Article

Understanding the Processes of Translation and Transliteration in Qualitative Research

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Abstract
There has been growing interest in the use of qualitative methods in health research amongst health and social care professionals. Good qualitative cross-cultural research analysis is not an easy task as it involves knowledge of different approaches, techniques and command of the appropriate languages. This article aims to discuss and explore some of the key processes and concepts involved in conducting translation and transliteration of qualitative research.

Keywords: translation, transliteration, qualitative methods, research, cross-culture, cross-language research

Introduction

The dictionary meaning of *translation* is the process of changing something that is written or spoken into another language, whereas *transliteration* is to write or describe words or letters using letters of a different alphabet or language (Wehmeier, McIntosh, Turnbull, &Ashby, 2005, p.1632). Despite the limited debates within research discourses and paradigms in relation to qualitative and interpretative perspectives, there has been a growing trend toward conducting research in a source language other than English. Presenting findings in a different target language, that is, English, is now increasingly popular among health and social researchers (Birbili, 2000). This means understanding and seeking comparable data across language boundaries, using research (qualitative) methodologies and values prepared in one language for use in another (Birbili, 2000). Hennink (2007) has argued that the use of language in research and its appropriate interpretation is an ever-expanding field in qualitative research when research seeks to understand human behavior, social processes, and cross-language meanings that describe human behavior in natural settings.

Research can be considered to be cross-cultural when it compares behaviors across two or more cultures, when it is conducted within a culture different from that of a researcher, and/or when it uses instruments relevant in qualitative research that were developed and intended to be used in a different culture (Rogler, 1999). Regrettably, in the conduct of research in cross-language settings (other than the English language), the issues of language or words used in research, the researchers' background, and the role of interpreters or translators are often neglected. Nevertheless, there has been growing interest among researchers in the non-English-speaking world to target and submit papers for publication to English-language journals. This is done mostly to gain access to a wider range of reading audiences, including the academic community, than would otherwise be the case. Sunol and Saturno (2008) argued that research carried out in languages other than English is also less available and referenced than that published in English, and that important findings "published in other languages may be probably lost or, in practice, non-existent for the scientific community as a whole" (p. 1). In addition, studies that are unavailable in English are often excluded from systematic reviews and meta-analyses due to language restrictions. Indeed it is common practice for such reviews to stipulate English language texts only, and therefore rich sources of international data are ignored.

Willgerodt, Kataoka-Yahiro, and Ceria (2005) have rightly pointed out that cross-cultural research must contend with issues of translation as most published literature has failed to describe and explain in detail the translation procedures that were used. As a result, it is difficult to fully understand how translation procedures in qualitative research were implemented or adopted to maintain the scientific rigor of studies, while being culturally sensitive to the populations of interest (Squires, 2009).

Although much has been written about the importance of translation in qualitative research, very few studies have sought to explore the process and strategy involved - when the research is especially involved in cross-language settings. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to discuss and explore some of the key processes and concepts involved in the process of translation and transliteration in qualitative research.

Translation and transliteration

Crystal (1991) defined translation as a process where "the meaning and expression in one language (source) is tuned with the meaning of another (target) whether the medium is spoken, written or signed" (p. 346). In the qualitative research method, interviews and discussion are the

key approaches for information-gathering, mostly in the form of audiotaped recordings, observations, documentary analysis and/or field notes. The process of transformation of such texts from one language to another is embedded within the sociocultural context (Halai, 2007). Some authors have argued that the process of transformation of verbal or spoken conversation into textual form is multilayered (Halai, 2007; Lambert, 1997; Nida, 1982). Lapadat and Lindsay (1999) emphasized such transformation is a "theory-laden process" (p. 82) and the decisions or choices made in the process are influenced by the analysis and interpretation of findings (Halai, 2007).

Torop (2002) has argued that translation, as a process of converting ideas expressed from one language into another, is embedded in the sociocultural language of a particular context and also described the translation process as basically a boundary-crossing between two different languages. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) agree with the view of Lapadat and Lindsay (1999) that translation is primarily a conversional process of converting field texts to research texts through making decisions at different stages for obtaining equivalence in meanings and interpretations (Brislin 1970; Cauce, Coronado, & Watson, 1998).

