge in the field of questionnaire design

Ability to use language level suitable for target population

Sensitivity to cultural differences and how to deal with them

Ability to understand items and correctly transfer meaning to target language

Ability to consider pragmatic meaning (different associations an item might trigger)

Ability to find good solutions for translation challenges

[Q31] You have indicated that you did not work with a professional translator during the last translation process you were involved in. Have you ever worked with professional translators in the domain of questionnaire translations before?

By professional translator we mean anyone who either has a degree in translation or has been working in the translation business for at least three years.

1 Yes

2 No

97 Don't know

[Q32] What do you think would be the advantages and disadvantages of using professional translators for questionnaire translations? Please explain:

Advantages:

Disadvantages:

[Q33] Overall, how satisfied were you with the initial translation A produced by this translator?

1	Very satisfied
2	Somewhat satisfied
3	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
4	Somewhat dissatisfied
5	Very dissatisfied
97	Don't know

[Q34] If you can still remember: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements concerning this member of the research team who did the initial translation A.

Overall, this team member transferred the meaning correctly.

Overall, this team member had good writing skills (used idiomatic/natural language).

Overall, this team member used a language level that was suitable for the target population.

Overall, this team member considered the measurement properties of items.

Overall, this team member recognized cultural differences that may require adaptation.

1	Strongly agree
2	Agree
3	Neither agree nor disagree
4	Disagree
5	Strongly disagree
97	Don't know

Author

Ulrike Efu Nkong is a trained translator and researcher in the department of Survey Design and Methodology at GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences. Before entering the academic world, she was working as a freelance translator for more than 10 years, specializing in questionnaire translation and its diverse procedures throughout different fields of application: in clinical research, educational testing as well as the social sciences. She is currently doing her PhD in the field of questionnaire translation, and at the same time working in the Translation Team of the European Social Survey (ESS). Her research interests are translation and review methods in cross-cultural surveys, comparability, and comprehensibility in questionnaire translation as well as cognitive interviews.

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