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WP3: Maximising equivalence through translation

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Work focuses on three key areas: Addressing key challenges for cross-national data collection, breaking down barriers between social science infrastructures and embracing the future of the social sciences.

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Summary

In the context of SERISS Task 3.1, an experiment testing two different questionnaire translation approaches was carried out in 2017: a close versus a more adaptive translation approach was administered in a series of translation sessions. The experiment was carried out in Estonian and Slovene, and the resulting translations fielded in the CRONOS online panel developed as part of SERISS (http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/methodological_research/modes_of_data_collection/cronos.html)

The set-up of the translations, the team composition as well as findings from the translation sessions are presented and discussed in this report. In follow-up interviews, the author assessed to what extent the translating teams had followed the different translation approaches or not.
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Introduction: why an experiment on close versus adaptive translations?

In the context of SERISS Task 3.1, an experiment was organised to test two different approaches to questionnaire translation: the so-called ‘ask-the-same-question’ approach, which is a rather close translation method and has been the basic rule in most of the multilingual surveys, was tested against a different approach that allows a higher degree of adaptation, an approach that has so far not been applied by the major surveys out of the concern that comparability between the different language versions may be hampered by a potentially too large distance between the source and the target versions.

The results of this experiment will be highly useful for the field of survey research because so far, translation teams in questionnaire translation have often been hesitant about the level of adaptation or freedom that may be permitted in comparative survey projects. Having empirical evidence in this respect has been needed for a while and will be a new contribution to the field.

The translations took place in summer 2017 and the resulting surveys were fielded in November/December 2017. Further details of the findings from the translation experiment are available in Deliverable 3.3 (Repke et al., 2019).

The process of setting up of translation teams, contracting the teams, organising the schedules, sending out the documents and controlling for timely delivery and respecting the required time-spans between batches was completed by the author of this report. Also, the author had drafted instructions documents for both translation approaches, one for each, and sent these to the respective translation teams in the SERISS translation experiments, see below (these instructions documents are provided in SERISS deliverable D3.1 (Dorer, Villar 2017)).

Experiment and research design

The translations were carried out in two languages: Estonian in Estonia and Slovene in Slovenia. In each of these countries, three translation teams worked on altogether 60 questionnaire items (subdivided into three sets of 20 items each) to be translated from English according to both methods.

An elaborate research design has been worked out in order to minimize team effects: each item was translated three times (once by each team) into each of the languages, twice following one method and once following the other method.

The research design is provided in Figure 1 below.
Figure 1: Research design, distribution of teams 1-3 and items 1-60

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Team 1</th>
<th>Team 2</th>
<th>Team 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Items 1-20</td>
<td>Close</td>
<td>Adapt</td>
<td>Adapt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Items 21-40</td>
<td>Adapt</td>
<td>Close</td>
<td>Adapt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Items 41-60</td>
<td>Close</td>
<td>Adapt</td>
<td>Close</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was a time lag of at least one week between translating the different batches, according to recommendations from the ESS Translation Expert Panel (TEP) and the ESS Methods Advisory Board (MAB).

At the end of the process, the final translations were fielded on the probability-based online panel of the ESS ‘CRONOS’, in waves 5 and 6. The experiment design involved three experimental groups which were comprised of a combination of a translation team and translation approach, resulting in three (different) translations of the same source item. CRONOS respondents in Slovenia and Estonian-speaking respondents in Estonia received one of the three translations of the same item depending on the experimental group they were randomly assigned to.

**Instruction of the teams**

Each batch of 20 items was sent to the respective translation teams by the author of this report. They received each time an excel file with the items to be translated as well as an Instructions document that contained instructions on which method to be applied. The names of the two approaches (‘close’ versus ‘adaptive’) did not appear in the instructions documents because the teams should not be aware of the fact that they were participating in an experiment.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) All resulting translations were fielded in the 5th and 6th waves of the CRONOS online panel developed as part of SERISS (http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/methodological_research/modes_of_data_collection/cronos.html) in Estonia and Slovenia. The CRONOS respondents were divided into three groups, and each of these three respondent groups received items from this translation experiment, produced by each of the three translation teams. This was in order to minimize group effects both stemming from the translation teams – and thus indirectly from the translation approach close or adaptive – and from the respondent group. The exact ordering of the experimental items within questionnaires of CRONOS Waves 5 and 6 are explained in SERISS deliverable D3.3 (Repke, 2019).

