

Development of Guidelines on the Use of Interpreters in Survey Interviews

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Abstract

Not much attention has been paid to the ways in which interpreters are currently being used in the conduct of federal household surveys. Many of these surveys entail personal interviews and are conducted largely by monolingual, English-speaking field interviewers. When a monolingual English-speaking field interviewer encounters a household in which the adult members speak little or no English, he or she must rely on someone (an interpreter) who speaks the target language of the respondent for assistance in conducting the interview. Given the increase in the size of the non-English-speaking population in the United States, the ways in which interpreters are used, their training, and their qualifications for playing this role should be of key interest to federal statistical agencies that take pride in the quality of the survey data they collect.

This paper discusses the role of interpreters in federal survey interviews, and shows the need to develop guidelines for selecting, training, and evaluating interpreters to ensure the quality of data collected from non-English-speaking households. This study is based on results from a web search of best practices in using interpreters by survey organizations around the world and on observations of Census Bureau field staff conducting interviews with non-English-speaking respondents.

1. Introduction

With the increasing level of immigration and the resulting surge of limited English-speaking populations in the United States¹, federal statistical agencies are facing the challenge of obtaining high quality data from non-English-speaking households. Two methods are normally used in administering surveys in multiple languages to collect data from non-English-speaking respondents. One is the translation of survey instruments, and the other is the use of interpreters in survey interviews.

The methodology for translating questionnaires has received increased attention in survey research both within the United States and internationally. The growth of multilingual surveys has led to rigorous study in two areas. One is the research on effective approaches in survey translation (e.g., Harkness, 2003; Harkness et al., 2004; Schoua-Glusberg, 2004), and the other is the research on standardization of translation procedures and development of translation guidelines (e.g., de la Puente et al., 2003; Pan and de la Puente, 2005). These research efforts help to ensure that data collected from different linguistic and cultural groups are of comparable quality and that accurate comparisons between linguistic and cultural groups can be drawn from surveys across linguistic and cultural borders.

While there is growing interest in the research of survey translation methodology, its impact on data quality and the recommended approach for survey translation, there is virtually no literature on interpreter usage in surveys and its impact on data quality (Doerr, 2005). The ways in which interpreters are currently being used in the conduct of survey interviews and the interpreter's role in survey interviews have not been carefully examined.

In this paper, I show that the use of interpreters in survey interviews deserves careful study in order to ensure high quality data from non-English-speaking households. The first part of the paper reports a) a review of literature on interpreting theories and practices, and b) a summary of a web search for any existing interpretation guidelines used by research and social science organizations within the United States and around the world. The literature review and web search summary

¹ The Census 2000 Supplementary Survey revealed that, in the United States nation-wide, there are approximately 45 million people aged 5 years and older who speak a language other than English at home. This represents about 18 percent of persons in this age group. Of these 45 million people, over 10.5 million speak English either "not well" or "not at all" (Li, et al., 2001).

provide background information on the current practice of interpreting and the use of interpreters in research-oriented activities.

The second part of the paper will first discuss the role and function of interpreters in survey interviews and then elucidate the contextual factors unique to survey interview interpreting. By doing so, I hope to illustrate that using interpreters in survey interviews is inherently in conflict with the very nature of standardized interviews. Any attempt to study the role of interpreters in survey interviews needs to address this issue. This paper also raises several issues that call for our attention when using interpreters in survey interviews. The paper concludes with an argument for the need of developing guidelines for using interpreters in survey interviews, the challenges of such a task, and the research efforts that have been undertaken at the U.S. Census Bureau to tackle the problem.

2. Review of Literature on Interpreting Theories and Practices

Literature on interpreting mainly discusses various training models for interpreters, task requirements and skill requirements for interpreters, including linguistic skills and social cultural knowledge needed for interpreting (e.g., Hung, 2002; Gile, 1995; Bowen and Bowen, 1990; Seleskovitch and Lederer, 1989). The task and type of interpreting are classified based on the social domain where interpreting takes place, for example, conference interpreting, hospital interpreting. Four types of interpreting are covered in the literature: conference interpreting, court and legal interpreting, health care/medical interpreting, and community or liaison interpreting.

