Translation in Qualitative Studies: Evaluation Criteria and Equivalence

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Abstract
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Keywords
Translation, Qualitative Research, Evaluation Criteria, Equivalence, Transparency, Trustworthiness

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Translation in Qualitative Studies: Evaluation Criteria and Equivalence

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Qualitative research is being increasingly conducted in more than one language. Translation becomes an integral part of cross-language qualitative research. Equivalence needs to be maintained in translation of texts. Different theories of equivalence in translation are described. Common translation procedures, mainly bilingual, followed in qualitative studies are discussed. The discussion analyzes how different translation procedures try to achieve equivalence. Criteria set for evaluation of translation in qualitative research and their appropriateness in achieving transparency and trustworthiness are discussed. The paper tries to sensitize researchers regarding issues of translation in qualitative research and how those issues may be resolved within the boundary of limitations. Keywords: Translation, Qualitative Research, Evaluation Criteria, Equivalence, Transparency, Trustworthiness

Introduction

Research crosses national and linguistic barriers as the world is becoming more globalized (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013). There are large numbers of researchers who are conducting and focusing their research outside their country of origin. Researchers whose native language is not English are conducting research in countries where English is the dominant language and culture (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2011). They focus on research areas that demand the usage of more than one language. For example, the primary data might have been collected in their local languages from their home countries. However, the research proposal and the presentation of findings need to be prepared in English. Translation is the only solution in such situations. However, the question which arises is: how efficiently is the translation of data done so as not to compromise with the research? The above-mentioned points emphasize the importance of translation in research.

Different key terms need to be defined at the onset of this paper so as to facilitate the discussions. First, cross-language research refers to research involving a translator at any stage during the research process (Temple, 2002). Monolingual or bilingual researchers may conduct this cross-language research. Monolingual researchers have working knowledge about one of the two languages in which the research is conducted. Bilingual researchers are proficient in both the languages in which research is conducted (Liamputtong, 2010). Linguistic equivalence refers to the similarity between linguistic expressions in one language and their translation in another (Loos, Anderson, Day, Jordan, & Wingate, 2004).

Limited numbers of researchers have focused on the issue of translation in social science research (Douglas & Craig, 2007; Liamputtong, 2010). One of the major issues in qualitative research is to ensure trustworthiness of the findings (Liamputtong, 2010). However, qualitative studies conducted in cross-language settings are deficient in the proper explanation of translation procedures to ensure trustworthiness of the research findings (Fryer, Mackintosh, Stanley, & Crichton, 2012; Larkin, de Casterle, & Schotsman, 2007; Wong & Poon, 2010). Trustworthiness may be defined as the degree of rigor in qualitative studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The degree of rigor depends on the research procedure. In cross-language qualitative
studies, trustworthiness depends not only on the methodology adopted and the research findings. It also depends on the effectiveness of translation. Final research findings depend a great deal on the translation procedure. Researchers have utilized complex translation procedures and have employed numerous translators (Chen & Boore, 2009; Regmi, Naïdoo, & Pilkington, 2010). Translation is of immense importance in a majority of qualitative studies because most of the qualitative studies are written by monolingual researchers. One of the major challenges in translation, both bilingual and monolingual, is to maintain translation equivalence. The other important challenge is to maintain trustworthiness of the translation procedures. Researchers depend on third-party translators to understand and interpret data gathered in a language and cultural context with which they are not acquainted (Croot, Lees, & Grant, 2011; Squires, 2009). In contrast, there are very few qualitative studies conducted by bilingual researchers (Douglas & Craig, 2007; Wong & Poon, 2010).

The paper attempts to address the various issues related to translation in qualitative research studies. There are resources limitations for bilingual researchers (Wong & Poon, 2010). Resources limitations from the perspectives of bilingual researchers are discussed. The paper focuses on the translation procedures adopted by bilingual researchers and the demonstration of trustworthiness in cross-language research. The study focuses on bilingual researchers because, as pointed out earlier, although important, fewer studies have been for bilingual translation compared to monolingual translation. So, bilingual translation requires in-depth discussion.