\(^2\) The Instructions were included in SERISS Deliverable D3.1 (Dorer, Villar, 2017).
Composition of translation teams

Finding enough people that would be both sufficiently qualified and experienced to make up the altogether six translation teams (three per language) was not easy; the main reason being that both languages are spoken by a relatively low number of native speakers.

Each team needed to consist of two translators and one reviewer/adjudicator.

The criteria for selecting team members were the following:

- Native speaker of the target language
- Residing in the target country at the moment of the translation experiment
- No previous or ongoing work for the ESS / no previous experience with the ESS translation approach
- Previous experience with translation of questionnaires, if possible in cross-national general population surveys (not marketing surveys)
- For the translators: if possible training as a translator or linguist or, if not, sufficient experience in translating questionnaires for similar projects
- For the reviewers: experience in questionnaire design for setting up surveys in the target country; strong academic background, if possible in survey methodology, sociology, psychology or political sciences

With the help of various contacts in the wider survey research and translation networks, it was possible to form 2 x 3 strong translating teams. In the end, only one person had a limited experience with translating ESS questionnaires, all others were new to this project and also the ESS translation approach.

For screening team members, the author sent out a questionnaire in order to gather information that would be needed to decide who could participate in the experiment or not. This questionnaire is provided in Annex 1.

Carrying out the translations and review meetings

Each time a translation team received one batch of 20 items – that is, the excel file containing these 20 items and the appropriate Instructions document – the two translators first translated the 20 items independently and then a review meeting was organised between both translators and the reviewer/adjudicator to discuss the translations of these 20 items and agree on one translation.

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3 Which is a team approach consisting in two independent translations that are subsequently discussed in a review meeting by the two translators and a reviewer (and possibly other participants). ESS follows an “ask the same question” approach which can include both close and, if needed, slightly free or adaptive translations.

For an explanation of the ESS translation approach, see: http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/ess_methodology/translation/
This process was repeated three times for each team. The overall translation period started early July 2017 and ended at the middle of September 2017.

All review meetings took place in Tallin and Tartu (Estonia) or in Ljubljana (Slovenia).

**Manipulation checks**

The following methods were carried out in order to check whether each translation team applied the correct method (close versus adaptive):

- The author carried out follow-up interviews with all 6 reviewers and some of the translators in autumn 2017 in order to understand whether (a) they had realised the difference between methods in the Instructions documents and whether (b) they had applied this method accordingly in their translations. Summaries of these follow-up interviews are provided below.
- All translation review sessions were audio-recorded with the idea to be analysed by native speakers of the target languages in order to learn whether the translators did indeed follow the instructions and applied the right method (close versus adaptive). However, in the meantime, it turned out to be too time- and cost-intensive to analyse these audio-recordings of all Review sessions by native speakers, so this has to date not been carried out.

**Summaries of the follow-up interviews after the translation sessions**

The author of this report carried out follow-up interviews with all six (2x3) reviewers and some of the translators of the teams that finished their work towards the end of the translation period. These follow-up interviews were carried out in autumn 2017 by adobe connect, and the author followed a predefined list of questions that she asked all persons one by one (these questions are listed in Annex 2). All these interviews took place and were video- and audio-recorded within adobe connect. In addition, the author took notes during these interviews.

These interviews are briefly summarised below.

**SLOVENIA TEAM 1**

**Reviewer**

Overall it turned out that this reviewer did not realise the difference between both approaches and translated all batches in the same way. This reviewer seemed to have a rather adaptive translation approach as he/she stated wanting to make the translations suitable to use in fieldwork.