Conference interpreting is a well-established profession that has well-accepted international standards and codes of conduct. Much of the research on interpreting has been done in this type of interpreting (e.g., Gambier, et al., 1997). In conference interpreting, interpreters always work in teams, and have working documents in advance. Interpreting is a one-language direction process. That is, interpreters always translate *into* their native language. Interpreters work as a team and in a working booth, away from their clients.

In court and legal interpreting, there is a general emphasis on accuracy, completeness, and impartiality. Interpreters should insert no opinions or advice and interpret everything as said. Unlike the conference interpreting, few standards of practice exclusively addressed court and legal interpreters, although codes of conduct can be found for legal interpreters (Bancroft, 2005).

In the field of health care/medical interpreting, standards of practice for interpreters in health care differ significantly from those for most other fields of interpreting. Medical interpreting focuses much more on the consumer's health and/or well being, promoting the bond between the provider and client, and exhibiting respect for all parties (Bancroft, 2005). That is, interpreters should protect the best interests of the patient by supporting the provider-patient relationship. There are elaborate standards of practice for health care/medical interpreting.

Community or liaison interpreting is the name given to the genre of interpreting where the interpreting is performed in two-language directions by the same person (Gentile, et al. 1996). This type of interpreting is used where two or more parties do not share a language in a social encounter and where the interpreter must be present in order to bridge the communication gap, for example, social worker's home visits and police interviews. There are special requirements for community or liaison interpreting. First, unlike conference interpreting, community or liaison interpreting is a two-language direction process. The interpreter needs to be competent in both the target and the source languages. Second, the interpreter functions as a cultural bridge to smooth the communication between the two parties. In addition to language competence, the interpreter needs to have cultural competence of the target culture and the source culture as well so that he/she can effectively convey the message across the two languages.

Although a substantial body of literature exists on interpreting theories and practices, few works discuss the role of interpreters in social survey interviews. Social survey interpreting can be viewed under the general category of community or liaison interpreting. However, not until recently did survey interpreting start to draw attention and discussions among survey researchers. Among them, Edwards (Edwards 2005) and Pan (Pan 2005) call for the need for developing guidelines for using interpreters in survey interviews. Doerr's (Doerr 2005) exploratory study looks into the effects of using interpreters in multilingual research on data quality.

3. Web search on guidance for using interpreters

Between September 2004 and June 2005, we conducted a web search for existing guidelines on using interpreters developed by research and social science organizations within the United States and around the world. The purpose of conducting the web search is two-fold: one is to investigate current best practices for the use of interpreters in field interviews by survey organizations; the other is to determine whether there are any policies/guidelines about using interpreters. We adopted the same search method as that used in a previous web search for translation guidelines (de la Puente, et. al. 2004). Google was the primary search engine. Search engines available within specific websites were also used.

The scope of the web search covers four categories: 1) research-oriented organizations (e.g., educational institutions, international research organizations), legal and health care institutions (state and local courts, state and local medical departments), survey research organizations and major statistical agencies around the world, and international organizations.

The strength of the web search is that it provides a very broad picture of what information is available on the Internet regarding guidance for using interpreters that can be useful to survey interpreting. This type of search is, however, limited to the publicly available internet information only. It should be mentioned that some organizations could have guidelines that are not posted on the web. The research group of Comparative Survey Design and Implementation headed by ZUMA (Center for Survey Research and Methodology, Mannheim, Germany) sent out a questionnaire in the summer of 2005 to major survey organizations around the world to find out the common practice of providing guidance for using interpreters. We are still waiting to get results from this survey.

For this web search effort, we visited many web sites in the above-mentioned four categories. Many of them do not specifically indicate that they handle interpreting or language issues in their research. We did not include these organizations in our analysis. Our analysis focuses on the organizations that clearly indicate they work with language issues and handle interpreting in their research. These are organizations of our interest. In addition, we also contacted these organizations by email or by telephone, wherever we were able to find their contact information, to make further inquiries to see if they have established any guidelines for using interpreters. The web search reveals that very limited and sketchy guidance is available on the internet. The following table summarizes the results from the web search.