The word *equivalence* in qualitative discourse is very much a contextual term as it has different meanings in different contexts. Some authors (Cauce et al., 1998; Chang, Chau, & Holroyd, 1999; Phillips, de Hernandez, & de Ardon, 1994) have conceptualized equivalence to establish validity in meaning or interpretation in two different categories: semantic equivalence, where the meanings are similar in two cultures or languages after being translated; and content equivalence, which refers to the extent to which a construct holds similar meanings and relevance in two different cultures or languages (Cauce et al., 1998; Chang et al., 1999). A more recent study (Alexander, 2000) has shown that "comparing is one of the most basic concepts of conscious human activities where we necessarily and constantly compare in order to make choices and judge in relation to others and to our own past" (p. 26). However, there is a still a debate over whether the construct under analysis maintains the same meaning and relevance in the cultures of both the original meaning and the meaning into which it is being translated (Chang et al., 1999; Flaherty et al., 1988).

Duranti (1997) has suggested that transcribing spoken words into text is more than just writing; it is a process or technique for the "fixing on paper of fleeting events" (p. 27) (colloquialisms, utterances, gestures) for the purpose of analysis and synthesis (see also Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Halai, 2007). However, this process might be very challenging as the original meaning of translation is to "obtain . . . conceptual equivalence without concern for lexical comparability" (Whyte & Braun, 1968, p. 121). The process of obtaining "comparability of interpretations or meanings in qualitative research is often influenced by researchers' knowledge and understanding of intimate language and culture" (Frey, 1970, cited in Birbili, 2000, p. 2).

In contrast to translation, the term *transliteration* in this paper is defined as a process of replacing or complementing the words or meanings of one language with meanings of another as sometimes the exact equivalence or exact meaning might not exist. The important aspect of transliteration is an unavoidable loss of meaning that occurs in everyday language, which helps to set the context in which cross-cultural translation can be better understood. Nida and Taber (1969) raised a concern that the issue of untranslatability often occurs when exact equivalence of meanings rather than comparative equivalence is required. A study by Nida and Taber (1969) showed that "if one is to insist that translation must involve no loss of information whatsoever, then obviously not only translating but all communication is impossible" (p. 13).

Therefore, transliteration is often required. Such an interpretation process will often be demonstrated by the use of italics in-text, giving the closest meaning either in brackets or as footnotes with some explanations.

Problems with translation and transliteration

Research is a process of inquiry involving people exploring and making sense of human action and experience (Reason & Rowan, 1981). Qualitative research is different from quantitative research in that it seeks to represent the diverse perspectives of participants and the richness of people's experiences, through a variety of approaches and methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Flick, 1998). In addition, qualitative research supports a "research paradigm in which the subject is also co-researcher, being actively and openly involved," bringing their own worldviews, paradigms, or set of beliefs (Reason & Rowan, 1981, p. 20).

As Khan and Manderson (1992) noted, maintaining accuracy when representing people's views and perspectives when using qualitative approaches is important but challenging, particularly when the research project is conducted in one language and then analyzed and synthesized in another. Therefore, the interpretation or understanding of meaning is fundamental in qualitative analysis as it often deals with the concept of "culture in making meaningful action" (Alasuutari, 1992, p. 2). Jootun, McGhee, and Marland (2009) therefore have suggested that researchers in such meaning-making process need to engage with meanings and discourses to come up with accurate and valid translations.

