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Translation in qualitative research with an emphasis on grounded theory

Pratap Chandra Mandal
Indian Institute of Management, Shillong, Meghalaya, India

Abstract
Translation is sometimes an issue in qualitative research. This is particularly true when the research is conducted in a specific language and the publication needs to be done in any other language. Data analysis also becomes a problem when the research team consists of researchers from backgrounds with different languages. In such cases, it is imperative to perform translation. It is absolutely essential to consider the importance of translation which becomes an issue in its own right. In this article, the guidelines for translation in qualitative research are presented with an emphasis on researches conducted based on grounded theory. Recommendations about the procedures for translation are presented. The translation procedure might follow four steps: translation in the process of coding, translation in the process of team discussion, translation in the process of advanced coding, and ensuring the accuracy of translation.

Keywords: translation, qualitative research, grounded theory, language, data analysis

1. Introduction

Translation is an important area of concern in qualitative research. Translation is required when either the respondent or the researcher or both speak different languages and when the language in which the publication needs to be made is different from the source of data. The process of translation may also be required to ensure that the research instrument used is valid. The most important issue in valid translation is to see that the meanings are equivalent in both the languages (Sechrest *et al*., 1972; Brislin, 1970) [1, 2]. Equivalence in meanings requires the translation to be accurate both technically and conceptually. Another major issue in qualitative research is, apart from technical and conceptual equivalence, the translation needs to take care of the lingual and the cultural aspects. This is important because literal equivalence in the target language does not always express the essential meaning of the source language clearly (Su and Parham, 2002) [3]. For all these reasons, qualitative researchers need to be aware of the above aspects to ensure conceptual equivalence (Chen and Boore, 2009) [4].

In this article, the guidelines required to be followed in translation for maintaining conceptual equivalence of data is elaborated. The discussion tries to answer the following questions:

1. When should data be translated for analysis?
2. Who should translate the data?
3. Which translation procedure should be followed?
4. How should this process be implemented?

2. Process of translation

The method of translation involves the use of both forward and backward translation. Forward translation is the process of translation from the source language to the target language. A forward-only method is insufficient to establish semantic equivalence in translation. For this reason, it is also necessary to perform backward translation. Backward translation is the process of translation from the target language to the source language. Both methods of translation need to be performed to verify the adequacy of translation (Maneesriwongul and Dixon, 2004) [5].

Backward translation is a method for ensuring the validity of a translation (Maneesriwongul and Dixon, 2004) [5]. But critics have argued that backward translation is more concerned with the closeness of fit rather than accuracy or truth of data (Chen and Boore, 2009; Maneesriwongul and Dixon, 2004) [4, 5]. It has also been shown by researchers that backward translation does not eliminate or reduce the problems related to linguistic or cultural differences (Su and Parham, 2002) [3]. Again, there are benefits of performing backward translation. One benefit is that it can provide insights into the process of decentering (Brislin *et al*., 1973; Sechrest *et al*., 1972) [6, 1]. Decentering is a collaborative process among experts in the two cultures or languages. It is used to minimize cultural and linguistic biases (Su and Parham, 2002) [3]. In the process of decentering both the source and the target versions are revised. This tries to ensure that a valid translation is generated (Su and Parham, 2002) [3].

Another method of translation commonly used by researchers involves both forward and backward translation. It is an extremely rigorous process because both forward and backward translations are involved. But this process might not guarantee conceptual equivalence. One major drawback is that it might not convey attitude (Croot *et al*., 2011; Larkin *et al*., 2007) [7, 8]. In this process the translation might be accurate literally, but a literal translation might fail to convey the original ideas or the attitudes which were captured in the original words (Croot *et al*., 2011) [7]. Another major disadvantage of this process is that it is too much time-consuming. It becomes expensive where the researchers need to invest a lot of time and energy which might not be

commensurate with the outcomes obtained through the process (Chen and Boore, 2009) [4]. So, it becomes sometimes impractical to apply this method. The results might not be sufficient compared to the efforts invested.

