

Comparing Backtranslation and a Team Approach to Translation: an English-Polish Experiment

CSDI 2013 – Stockholm University
March 21, 2013

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Reporting on Experiment in Progress

Motivation for Experiment

Back translation is a translation assessment method that is still in use in survey translation despite concerns about its usefulness

Earlier research (Schoua-Glusberg 1996) comparing it with committee approach showed empirically that the concerns were well placed

No empirical research has been published to show how it actually performs when compared with other approaches

Experiment Design

1. The instrument is being translated from English into Polish independently by a committee of three Polish translators.
2. A reconciliation meeting will be held on April 14 with the three translators and the translation coordinator.
3. The credentials of the three translators are being independently examined. The version produced by the translator with the strongest credentials will be given to an English-dominant Polish-English translator to translate back into English.

Experiment Design (cont.)

4. The backtranslator will not know the assignment is a backtranslation.
5. The backtranslated English version will be compared to the original English instrument.
6. For items that differ in meaning in the two English versions, the Polish version will be checked.
7. For items identical in meaning in the two English versions, the committee version will be consulted, to see if the backtranslated Polish had been accepted at the reconciliation meeting with no changes or only minor ones.

Experiment Design (cont.)

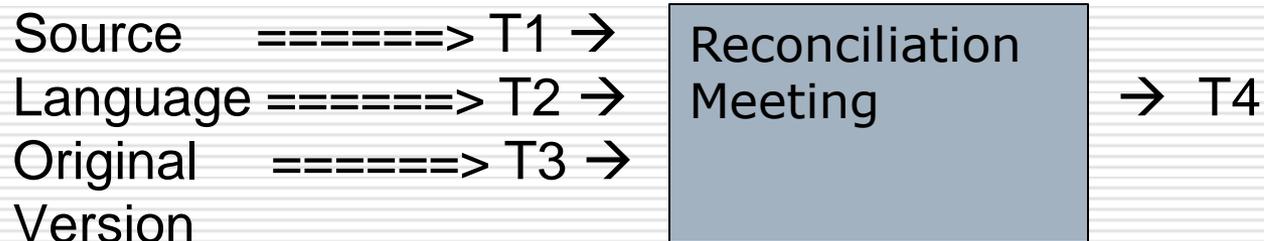
8. Items requiring further investigation will be identified.
9. A focus group will be conducted to run those items by a group of recent Polish immigrants, functionally monolingual speakers of Polish.
10. The focus group discussion will be used to identify style discrepancies with no difference in meaning, back-translation problems, and translator problems (including committee choices possibly due to translators' bilingualism.)

Comparing two approaches

Back-translation



Committee Approach



Comparison of Original and Back-Translated English

Summary of 1996 Findings:

- For 18 items, the original English (OE) and backtranslated English (BTE) were virtually identical, and the committee had already agreed to use the Russian version that was given to the backtranslator (RVB).
- For 17 items, the BTE version showed a problem that had already been discovered and fixed during the committee reconciliation meeting.
- For 9 items, the OE and BTE were virtually identical, but the committee had agreed that an alternative version, more „Russian-sounding“, or more „idiomatic“ would be used. **USE OF BACKTRANSLATION ALONE WOULD NOT HAVE LED TO THAT BETTER VERSION.**

Comparison (cont.)

- For 11 items, the BTE differs from the OE in a way that suggests a possible problem/error in the OE version, not identified in the committee reconciliation meeting. These items will require additional investigation, to assess whether the possible problems are real.
 - Example: (OE) I felt that time would make a difference -- the only thing was to wait.
 - (BTE) I thought that with time something would change, and that I only needed to wait.

Comparison (cont.)

- For 5 items, the BTE version was in error. The RVB had been discussed and approved by the committee. WITH BACKTRANSLATION ALONE, THE RESEARCHER WOULD NOT HAVE KNOWN RIGHT AWAY WHETHER THE RUSSIAN VERSION OR THE BACKTRANSLATION WAS WRONG.
 - Example: (OE) I talked to someone to find out more about the situation.
 - (RVB) I talked to someone to learn/find out more about this situation.
 - (BTE) I spoke to someone in order to better understand this situation.

Comparison (cont.)

- For 3 items, the BTE version was judged equivalent in meaning to the OE, yet the RVB had a slightly different nuance not reflected in the backtranslation. THE RVB MAY HAVE BEEN THE BEST POSSIBLE WAY TO STATE THE ITEM IN RUSSIAN, BUT THE BACKTRANSLATION FAILED TO ALERT THE RESEARCHER TO DOUBLECHECK THE RVB.
 - Example: (OE) I turned to work or another activity to take my mind off things.
 - (BTE) I delved into my work or another activity, so that I wouldn't think about it.
 - (RVB) I delved into my work or another activity, in order to forget.

Comparison (cont.)

- For 3 items, the BTE version was awkward

Example A (RVB had been judged problematic by committee)

- OE: I waited to see what would happen before doing anything. / BTE: I chose a position of waiting, to see what would happen next before undertaking anything.

Example B (RVB had been chosen by committee)

- OE: I apologized or did something to make up.
- BTE: I apologized or made a step toward reconciliation.

It was not readily apparent whether this indicated a problem in the RVB, or was simply a literal translation of a Russian idiom. The discussions of the committee had already shed light on this, and 1 item had been found to be adequately translated, while 2 others had been abandoned for better alternatives.