**Translation Equivalence**

Equivalence in translation may be viewed as the effectiveness of translation in conveying the same meaning as was intended in the language in which the research was conducted (Kenny, 2009). Researchers have differences of opinions regarding the concept of equivalence in translation. Equivalence has been supported by some and rejected by other factions in linguistics and translation studies (Kenny, 2009). Researchers who reject equivalence in translation consider that equivalence is irrelevant. They are of the opinion that equivalence blocks the progress and creativity in translation. It is also extremely difficult to determine the equivalence between two languages. Some researchers feel that there needs to be specified criteria set to evaluate equivalence. Otherwise, it becomes very difficult to determine which text is a translation and which one is not (Brislin, 1970; Kenny, 2009). Researchers supporting equivalence are of the view that equivalence needs to be accepted for the sake of convenience in translation (Baker, 2011). However, any language and culture will have their own distinctive features which make it impossible to attain absolute equivalence (Baker, 2011; Kenny, 2009).

The difficulties in achieving absolute equivalence may be understood by examining the building blocks of a language (Kirkpatrick & van Teijlingen, 2009; Larkin et al., 2007). The easiest way to determine equivalence between two languages is to examine the corresponding words in the source language and the target language. This is called lexical equivalence (Baker, 2011). However, there are certain problems with lexical equivalence. Firstly, for a specific word in the source language, there may not be an equivalent word in the target language. Secondly, a word in the source language may have more than one equivalent word in the target language and vice-versa. Finally, there are also cases of no equivalence (Larkin et al., 2007; Squires, 2008). Again, rules of grammar in the source language may be different from the rules of grammar in the target language which makes translation and attaining translation equivalence very difficult. A particular way of thinking and of expressing ideas in one language may not translate into another language (Baker, 2011). The above-mentioned points explain the fact that although some set criteria may be specified for translation equivalence based on
the equivalence of words or sentences, the idea will be simplistic and may not address the complexity of languages (Liamputtong, 2010; Temple & Young, 2004). Consequently, researchers have abandoned lexical equivalence and advocate conceptual equivalence in cross-language research (Larkin et al., 2007; Squires, 2008).

Conceptual equivalence focuses on the similarities of concepts or ideas between two languages rather than the exact similarity of lexical meanings across languages (Neuman, 2011). Researchers also accept the fact that it is impossible to translate from the source language to the target language keeping the lexical meanings unaltered (Baker, 2011). Some nuances of meaning may get changed when translated from the source language to the target language. Apart from lexical equivalence, researchers also need to understand how information is structured in one particular language, how coherence of ideas and statements happen in a specific language, and how the speakers of a particular language incorporate expressions, conceal or reveal their feelings, and provide their opinions. Researchers also accept that it is difficult to identify all the variables involved in the process of translating a text (Baker, 2011). Researchers are able to determine the best translation results subjectively with the notion of conceptual equivalence. However, since conceptual equivalence is subjective, it is difficult to determine the effectiveness of translation results, which subsequently affects the trustworthiness of the entire research (Liamputtong, 2010).

Researchers advocate dynamic equivalence as a more convincing and acceptable goal in translation rather than pursuing lexical and conceptual equivalences (Constantinescu, 2010; Nida, 1969). Dynamic equivalence may be defined as the most natural process of reproducing the message from the source language to the target language (Constantinescu, 2010; Nida, 1969). Researchers consider dynamic equivalence as the most appropriate manner to understand equivalence in translation (Munday, 2008). Once the translation is done, users of the target language are examined to determine the ease of understanding and acceptance of the translation text. This also helps in determining the accuracy of the translation (Constantinescu, 2010; Nida, 1969). Dynamic equivalence, however, compels researchers to accept the fact that trustworthiness of translation may not be universal and may not be totally neutral. For example, according to Baker (2011):