Qualitative research is characterized with words rather than with numerical data as used in quantitative research. The interpretation of the meanings of participants' words becomes extremely important for the interpretation of the phenomenon (Fenna *et al*., 2010) [9]. The interpretation of the meanings of the words and the interviews performed might not be uniform and might vary from researcher to researcher. In this case, the challenge is to interpret the meanings of the words correctly. Otherwise, this might affect the results of the study adversely. The results of a qualitative study are considered rigorous if the interpretation of participants' meanings is as close as possible to the participants' experiences (Polkinghorne, 2005) [10]. For this reason, researchers have emphasized that the issues related to the translation process need to be addressed prior to data collection. The meaning and intent of the research might be lost if the process of translation is not appropriate (Fenna *et al*., 2010) [9]. Also, the quality of translation will influence the equivalence and accuracy of findings (Frederickson *et al*., 2005; Schultz, 2004; Temple, 2002) [11, 12, 13].

The above methods become also important for cross-language research. Cross-language research is defined as studies in which a language barrier is present between researchers and their respondents (Temple, 2002; Larson, 1988) [13, 14]. The translation process in cross-language research depends on the qualitative methodology employed for conducting the research. For example, the translation process used in ethnography will be different from that employed in a grounded theory study (Twinn, 1998) [15]. In phenomenology studies, the research needs to be conducted in the native languages of the participants. Otherwise, the meaning will change too much even with a rigorous translation process (Squires, 2008) [16]. Several researchers have argued that for cross-language studies, the preliminary data should not be translated because the meanings might change because of translation. They suggest that translation can be done only after obtaining the final results (Larkin *et al*., 2007; Temple, 2002) [8, 13]. The above discussion indicates that the processes of analysis for different qualitative methodologies are different. The timing of translation may also differ based on the approach. As evident from the discussions, researchers have suggested guidelines for the process of translation to be used in qualitative research (Fenna *et al*., 2010; Chen and Boore, 2009; Suh *et al*., 2009; Smith *et al*., 2008) [9, 4, 17, 18]. But there is no consensus among researchers about the guidelines to be followed for translation in a grounded theory analysis.

The idea of Grounded Theory (GT) was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) [19] out of an urgent need in the field of social research to discover theories as opposed to merely testing existing theories. The investigation examines the respondent's experiences in an attempt to understand the factors affecting customer satisfaction for Indian retail banking customers. The idea of emergence is one of the strengths of qualitative research and GT (Charmaz, as quoted in Puddephatt, 2006) [20]. GT goes beyond speculations and presumptions to the actual processes and the respondent's reality (Glaser, 1995) [21]. For understanding the importance of translation in grounded theory, the guidelines followed in grounded theory need to be understood.

Grounded Theory as an inductive process is guided by specific guidelines as outlined by Corbin and Strauss (1990) [22]:

1. Data collection and analysis are interrelated and concurrent processes. Collecting data first, as in other methods of research, violates the core foundation of GT.
2. Concepts are the basic units of analysis. Conceptualization of data rather than description is the central emphasis of GT.
3. Categories must be developed and related. Concepts are grouped together to form categories, and must be of theoretical significance to contribute to the development of categories.
4. Sampling in GT proceeds on theoretical grounds. Sampling is guided by ideas generated from the phenomena under study.
5. Analysis makes use of constant comparisons. The comparison of incidents results in the development of concepts. Comparisons are drawn throughout the research process and as concepts are grouped into categories. The process provides verification as the researcher compares concepts and categories with new data.
6. Patterns and variations in data are accounted for.

At each of the stages mentioned above, translation may play a major role if the entire process is conducted in a language other than English. The whole process is guided by questions posed by the researcher to the respondents. The questions deal with preconceptions, feelings, prior thoughts or knowledge, and reactions to situations which arise during interviews.

