

What is Lost in Translation?

John Kennedy

Editor-in-Chief

Since the start of AJPOR, I have read every article and many times over the years I wondered what is lost (or perhaps gained) in translating the research into English. If you have a few minutes, please let me know what you think about it.

When I first started reading AJPOR articles that had quotes from research participants, I wondered how closely the translation matched the words and the substance of what was said in the original language. Were the quotes around the English translation implying that they were exact words spoken by the participants? Would a second or third translator provide a translation that more accurately interprets what was said in the original language? Can an English translation ever capture what the research participants said if they did not speak in English?

In some AJPOR articles, survey questions that were asked in the original language are translated into English. Based on substantial research and my personal experiences, translating survey questions from one language to another is very challenging. Are we misleading readers when we provide translations without some acknowledgement of the challenges of translating from the original language to English?

For the past year or so, I have been wondering if AJPOR articles are diminished when translated from their original language. That is, are we losing some science, some knowledge, or some understanding of the social phenomena when the article is transformed into English? In addition, Sarah (our managing editor) and I usually edit the articles and we may improve the readability but does our editing reduce the quality of the research? Certainly, the English translation makes the articles more accessible to a wider group of researchers but at what cost, if any?

I don't have the answers to these questions. AJPOR readers likely don't have all the answers, either.

However, please send me your thoughts about these issues. I don't think we can change much but we can make others more aware of what is lost and gained through translations to English. Please send your thoughts to me – kennedyj@indiana.edu. I will summarize your thoughts in a later issue of AJPOR.

Biographical Note

John Kennedy directed the Indiana University Center for Survey Research for 24 years. He also directed the University of Hartford Institute of Social Research for two years and was employed at the US Census Bureau for four years. He earned a PhD in sociology from the Pennsylvania State University. He has been involved in the development of a number of professional journals and was the founding editor of *Survey Practice*, an e-journal published by the American Association for Public Opinion Research. He has also been actively involved in professional research ethics including chairing Indiana University Social Behavioral IRB for 12 years and he served on two committees that revised the American Sociological Associations Code of Ethics. He teaches a graduate course in Survey Design.

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