

Interviewing with Translators

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I am writing my dissertation, a qualitative interview study, on the effects of war on teachers in Matagalpa in Nicaragua. I don't speak sufficient Spanish, and have had to hire translators.

I found several techniques helpful.

- 1) Cadenced translation. After a question is asked, the investigator stops the translator every three or four sentences and asks for a translation. This serves several purposes. The investigator can insert probes or change the direction of the discussion. This also gives the investigator an understanding of the entire interview with immediacy, avoiding waiting for a later post-interview translation.
- 2) All translators, in my experience, have tendencies to paraphrase. It is important to stress to them to translate as much of the detail of the conversation as possible, including grammatical errors.
- 3) Translators should become a part of the research team, and be given an understanding of the basic methodology of the research being done and the research questions being asked. They may notice a cultural aberration in the speech which implies a nonliteral meaning. They should be coached to stop the interview and discuss these nuances with the investigator, so that the investigator can decide whether to address the issue, note the nuances, or insert probes.
- 4) In making transcripts, I found it necessary to do some retranslations because of the nuances missed in the first translations, inadequate translation, or a tendency of the original translator to paraphrase. I had the translators translate the interview into English onto audiotape, using two tape recorders (one for the original interview). I encouraged them to describe any cultural nuances they felt I might not understand, and always to identify themselves by name into the tape before offering an opinion, as the tape became very confusing otherwise.
- 5) I had all relevant documents translated before travelling to the site, and left copies of both English and Spanish documents with the participants. This included an informed consent release, a project information sheet, a personal data form, and a photographic release.
- 6) Translator bias. In my study most native translators were aligned either with the Sandinista movement, or with what might be termed the right-wing anti-Sandinista movement. Their biases were important to me and I encouraged them to discuss them with me and to inform me if they detected political bias in other translators (some of them retranslated tapes of interviews). In this way I was able to become acclimated to the tendencies of each translator. I found that the translators rarely tried to manipulate the translation because of political differences.

- 7) Translator proficiency. I have found that the poor translations have carried the themes almost as well as the better translations, and that even heavily paraphrased translations adequately carried the themes. The better translations are far easier to transcribe and discuss. However, I appeared with a native Matagalpan Nicaraguan translator and Spanish transcript when my research was presented to a qualitative research committee on several occasions. The translator was asked for opinions about the themes, opinions about our interpretations, and for retranslations of specific words under scrutiny. Portions of the transcript actually quoted in my dissertation will be rechecked by this translator from the original tapes.

I have found that this type of work takes about three times the time untranslated work takes to transcribe.

PS My dissertation with about 50 pages of translated interviews was accepted by the University of Tennessee Knoxville and I was able to graduate this semester. The title of the dissertation was "Walking in our Disadvantages: The Perceptions of Selected Nicaraguan Teachers about the Effect of War on Their Professional Roles". My defense was attended by a native Nicaraguan translator, as were many research sessions, so that questions of nuance of language or cultural usage could be referred to her.