

THE SPANISH TRANSLATION OF THE REDESIGNED
CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY - LESSONS LEARNED

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The intent of this paper is to share lessons learned in the course of developing the Spanish version of the redesigned Current Population Survey questionnaire. These lessons draw on a cultural analysis of: differences in goals between the members of a translation team; characteristic patterns of interaction between various Hispanic ethnic groups; culturally-patterned perceptions and evaluations of language use across Hispanic ethnic groups.

The Spanish translation of the CPS questionnaire was a joint effort of the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) and the Bureau of the Census. (SLIDE ONE See next page) It involved a multi-stage translation process which called for: translation of the English questionnaire into Spanish; back-translation of the Spanish questionnaire into English by a team of Hispanics representing the major Hispanic ethnic groups; reconciliation of disparities arising from back-translation; evaluation of the resulting questionnaire by

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focus groups of bilingual CPS interviewers; cognitive research on the questionnaire with respondents in the field.

While this plan was sensitive to possible ethnic group differences in language, it did not take account of characteristic ways in which different Hispanic ethnic groups interact nor Hispanic ethnic group differences in value systems regarding Spanish language use.

(In this paper, "value" is being used in the sociological sense of a "conception of the desirable and the undesirable.")

Although survey planners would be expected to learn about the professional training and experience of a translator, we do not usually inquire about the translator's view of the intended goal of the translation process. Thus, we assumed that the member of the translation project team who would actually do the initial translation into Spanish, a Cuban who had translated other government survey

questionnaires, shared our goal of producing a questionnaire that would be understood by the widest possible range of

Spanish-speaking Hispanic respondents. Belatedly, we learned that the goal of our translator was to produce a questionnaire written in fine literary prose. (We believe the latter goal of literary excellence was reinforced by the use of the back-translation approach.)

The difficulty caused by differences in beliefs about

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the desired goals of the translation effort was compounded by differences in ethnic group background of the translator, Hispanic CPS interviewers, and CPS respondents. While non-Hispanics tend to assume the existence of a somewhat monolithic Hispanic ethnic group, this view ignores the characteristic patterns of inter-ethnic group interaction, and evaluation of language patterns across Hispanic ethnic groups. Cubans and, to a lesser extent, Puerto Ricans, tend to see themselves as guardians of the Spanish language in the New World. Mexicans, at the other extreme, have a genius for incorporating English loan words into their language.

Thus, when the Spanish CPS was evaluated in a teleconference call linking bilingual Hispanic CSP interviewers from different regions of the United States, it soon became apparent that interviewers on the East coast, most of whom were Puerto Rican or Cuban, believed that their views of language use were the "correct" ones that should be adopted. Interviewers from the southwest and California, most of whom were of Mexican background, tended to defer to the Puerto Rican and Cuban interviewers.

Approximately 65% of the Hispanic respondents in CPS are of Mexican origin, and less than 50% of Mexican origin persons over 25 years of age have a high school diploma.

Allowing the views of the East Coast Cuban and Puerto Ricans to predominate over those of the West Coast Mexicans led to

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a questionnaire that was not adequately sensitive to language patterns of the majority of CPS respondents. Subsequent field-testing of the questionnaire with Mexican-origin populations in California revealed that respondents there had difficulty in understanding the questions, both because of the very formal language used in the questions, as well as their lack of familiarity with some of the vocabulary used.

The problem caused by differing assumptions about the goal of translation and, to a lesser extent, ethnic differences in language usage, can be illustrated in the following example. Our translator and the back-translation group had decided that the word "inquilino" was the best Spanish word for "boarder." (This is an important term for the CPS because previous ethnographic research had revealed that some of the Hispanic undercount in CPS may be attributable to respondents not knowing that they are supposed to include boarders as members of their households.

When cognitive research on the questionnaire was carried out with Mexican-origin populations in California, none of the respondents reported having boarders. During cognitive debriefing, several respondents said that they did indeed have boarders, whom they call "renteros." None of the Mexican origin respondents were familiar with the term "inquilino."

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When it was suggested that we add the term "rentero" to the household roster flashcard which is given to respondents during the CPS interview, the translator protested. "Rentero" was not "good" Spanish. Good was defined as something one would not be embarrassed to show to a well-educated Spanish speaker. Other members of the back-translation group, Hispanic economists from Central America, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, supported the translator. This was a United States government form, they said, and one would not want to use a level of language that would reflect badly on the government.

(I should add that although we arranged for a Mexican-origin translator to produce a backtranslation of the original Spanish translation back into English, there was no regular Mexican-origin member on the BLS Hispanic translation team. Mexican input into the work of the translation team came from a California-based,

Mexican-origin sociolinguist who conducted the cognitive field interviews. In retrospect, we realize that we should have arranged for a regular Mexican-origin participant in the ongoing work of the translation team.)

There are no "right" answers to some of the problems we encountered in the course of developing the Spanish version of the redesigned Current Population Survey.. However, to understand the problems caused by differences in beliefs

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about the proper goal of translating a survey questionnaire into another language, as well as problems caused by the attitudes of some Hispanic groups towards other Hispanic groups' language patterns, in *cultural* rather than *personal* terms, should contribute to more objective and rational resolution of these problems.