In the first stage of analysis, initial or open coding is conducted to fracture the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) [19]. This means that the data is broken down into simpler parts. Constant comparisons among the parts are done to note the similarities and dissimilarities in the data (Corbin and Strauss, 1990) [22]. At this stage, line-by-line analysis of data is done. Data are coded and compared with each other. This process is called open coding or constant comparative analysis and uses both inductive and deductive logic (Birks and Mills, 2011) [23].

The next phase of analysis is called intermediate coding. Intermediate coding is also known as axial coding (Corbin and Strauss, 1990) [22]. Axial coding is done to relate the different categories and sub-categories which are generated based on exploratory card sorting. Axial coding is the process of relating categories to their sub-categories. The coding is termed "axial" because coding occurs around the axis of a category, linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions.

The process of axial coding as proposed by Corbin and Strauss (1990) [22] involves the following steps:

1. Laying out the properties of a category and their dimensions, a task that begins during open coding.
2. Identifying the variety of conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences associated with a phenomenon.
3. Relating a category to its sub-categories through statements denoting how they are related to each other.
4. Looking for cues in the data that denote how major categories might relate to each other.

The above steps describe the process of axial coding whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connection between (and within) categories. The last level of analysis is called advanced coding or selective coding. Selective coding is performed on the data to find the central category. Selective coding is the process of integrating and refining the theory. The central category (sometimes called the core category) represents the main theme of the research.

The criteria followed for choosing the central category as proposed by Corbin and Strauss (1990) [22] is as follows:

1. The category must be central; that is, all other major categories can be related to it.
2. It must appear frequently in the data. This means that within all or almost all cases, there are indicators pointing to that concept.
3. The explanation that evolves by relating the categories is logical and consistent. There is no forcing of data.
4. The name or phrase used to describe the central category should be sufficiently abstract that it can be used to do research in other substantive areas, leading to the development of a more general theory.

Based on the above process, the storyline is developed further. Advanced coding uses the storyline technique and, later on, theoretical coding (Birks and Mills, 2011) [23].

Researchers (Birks and Mills, 2011; Corbin and Strauss, 1990) [23, 22] suggest that there are several reasons, for which minimal translation should be done in a study based on grounded theory. 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.

There are difficulties of doing translation in grounded theory. Few researchers are specially trained or natively skilled at doing translations. There are additional difficulties in trying to code in English. Often, there is no equivalent English word capable of capturing the subtle nuances in meaning of the original language. Hoffman (1989) [24] has stated that meanings become "lost in translation". For presentation or publication in a country other than the one in which 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, it is suggested by researchers not to go for extensive translation. This is because too much valuable time and meaning can be lost in trying to translate all of one's materials. Also, many of the original subtleties of meaning are lost in translation.

Sometimes, it becomes essential to do some amount of translation. Otherwise researchers cannot work on the data. Again, it needs to be noted whether a given translated word or phrase really approximates what the interviewee intended. For instance, in one study 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 are not quite picked up by English translations of the native words. When this happens, the researcher needs to give words and descriptions that convey the original native meanings. The researcher needs to explore the parameters of translated meanings and to avoid imposing outsider interpretations on the data.

2.1 Procedures for translations in a grounded theory study

As already discussed in the "Introduction" section of the article, the following points need to be considered during translation of data:

1. When should data be translated for analysis?
2. Who should translate the data?
3. Which translation procedure should be followed?
4. How should this process be implemented?

1. When do researchers need to translate data?

The need for translation might arise in the initial phases of qualitative research during data collection or, later, in the process of analysis and publication (Fenna *et al*. 2010) [9]. Data may be translated at three distinct points in the research process – before analysis, during analysis, or after analysis when the manuscript is ready for publication (Suh *et al*., 2009) [17]. Translation is sometimes required during the analysis itself because this ensures the authenticity of the findings. This is more important if the study is to be published in a different language. Concerns are also there that if data are translated before analysis, the meanings will be lost from the participant's implicit expression (Larkin *et al*., 2007) [8]. Again, translation becomes difficult after the analysis has been done because sometimes there is no precise English word or phrase to express the participant's implicit expression (Choi in Shu *et al*., 2009) [17].