The process of translation and transliteration can become very time consuming and resource intensive, especially if a large quantity of data are collected and analyzed (Halai, 2007). A study conducted by Emmel (1998) suggests that the only way to ensure accuracy in the translation process is to use different researchers to check recording tapes and transcripts. For example, someone other than the researcher might be given the task of translating and transcribing, whereas the researcher is given the task of editing the transcripts with reference to the original recording tapes or the field notes. Sometimes ideas, concepts, and feelings might not always translate exactly from one language to another. It is even possible that in some cases there is apparent contradiction between valuing meaning, on the one hand, and a desire to obtain conceptual equivalence, on the other, which might present a real challenge to the novice. In such cases the whole research team might wish to discuss a particular section of the tapes and transcripts to arrive at the closest meaning (Emmel, 1998). It is important, therefore, that when translating, the research team be aware of and understand the linguistic or social context within which utterances are made (Greene & Coulson, 1995).

Similarly, the complicated process of translation of data involves testing for cultural equivalence and congruent value, and the careful use of colloquialisms (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; White & Elander, 1992). Even if teams are working in the same language, respective disciplines might have their own vocabularies, with terms that have specific meanings (Green & Thorogood, 2004). The case study, for example, means something different for clinicians and social researchers; therefore, research consensus is important.

The principal drawback of translation is that it is often intensive and time consuming, as the basic rule is to transcribe and translate everything as recorded on the tape. Shortcuts such as the omission of words, the use of abbreviations, or the exclusion of what is regarded as unimportant information can sometimes distort the information and hinder later analysis of the data. Coffey

and Atkinson (1996) suggested that "parsing text into clauses of spoken language into written text should be regarded as the first stage of interpretation" (p. 33). Research teams, therefore, need to have an agreement about transcribing rules, for example, how punctuation is used in transcripts.

Translation and transliteration: Strategy

Although there is a lack of consistency in terms of the process of translation and transliteration, the purpose of translation is to achieve equivalence of meanings between two different languages. Brislin's (1970) model of translation, for example, is considered to be the best method for cross-cultural research (Jones, Lee, Phillips, Zhang, & Jaceldo, 2001). This model suggests recruiting at least two bilingual people who translate the qualitative research texts, that is, field notes or interview transcripts from the source language (non-English) into the target language (English). This process is often called forward-translation (McDermott & Palchanes, 1994). Another bilingual person, according to Brislin (1970, 1980), who is also involved in the translation process will back-translate the documents from the target language to their source language, and finally both versions will be compared to check accuracy and equivalence. Any discrepancies that have occurred during the process are then negotiated between the two bilingual translators (Brislin, 1970).

Several authors (Beaton, Bombardier, Guillemin, & Ferraz, 2002; United States Census Bureau, 2001; Weeks, Swerissen, & Belfrage, 2007) have suggested some common stages involved in the process of translation:

1. determination of the relevance or context,
2. forward-translation of the research instruments (i.e. topic guides),
3. backward-translation,
4. examination of the translated meaning in both source and target languages, and then finally
5. revisiting the whole process to get similar interpretations.

Flaherty et al. (1998) also suggested a four-point scale approach that can be used when translating to ensure relevance in content: semantic (similarity of meaning), technical (method of data collection is comparable), criterion (translated terms are consistent with the norms of each culture), and conceptual equivalence (also called cultural equivalence, having the same meaning and relevance in two different cultures) (see also Beck, Bernal, & Froman, 2003; Wang, Lee, & Fetzer, 2006).

Recently Halai (2007) proposed yet another strategy for translation/ transliteration: The researcher should check whether the source words have any equivalent in standard English words; if that is the case, they should adopt English words or phrases in translating the selected interviews, using quotes when the source words or phrases either do not have a direct equivalent or are difficult to translate or interpret.
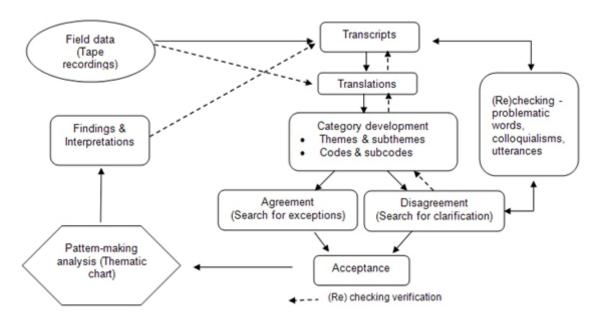
In the light of these processes and approaches for translation and transliteration, and also the experience and insights of the authors, two key strategies for translation and transliteration in qualitative research might be suggested (Table 1). First, interviews conducted in an original source language should be transcribed word for word (verbatim), including pauses, emotional expressions, and annotations in the same language (Crabtree & Miller 1999; Honig, 1997). Each transcript should then be translated into the target language (English). Lyons and Coyle (2007) have recommended that checking and rechecking transcripts against the translated interpretations