Table 1. Summary of Web Search on Interpretation Guidelines

Categories	# of organizations that handle interpreting issues	# of organizations that have policy/guidelines on using interpreters
Research-oriented organizations	25	2 (8%)
Legal and health care institutions	12	6 (50%)
Survey organizations and major statistical organizations	7	0 (0%)
International organizations (e.g., World Bank, NATO)	15	6 (40%)
Total	59	14 (23%)

Major findings from the web search are:

1. Legal and health care service delivery agencies provide more and better guidance in using interpreters than other kinds of organizations;
2. International organizations provide general information on qualification requirements for interpreters and codes of professional ethics (e.g., conference interpreting);
3. Survey organizations generally lack guidance on how to use interpreters. However, most of them recognized the need to develop such guidance.

Both the literature review and web search findings point to the lack of research and guidance for survey interpreting. We can conclude that survey interpreting is a new interpreting practice due to the rise of the need to conduct surveys that cross linguistic and cultural borders. If an interview is conducted through the use of an interpreter, the interpreter, like the field

interviewer, is one of the main players in the interview, and has certain impact on data quality. We need to carefully investigate these effects.

4. Survey Interview Interpreting

Although it bears some similarities with other kinds of interpreting working environment, survey interpreting has its unique conditions and considerations. Let us first look at the nature of survey questions and the nature of interpreting and we will see that that the very nature of interpreting is inherently in conflict with the very nature of the survey interview.

According to Sudman and Bradburn, in conducting surveys, “Question wording is a crucial element in maximizing the validity of survey data obtained by a question-asking process. ... (S)eemingly small changes in wording can cause large differences in responses” (Sudman and Bradburn, 1982:1). For this reason, survey questions are carefully crafted and pretested. For the same reason, standardization in survey interviewing is emphasized so that each question is asked the same way and receives the same treatment. Survey interviewers are trained to read each question as worded.

Interpreting, by definition, is to convey messages across languages. Interpreters are trained to focus on getting the message across and not focus on word-for-word meaning of a sentence. In other words, interpreters are working with the unit of a discourse, not with the unit of a sentence. Interpreters rely heavily on their memory of the message to reconstruct the idea in another language. They may use different wording or phrases to convey the idea, so long as the idea is getting across. When conducting a survey interview through an interpreter, there will be some degree of divergence from the original question wording.

The question we need to consider is if we can’t standardize the interpreting process, what aspects of survey interpreting can we control or set requirements to in order to minimize the divergence between the original questions and the interpreted questions?

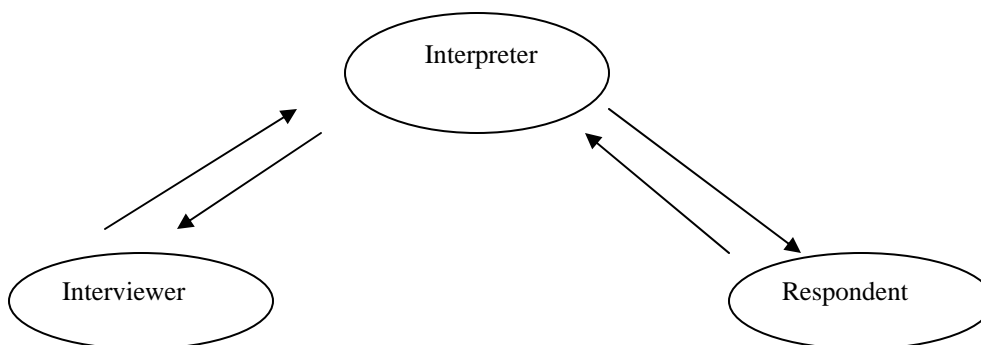
I have the following questions for us to ponder:

- 1) What are the desired qualifications for survey interview interpreters?
- 2) Should there be a standardized procedure for identifying and using interpreters?
- 3) What training is needed for interpreters? And
- 4) What training is needed for interviewers working with interpreters?