=>overall no difference, but rather adaptive style
Translator 1

T1 said that in the Review sessions they did not make a difference between different instructions as no difference had been realised. T1 says that different options may have been selected had they been aware of different approaches.

Translator 2

T2 had not realised the difference. He/she stated that his/her usual approach is being as close as possible, but that understandability is most important. Free translations may be required, for instance for regional language use.

=> Overall Slovenia Team 1: no difference between both approaches, but rather adaptive style

SLOVENIA TEAM 2

Reviewer

This Reviewer realised the difference between the three batches correctly (batches 1 and 3 were adapt and batch 2 was close) and found the instructions useful; however, the translation approach did not differ so much because of the experience he/she had in translating questionnaires previously. So this person was more guided by the previous experience in translating questionnaires so that they would be good survey instruments than by the proper instructions of this experiment.

=> Reviewer Slovenia Team 2 realised the difference and implemented it where appropriate: for items in the adapt mode to make sure the translations were appropriate for a broader cultural context in Slovenia.

Translator 1

The statements of this T1 were not so clear: T1 had correctly understood that two batches were more adapt than the third one. T1 stated that overall not so many adaptations were made, the guiding principle was rather how the translations would sound better, so rather linguistic adaptations were made. In the end T1 admitted that the difference may have been more extreme if he/she would have been aware of the real task.

=> T1 did not fully implement difference

Translator 2

T2 had realised some difference but stated that in the Review sessions, the guiding line were not the instructions and 2 approaches, but the overall goal of understandability, above all for the general population, and to get the meaning of the source questionnaire across. According to T2’s statements it is not sure the Reviewer told the truth about the Review meetings.

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4 For maintaining anonymity of the test persons, no gender indication have been provided by these summaries.
=> Overall: Not clear whether Slovenia Team 2 implemented the difference in the Review sessions; according to both translators, the guiding principle was understandability of the general population and getting the same meaning across as in the source text – and NOT differentiation between adapt and close.

**SLOVENIA TEAM 3**

**Reviewer**

Realised the difference correctly and implemented it this way, tried as much as possible. For instance, not changing examples in the close approach, sticking closer to the original than in the adapt versions.

=> Overall Slovenia Team 3 implemented the difference in the Review sessions correctly.

**ESTONIA TEAM 1**

**Reviewer**

This Reviewer had realised the difference and had applied that in the Review sessions. He/She stated that in the Review sessions, they always considered how a question would work in the field, how understandable that would be for the target group, that is, for a 20-year old as well as for a 70 years old respondent. So the guiding principles were both the team’s experience with translating and using questionnaires and also the instructions.

This Reviewer stated that the instructions made it partly difficult to find translations that would be suitable for the field!

He/She stated that the translation was partly difficult because the context and additional background on the items were missing, and that would have been necessary for producing good translations. Therefore this Reviewer stated that he/she was not satisfied with either of the 3 batches as more flexibility would have been needed for producing good translations (especially for difficult and sensitive questions).

=>Overall: realised differences and implemented them

=>BUT: rules were too strict / more flexibility would have been needed // context was missing

=> for the ADAPT version they would have liked more freedom to produce a good questionnaire for the field (the instructions, according to this Reviewer, did not allow enough adaptation / flexibility)

=> the CLOSE version was difficult as this Reviewer would not like to use the translations produced with these instructions in the field

=> Overall Estonia Team 1 implemented the difference in the Review sessions correctly, but was neither happy with the instructions nor with the final translations.
ESTONIA TEAM 2

Reviewer

This Reviewer drafted even simpler instructions for the translators for their translation process. For him/her, the CLOSE batch was the most difficult one – most difficult to translate and most difficult to implement.

This Reviewer stated that for the sake of respondents, it’s better to adapt more, so he/she follows a more liberal approach in translating questionnaires, having learned that from experience, also from qualitative studies and data.

=> Estonia Team 2 realised and implemented the difference between adapt and close – the Reviewer even produced and added own, simpler instructions for the translation team members.