> It is in fact virtually impossible, except in extreme cases, to draw a line between what counts as a good translation and what counts as a bad one. Every translation has points of strengths and points of weakness, and every translation is open to improvement. (p. 6)

Translation may be viewed as a means of communication between the original texts in the source language and the translated texts in the target language. The entire process is mediated by a translator who tries to ensure equivalence between the two texts. This results in dependence between the two texts (Baker, 2011). Dynamic equivalence focuses on the understandability of the text in the source language to users of target language. So, specific nuances characteristic to the source language may be lost (Croot et al., 2011). Consequently, dynamic equivalence may not be a preferred choice for those researchers for whom maintaining the perspective of the sources language users is important.

Common Translation Procedures in Qualitative Studies

Researchers use three common translation procedures in qualitative studies – single translation, back translation, and parallel translation (Liamputtong, 2010; Neuman, 2011). Each of the procedures is examined based on the discussion of equivalence already mentioned above. Translation limitations in the procedures are also focused upon.
In single translation, data is translated from the source language to the target language (Neuman, 2011). It is considered to be the most straightforward procedure of translation. It is also the least complicated and the quickest translation procedure. However, single translation is not the most effective procedure because transparency is not ensured (Neuman, 2011). As a result, it is also difficult to ensure trustworthiness (Liamputtong, 2010). Single translation depends on the skills, competencies, and interpretation of only one translator. There is very little scope of comparing with other processes. There is also minimal input from others because the entire translation is done by only one translator (McGorry, 2000).

Bilingual researchers sometimes apply the dynamic equivalence approach to improve and ensure trustworthiness. In this approach, researchers confirm the translation results with one or more native speakers of the target language. This produces results easily understandable by target language users. It also helps to reduce personal bias and increase transparency in the translation process. Consequently, it also helps in improving trustworthiness of the process (Wong & Poon, 2010).

Single translation cannot ensure equivalence across languages. This problem is minimized with the application of back translation procedure which reduces inaccuracies (Liamputtong, 2010; Lopez, Figueroa, Connor, & Maliski, 2008). In this procedure, two translators are employed. One translator translates data from the source language to the target language. The other translator translates the data from the target language to the source language. This translator is unaware of the data in the original source language version (the back translation; Brislin, 1970). The version in back-translation is then compared with the original version in the source language. Accuracy of translation is verified based on the comparison between the version obtained after back-translation and the original version (Douglas & Craig, 2007). Back-translation is always better than single translation to ensure accuracy of translation and consequently, trustworthiness. Errors in translation are also minimized because more than one translator is involved. Also, since a number of translators are involved to ensure the accuracy of translation, a researcher need not be bilingual to examine the accuracy of translation (Chen & Boore, 2009; Jones, Lee, Philips, Zhang, & Jaceldo, 2011). However, back-translation for a large amount of data is laborious and is a lengthy process (Chen & Boore, 2009; Guest et al., 2013). Also, as stated earlier, equivalent words between two different languages may not always exist. This makes examination of conceptual equivalence between texts in different languages challenging. So, sometimes researchers tend to avoid back-translation. However, bilingual researchers have found out ways in which back-translation may be applied.

Firstly, third-party translators may be assigned to perform the translation. The researcher may act as an evaluator of the back-translation results (Guest et al., 2013). Researchers have a feeling of involvement in the translation process. The involvement also helps the researchers to understand the complexity of the entire process. Evaluation of the back-translation results may also help in improving the accuracy of the results.

Secondly, bilingual researchers may themselves perform the back-translation process as the first translator. A third-party translator may then be asked to compare the translation results with the original text in the source language. In case of inconsistencies, the bilingual researchers may revise the translation in the target language. Since only one third-party translator is employed, the method is also more financially viable than engaging a number of third-party translators.