The rest of the paper will be devoted to the discussion of these issues.

5. The Role of the Interpreter in Survey Interviews

When a survey interview is conducted through the use of an interpreter, the interpreter plays an essential role in the interview and in the data quality. As the following diagram indicates, there is almost no direct communication between the interviewer and the respondent since they do not share a common language. The interpreter is the bridge between the two parties and the two worlds. All questions and answers are parsing through the interpreter and then transmitted to the other party.



In addition, survey interpreting is a two-way interpreting process. That is, the interpreter needs to translate from the source language into the target language and also translate from the target language into the source language. This means the interpreter should be equally competent in both the source and the target language. He/she also needs to have the knowledge of the two cultures so that he can convey subtle cultural nuances in the two languages. If the interpreter does not have these qualifications, the data quality will suffer.

5.1 Desired qualifications for survey interview interpreter

The first issue that we need to consider is “What are the desired qualifications for survey interview interpreters?” In order to understand this issue and the issue of how interpreters are used in the field, we conducted an initial observation of Census Bureau field interviews with non-English-speaking households through the use of an interpreter. The first problem we noticed is that interpreters are not always giving an accurate translation of what the field interviewer says to respondents and vice versa. Interpreters sometimes add or omit information.

For example, in one of the Current Population Survey interviews that we observed, the interviewer attempted to ask about the number of hours that each man in a Spanish-speaking household had worked in the past week individually. The Spanish interpreter did not ask about each man but only said: “They work hard, they’re Hispanic; everybody works 40 hours.” She specifically confirmed with only one man that he actually worked 40 hours a week and then she generalized it to the rest of them, without asking individually.

In another Current Population Survey interview with a Chinese household, a 15-year-old child was acting as the interpreter. When the field interviewer asked if her parents did any work in the past week, she turned to her parents and said: “She asked if you work or not.” “Yes, we work,” the parents answered. The child obviously left out the reference period of “past week” in her interpretation.

Obviously, interpreting survey interviews requires a special skill set. In addition to language competence in English and the target language, and the cultural knowledge of how to interact in the two cultures, the interpreter should have the basic knowledge of how surveys work. We cannot assume that anyone who speaks the two languages can do interpreting.

5.2 Procedure or protocol for identifying/using interpreters

The second issue that deserves our attention is “Do we want to have an explicit procedure or protocol for using/identifying interpreters?” This question consists of three points. One is whether we need to establish certain formal procedures in identifying interpreters; second is how to evaluate an interpreter’s qualifications, and the third is how to assess an interpreter’s performance.

From our observations, we noticed that interpreters are used in a haphazard manner. There lacks a formal procedure or an explicit protocol for identifying interpreters in field interviews. We learned that some Census Bureau regional offices provide interpreters (the Census Bureau has 12 regional offices). But in most cases, interviewers find their own interpreters (from their own resources, connections with the neighborhood, or on the spot). Field interviewers have no way to assess an interpreter’s qualifications or performance. When asked how they know if an interpreter is doing a good job, one field interviewer in North Virginia said that he judged it by the interaction between the interpreter and the respondent. If the interaction seemed to be smooth, he assumed that the interpreter was doing a good job. In our observation, we noticed that an interpreter could carry out a seemingly smooth conversation with the respondent without accurately translating what the field interviewer or the respondent were saying.

5.3 What training is needed for interpreters?

The third question for us to consider is “Do we need to provide training for interpreters? And what kind of training is needed for interpreters to successfully perform their job?” From our field observations, we identified the following problems with interpreters’ job performance:

1. Interpreters are not always familiar with the survey on which they are working. Often they have not been informed of confidentiality and privacy policies, and this can lead them to omit this information when speaking to respondents.

2. Interpreters often usurp the role of the interviewer: they construct their own questions and sometimes even provide answers for the respondent. For example, in an interview for the Current Population Survey, when the interviewer asked the respondents about their nationality, the Spanish interpreter answered “Mexican” without asking the men residing in the household.