Strategy	Comment	Technique for Dealing with Translation-Related Problems
Literal translation: transcribing everything from tape recordings; i.e., word for word (verbatim), including pauses, emotional expressions, and annotations (Duranti, 1997; Honig, 1997)	Adds rigor to the research, but time consuming (Greer, 2003; Johnstone, 2002; Sacks, 1992), and such a practice might reduce the readability of text (Birbili, 2000)	One of the important techniques suggested for dealing with translation-related problems is to use multiple checks of tapes (recordings) and transcripts, back-translation, consultations, and collaboration with other people (Jakobson, 1971)
		Involve independent bilingual translators to compare two versions of transcripts until discrepancies are omitted (Ercikan, 1998; Halai, 2007)
		Recruit a review panel or consult with other people—engage in discussions about the meaning of the word (Brislin, Lonner & Thorndike, 1973; Whyte & Braun, 1968)
		Qualitative methodologies: interview checklists, focus group topic guides, including the letters of invitation and consent forms need to be developed, pretested, or piloted in local (source) language (Ercikan, 1998; Hambleton, 1993; Warwick & Osherson, 1973)
		Use of multiple methods validates the research findings (triangulation) (Brislin et al., 1973; Mason, 2002; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003)
Transcribe only the key themes or few quotes putting in the context; such a process of translation is also called "piecemeal" or "elegant free translation" (Birbili, 2000)	This approach saves time but leads to possible mistakes, distortion of key messages, and greater risk of losing key information from sources as this approach involves the risk of misrepresentation of the contextual meaning (Rubin & Rubin, 1995)	

Table 1. Translation strategy analysis

during analysis and synthesis adds more credibility to research findings. Second, only the key themes or issues that emerge in the process of translation are transcribed (Birbili, 2000). It has been argued that this approach saves time and entails less transcribing (Emmel & Malby, 2001).

As Brislin (1970, 1980) suggested, a good practice for translation is to employ at least two competent bilingual translators who might be familiar with the research, one to translate forward and another to translate back to the original language without having seen the original text. However, many authors (Broadfoot & Osborn, 1993; Ercikan, 1998; Lewin, 1990; Phillips, 1960) have warned that translation is a daunting process that is time consuming and expensive, and this might be beyond the capabilities of many novices and student researchers. Strauss and Corbin (1998), therefore, suggested that a minimal transcript should ideally be retranslated into the original language unless a problem has emerged in the process of translating with the sample transcripts. The World Health Organization (WHO, 1997) further recommended that in a research study with sufficient resources, a review panel comprising bilingual people, experts in the field of

Figure 1. Iterative process of translation

study, and members of the population being studied should be used to refine the translations as well as assess equivalence and congruence. This iterative process of translation and transliteration has been illustrated in Figure 1.

Conclusion

In this paper we have highlighted the increasing need for non-English-speaking researchers to translate findings from their research project into English, and the different translation and transliteration-related decisions that researchers engaging in this approach need to take. Before focusing on issues related to English and non-English translation, we acknowledge the possibility that all interpretations in research and the research process embrace an element of cross-cultural translation. Although this paper has highlighted some key issues that arise for researchers when conducting translation and transliteration, and suggested strategies that might assist researchers in their research process, there could still be a debate regarding to what extent the same meaning and relevance can exist in two different cultures, especially in the context of qualitative social research. For novice researchers in particular, translation of qualitative research data is a challenge. However, with careful consideration, the process of translation and transliteration can widen the academic audience for a piece of research without jeopardizing its validity.

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