ESTONIA TEAM 3

Reviewer

This Reviewer had not realised a difference between the instructions and stated having relied on the translators. A guiding principle of this translation team seems to have been the mode (face versus web). So this Reviewer seemed to have been the least involved one of all 6 Reviewers, relying on the translators for producing a good final product.

=> in these Review sessions, no difference in approaches was implemented although one of the translators (T2) had actually realised the difference.

Translator 1

T1 stated that he/she had not realized any difference, neither while translating nor later in the Review sessions. Difficulties translating were of a general nature, such as familiarity of terms, not so easy questions (from the question design point of view). But the same approach was applied in all three batches.

Translator 2

T2 had realised the difference between the 3 batches correctly and stated that the instructions had had a big impact on the translations. T2 stated having mentioned the particular instructions in the second but not third batch meeting. T2 stated for instance that T2 and the Reviewer sometimes disagreed about the level of closeness versus adaptation, that, for instance, in batch 1 – adapt – the Reviewer opted for a closer translation while T2 wanted to adapt more because of the background and in order to be more comparable.

=> According to T2, the result of Estonia Team 3 would have been different – more adapt – if they had followed the instructions better.

=> However, T2 being a linguist / trained translator, did not find the instructions clear enough to be sure how to make the difference between both approaches. So the instructions should have been stronger in their differentiation from this trained translator’s point of view.
T2 found the instructions particularly confusing and difficult to implement for batch 1 (adapt) because of the particular context of these items.

=> Overall Estonia Team 3 did not realise nor implement the difference in approaches – and it seems that the overall approach was rather close than adapt.

**Overall findings from the follow-up interviews**

During these interviews it turned out that not all teams and team members had realised the difference between the two translation methods. This suggests that the differentiation between the ‘close’ and ‘adaptive’ method was not realised properly in all cases and thus not correctly implemented in the CRONOS fieldwork.

Specifically for two of the teams, this differentiation was not understood by the Reviewer and thus did not guide the finalisation processes in the Review sessions: Team 1 in Slovenia and Team 3 in Estonia did not realise a difference in approaches; from follow-up questions it seemed that Slovenia Team 1 team followed in general a rather adaptive approach while Estonia Team 3 followed a rather close approach. For Slovenia Team 2 it is not clear whether the differentiation was really followed during the Review sessions because the statements of the Reviewer and the Translators differ in this regard. All other teams (Slovenia 3, Estonia 1+2) seem to have implemented the differentiation as instructed.

Several other interesting statements were made in these interviews about specific translation difficulties, approaches and solutions in particular items. Examples of adaptations, close translations, specific difficulties and/or solutions were mentioned and described by almost all persons in these manipulation checks, and these will be analysed in more detail in the qualitative analysis of all translations in SERISS Deliverable 3.3 (Repke et al., 2019).

**Quality of the instructions documents**

It should be considered why the instructions did not work correctly in all cases. There are different aspects to consider:

One cannot conclude that the instructions were incorrect, as half of the teams understood and used them correctly as intended.

The reason is probably rather to be seen with regard to (a) the composition and background of the translation teams and (b) with the implementation of the instructions: Some teams stated that the final translations would have been different had they been aware of the different approaches. In these cases it may have been helpful to have a member of the central research team present during the Review sessions for making the teams aware of the difference in the instructions. However, then the instructions would have lost their proper function of being the linking vehicle between the central research team steering and guiding the translation process by setting the process requirements and the translating teams executing these processes remotely without physical contact: this is often the case in real cross-national surveys, and so one of the aims of this experiment was also to test how to best instruct remote translation teams.
On the other hand, depending on the team composition, team members stated that they would not have translated differently even when knowing about the different requirements because of the overall requirement of producing a fieldable questionnaire: so they somehow applied the translation approach they had been used to in their usual questionnaire activities for other projects. In these cases, the instructions would have needed to be more extreme, which means not including the instruction to produce a fieldable questionnaire. Then some translations would have more clearly deviated from their previous translation habits and followed the respective approach more clearly.