3. Interpreters sometimes take on additional role in the interview. For example, one Spanish interpreter in the Washington, D.C. area gave a long lecture to respondents about why they should go to church during one of the interviews. Another Chinese interpreter in the Los Angeles, California area initiated sidetrack conversations with the respondent about housing prices.

We believe interpreters, like field interviewers, need to have adequate training of the survey that they work on, and to have training on informed consent messages, such as the purpose of the survey, confidentiality, and data uses. In addition, they should receive training about their role in the interview, including what to interpret, when to speak, and when not to speak.

5.4 What training is needed for field interviewers who work with interpreters?

The forth issue to ponder is “Do we need to provide training to field interviewers who work with interpreters?” As mentioned earlier, interpreters rely heavily on their memory to reconstruct the meaning of a sentence/message. It is unrealistic to expect interpreters to remember long sentences or passages. Interviewers need to know when to pause and break in the middle of a long question so that the interpreter can accurately translate what is being said.

Interviewers also need to know that the role of an interpreter is to translate what the field interviewer says, but not to take over the interview. It is tempting to hand over the interview to the interpreter, since it takes less time. From our observation, we came across a few occasions where the interviewer turned the laptop screen to the Chinese interpreter and said: “Here are the questions. Just ask the respondent these questions, and I will record their answers.” Although the interpreter was fluent in both languages, she was not familiar with the survey and did not have the training in survey interviews. She was not confident in asking the survey questions and did not understand the intended meaning of each question. The point here is that the field interviewer should be in control of the interview, and not let the interpreter take over the show.

Another important issue to consider is that survey interviewing through an interpreter doubles the interview time. This adds to the response burden of the survey interview. Will the respondent run out of time or patience to complete the entire interview? It is important that the interviewer and interpreter work together to stay on target and not to deviate from the interview. The use of interpreters also has cost implications for survey organizations.

6. Future Research

Based on our web search and initial field observations, we believe that it is important to provide guidance and standards for using interpreters in survey interviews. Preliminary research indicates that Census Bureau interpretation guidelines need to address the following critical issues:

- 1) What are the most appropriate criteria for use in selecting interpreters?
- 2) What standard procedure should be in place for using interpreters in the field?
- 3) What type of training is needed for preparing interpreters?
- 4) What materials should be provided to interpreters?
- 5) When encountering a non-English-speaking household, what type of protocols or procedures should field interviewers follow in identifying an interpreter on the spot?
- 6) What should be the key elements/features of the protocol/procedure?
- 7) How can a field interviewer best implement these procedures?

With these issues in mind, we plan to carry out future research to develop the Census Bureau guidelines for using interpreters. Future research will include: 1) systematic observations of field interviewers conducting interviews with non-English-speaking respondents in different regions in the United States, and 2) the conduct of focus groups and debriefing interviews with field interviewers to identify what type of training is needed for field interviewers concerning the use of interpreters.

The ultimate goal of this research is to develop the U.S. Census Bureau interpretation guidelines, incorporating findings from the present research and best practices of survey organizations around the world. We envision that the U.S. Census Bureau interpretation guidelines will consist of the following components:

- 1) Guidelines on protocols, procedures, and standards for using interpreters in interviews;
- 2) Guidance on interpreter training (survey information, confidentiality, interpreters' role in a survey interview, codes of ethics and codes of conduct);
- 3) Guidance on field interviewer training on how to work with interpreters;
- 4) Development of a self-assessment tool of bilingual proficiency and/or interpretation skill for potential interpreters.

We recognize the challenges and obstacles of such a task, given the cost implications and limited resources for interpreters. However we believe that developing some form of standard or guidelines for using interpreters will help to ensure that the data collected in an interview through an interpreter are as reliable and accurate as the data collected in standardized interviews in English. By undertaking this research effort, we will be able not only to develop the Census Bureau interpretation guidelines, but also to contribute to the research on the use of interpreters in survey interviews and its impact on data quality.

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