The composition of the research team also needs to be considered when deciding the point at which translation should take place. If the members of the research team do not speak the same language, then translation might be needed before analysis. This is because all the members need to get involved in the analysis.

2. Who should translate data?

A translator is defined as a person who transforms the research data from one language to another (Josephine and Maurice, 2010) [25]. The theoretical and the philosophical approach need to be considered to decide who should translate the data (Temple and Young, 2004; Adamson and Donovan, 2002) [26, 27]. Translation is simpler if the research deals only with discovery of knowledge and not with the construction of knowledge or theory (Squires, 2008) [16]. But this process of translation gives a technically precise version only (Temple, 2002) [13]. The use of a professional translator is suitable for research within an epistemology of objectiveness where truth exists to be uncovered rather than a constructivist or interpretive epistemology in which truth is constructed (Temple and Young, 2004) [26].

A professional translator may not be suitable if the research is done from a social constructionist or interpretative approach. This is because there might be social and other issues which a professional translator might not be aware of or might not understand. In such cases the perspective integrates the cultural interpretation of a participant's statements into the data analysis process. In such cases, the employment of a professional translator may not be appropriate because translation is not considered to be a neutral technique to

change words from one language to another. A technically accurate translation may not necessarily convey the precision or the subtle nuances of the original intent described in the text (Bradby, 2002) [28]. Translation involves the interpretation of meanings of two languages and is influenced by power relations and social context (Buhler, 2002) [29].

Another issue to resolve is choosing the best person to be the translator-moderator. The members of the research team who are fluent in the original language undertake the identification of categories. The best person to act as moderator-translator is the person who is fluent in both the source language and also the target language (Croot *et al*, 2011; Chen and Boore, 2009) [7, 4]. If the person is bilingual that is the best situation (Shklarov, 2007; Hunt and Bhopal, 2004) [30, 31]. The most suitable person to be a translator-moderator is a person who is truly bilingual and who is sufficiently educated to be familiar in the formulation of concepts and with the formal and specialized language used in the data (Chen and Boore, 2009) [4]. The benefit is that apart from translation, the person would have an idea about the formation of concepts and categories (Temple, 2005; Edwards, 1998) [32, 33].

3. The translation procedure

The procedure includes translation in the process of coding, translation in the process of team discussion, translation in the process of advanced coding, and ensuring the accuracy of translation. All the above procedures have been already discussed throughout the text of the article.

The process followed is mentioned as a number of steps below:

1. Translation in the process of coding
a. Coding (in original language)
b. Written translation of categories and sub-categories
2. Translation in the process of team discussion using written translation and oral translation of memos.
3. Translation in the process of advanced coding
a. Writing the storyline (either in original language or target language)
b. Final storyline in target language
4. Ensuring the accuracy of translation

4. How should the process be implemented?

The process might be implemented keeping the following important points in mind.

1. Translator-moderator needs to listen to the original version to check the transcript and translate the evidence into English – first version.
2. An English teacher needs to translate the evidence into English – second version.
3. The research team compares the first and second versions of evidence resulting in the third version of evidences.
4. Back translation of the third version of evidence is conducted.
5. Translator-moderator compares the result of back translation with the original transcript.
6. The translation of evidence becomes ready to be used in dissemination of the final grounded theory.

3. Conclusion

The process of translation can be a problem area in qualitative research. The aim of the paper was to discuss some of the problems and sensitize researchers towards the issues which might arise during translation. The paper laid emphasis on a specific type of qualitative research viz. grounded theory. Apart from discussing the problems, the paper also discussed some of the solutions which might be adopted to solve the problems. It is expected that the procedures and the discussions will help researchers who are conducting qualitative research to maintain integrity of their data and their findings during the translation process.

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