In some cases, however, it was simply not possible to find translations that would clearly be different in terms of level of closeness or adaptation, meaning that the translating teams had no real chance to produce two clearly different translations. For knowing to which items this applied, native speakers were subsequently asked to determine a ‘translation potential’ of all source items when translated into their respective mother tongue (Estonian versus Slovene). This process as well as the results of this exercise are presented and discussed in SERISS Deliverable 3.3 (Repke et al., 2019).

So, one of the findings from this experiment is the difficulty to properly instruct translating teams that the central research team does not know in person and with both sides having no physical contact with each other. It may be necessary either to draft such instructions in a more extreme way in order to clearly deviate from the team members’ previous translation habits or to have members of the central research team present in such Review meetings (but because of missing language skills this may not be possible in all cases). More research is required in this regard.

Another point to consider is that not all items subject to the experiments had the same potential to be adapted both closely and adaptively. This is further investigated in deliverable 3.3 (Repke et al, 2019).

Conclusions and next steps

The translations that were part of the experiment about close versus adaptive questionnaire translation approaches were carried out in summer 2017. All translations were done by experienced teams, including survey researchers, questionnaire designers as well as professional translators.

Follow-up interviews carried out in autumn 2017 by the author of this report (who oversaw and coordinated the whole experiment) revealed that not all translation teams had understood and thus not made the differentiation between both methods in their final translation decisions during the Review meeting correctly. These teams were Slovenia 1 and Estonia 3.

For analysing the survey data (from fieldwork in CRONOS) in combination with the translations with the aim of detecting and then interpreting differences in the resulting data, it to which translated items.

As the implementation of the research design has apparently not been implemented correctly by all six translation teams in all 60 items, another method needed to be applied for obtaining this information: Independent native speakers and trained translators of both Estonian and
Slovene were asked to rate the translations as actually fielded in CRONOS. This process of rating the translations as close or adaptive as well as the results are presented and discussed in SERISS Deliverable 3.3 (Repke et al., 2019).

These findings will then be taken into account in the quantitative analyses of the data gathered in the CRONOS online panel.

So overall the process of translating the selected items into both target languages according to both approaches went well, however the effect of the instructions to apply both translation methods did not materialise as intended. So for the future, a different approach for instructing translating teams in comparable experiments as well as of selecting items to be translated should be considered as discussed above.
References

Dorer, B. and Villar, A (2017) Standards for the implementation of the two survey translation approaches: the ‘stay close to the source’ approach & the adaptive approach Deliverable 3.1 of the SERISS project funded under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme GA No: 654221.

Annex 1: Questionnaire for screening candidates to participate in Translation Experiment

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Questionnaire for candidates to participate in translation projects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name / affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Which is your native language?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your level of English?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What training and qualifications do you have?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your current working situation / job?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have experience in translating questionnaires into your mother tongue?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please describe your experience in questionnaire translation: e.g., which surveys / what type of questionnaires?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since when?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In what function?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was a specific method applied for this translation / were you briefed in a specific way?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How is your availability to translate about 60 questionnaire items (questions) – 3 times 20 items – and to participate in Review sessions to discuss all these questionnaire items to be translated between July and early September 2017?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where are you based / living?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will you be available to participate in a Review session to discuss the translation of a questionnaire?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any other questions you have?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Annex 2: Questions asked to the translation team members in the follow-up interviews (manipulation check)

SERISS Translation experiment // Follow-up interviews

Person / Team:

Date:

1) For each batch, how did you proceed after you had read the instructions?

2) What would you say: how much effect did the instructions have on the way you – and the team – approached the task?

3) What effect did the instructions have on your translations?

4) Did you notice the difference in instructions?

5) How would you express the difference between the instructions in your own words?

6) Do you remember an example where it was difficult to follow the instructions? Could you explain why it was difficult and how you resolved that?

7) Overall: did you find the instructions clear?

8) Overall: did you find the instructions easy to implement in your translations?