Researchers propose the usage of parallel translation to overcome the shortcomings of single translation and back-translation. Parallel translation is also known as the team or committee approach of translation (Douglas & Craig, 2007; Lopez et al., 2008). In this approach more than one translator is involved in translation from source language to target language. Each translator performs the translation independent of the other. So, the problem of
the translators influencing each other and the probability of bias are minimized. Experts are invited to compare the different translation transcripts obtained from the translators to understand which version of translation is the best (McGorry, 2000; Neuman, 2011). Parallel translation is considered an effective translation procedure because there is continuous and extensive checking and evaluation with a panel of translators and experts. The rigor followed also minimizes the possibility of errors in translation (Douglas & Craig, 2007). A comparison of the different translation results in the target language helps in identifying the most effective version of translation result (Liamputtong, 2010; Lopez et al., 2008). Although evidence has proved that parallel translation is the most effective process of translation, it may be costly and more time-consuming because the process is elaborate and a number of people are involved in the process (Guest et al., 2013). Cultural and educational backgrounds of translators and experts may affect the manner in which the data are translated. It is also necessary to understand the society and culture of the research participants. Translators also need to understand the context in which the responses were given by the participants. Otherwise, the translation results may be influenced by the personal interpretations of the translators rather than by the original voices and opinions of the respondents (McGorry, 2000). Back-translation allows for the comparison between the original text in the source language and the back-translated text. However, in parallel translation, texts are produced only in the target language. This implies that parallel translation focuses on understanding of text by target language users and not source language users. To resolve this issue, at least one of the translators in parallel translation needs to be a native speaker of the target language so that the translator may aim for dynamic equivalence in an efficient manner. The above-mentioned discussion focused on the benefits and the shortcomings of parallel translation. The discussion also focused on how some of the shortcomings may be overcome.

Researchers such as Squires (2009) have introduced evaluation criteria for improving trustworthiness and transparency of cross-language research. The criteria also specify those aspects related to translation process and the roles of equivalence and bilingual researchers in translation.

Criteria for Evaluation of Translation in Qualitative Research

The criteria for evaluation of translation in based on conceptual equivalence and various aspects of the roles and credentials of translators, for example, language proficiency in both the languages used. Criteria developed by Squires (2009) evaluate translation from the perspective of monolingual researchers. The present discussion addresses the criteria for evaluation of translation for bilingual researchers.

The quality of translation is determined to a large extent by the language proficiency of the researcher and the qualifications of the translator (Squires, 2009). Researchers need to evaluate their own qualifications and experiences in translation before participating in translation. At least one third-party translator needs to validate the translated text. Researchers mostly employ the criteria set by Squires (2009) for evaluation of translation in qualitative research. Some of the studies which apply the criteria set by Squires (2009) include studies performed by Liamputtong (2010) and Regmi et al. (2010). However, different researchers have different views on evaluation criteria and there is no universal consensus. So, the criteria proposed by Squires (2009) may not be employed without exceptions (Croot et al., 2011).

The criteria suggested by Squires (2009) for monolingual researchers need to be broadened to specify effective criteria for bilingual researchers. Criteria set by Squires (2009) ask for clarification on the language proficiency of researchers and translators. The role of translator in the research is also mentioned. However, the criteria do not specify the roles a researcher may play during the translation process. As already discussed, a researcher may
assume different roles during the translation process. This is especially true for bilingual researchers.

Secondly, any research will have a number of resource limitations. Resource limitations need to be considered to understand the impact created on the effectiveness of translation. Resource limitations may act as a barrier to the translation process. For example, it may be a challenge for researchers to find experts for languages which are lesser known or studied or which are spoken by very few people (Guest et al., 2013). Compensation to be paid to the experts for the services rendered may be a financial burden for the researchers. The whole process of translation and its validation require a sufficient amount of time. So, time may also be a constraint because of which the validity of research may be affected. For all the above-mentioned reasons, limitations of resources such as time, funding, and expertise in translation need to be included in the criteria of evaluation. Personal experiences of the author indicate that these are practical limitations which affect the quality of translation and consequently, the quality of research. Respondents and translators may have time constraints. Respondents may need to be paid so that they are motivated enough to participate in the study. Translators require to be paid for sharing their expertise. All these require funds. Also, the research needs to be conducted within a specified time period. Otherwise, the research may lose its relevance and significance. Finally, Squires (2009) focuses on conceptual equivalence. Conceptual equivalence may not be of importance to researchers seeking dynamic equivalence. Some researchers may want to emphasize the comprehension of the translation by the users of the target language rather than emphasizing on the voices of participants in the source language.

From the above discussions it is clear that the main concern in translation in qualitative research is to explicitly articulate the rationale behind the translation procedure employed, the roles played by the translator and the bilingual researcher, and the mitigation of issues that may influence the trustworthiness of the research findings (Croot et al., 2011; Squires, 2009).

**Discussion**

The author discussed the various issues related to translation in qualitative research. Equivalence in translation was discussed. The various types of equivalence – absolute equivalence, conceptual equivalence, and dynamic equivalence were dealt in details. The various types of translation methods – single translation, back-translation, and parallel translation were discussed in details. The application of equivalence to achieve transparency and trustworthiness in translation for each of the methods was focused upon. Different criteria to evaluate translation in qualitative research were discussed. It is understood from the discussions that translation in qualitative research is a complex issue and poses challenges for the researchers.

For all the reasons discussed, there are researchers who are not in favor of translation (Hoffman, 1989). There are several reasons for not doing translation or for doing only minimal translating. Some specific examples mentioned below may help in understanding the issue. A main reason for some translating is so that English-speaking readers can get at least some degree of feeling about, or insight into, what the interviewee is saying and thinking as well as a sense of what the coding looks like. On the other hand, the difficulties of accurate translation are obvious. Few researchers are specially trained or natively skilled at overcoming those difficulties, especially for extended passages. Several researchers report additional difficulties in trying to code in English. In many cases there is no equivalent English word capable of capturing the subtle nuances in meaning of the original language. To quote Hoffman (1989), meanings become “lost in translation.” For presentation or publication in a country other than the one in which the data were collected (if the language is different), key passages and their codes can be translated, approximating the original as closely as possible. However, as a
general rule, too much valuable time and meaning can be lost in trying to translate all the materials. Also, many of the original subtleties of meaning are lost in translation. In some cases it becomes imperative to translate some passages; otherwise, other researchers cannot work on these data. However, each researcher is asked whether a given translated word or phrase really approximates what the interviewee intended. For instance, an African mother spoke of the care of her mentally ill son as “difficult.” When queried, the native researcher agreed that the native word for “difficult,” as used in this situation, actually was quite equivalent to the English term. However, on other occasions, there are nuances and differences that were not quite picked up by English translations of the native words. For example, in a study conducted in Bengali, the mental condition of a person was expressed in Bengali. There were no equivalent words to express the mental condition in English. When this happens, the researcher needs to do his best to give words and descriptions that conveyed the original native meanings. In some of the cases, no translation or minimal translation should be done. In the cases where translation is essential, the challenges may be overcome based on the approaches mentioned throughout the paper. The above discussion emphasizes the importance of proper translation and sometimes not doing any translation at all.

Conclusion

The paper focused on the various aspects related to translation in cross-language and bilingual qualitative research studies. It elaborated upon the concept of equivalence in relation to a chosen translation procedure and the limitations faced by a researcher in translation. Researchers will have resource and other limitations. The roles of researchers in the translation process need to be carefully analyzed to maintain the trustworthiness of translation of data keeping the limitations in mind. Limitations experienced by researchers cannot be avoided. So, the final result of translation and its transparency and trustworthiness to a certain extent will depend on the judgment made by researchers. There are several approaches to translation. Researchers need to consider how the approaches fit with their own research goals before trying to emulate the translation procedures. Nevertheless, it is expected that with the help of the discussions presented in the paper and by paying attention to the requirements of the translation, the procedures of translation of data presented may be useful for bilingual researchers who are engaged in qualitative cross-language research.

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