Interviewing Through Interpreters

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The following is a short overview of some practical and theoretical issues that can be encountered by a researcher wishing to plan and conduct a study using qualitative interviews in a foreign language through interpreters. It is primarily based on my experiences preparing for and conducting semi-structured qualitative research interviews with workers and foremen in the sugar industry and agriculture in Northeast Thailand in connection with my Ph.D.-research project "Meaning of Work, Leadership, Work Motivation and Job Satisfaction in two Occupational Groups in Thailand".

As a flexible research method, qualitative research interviewing should not be restricted to the mother language of a researcher. It is possible to conduct qualitative interviews in languages that the researcher has no command over through qualified interpreters. Doing so puts some specific demands on the researcher, who must prepare for this kind of research in certain ways. I will here discuss my experiences of conducting interviews through interpreters and try to give an outline of how I would go about it in the light of experience. The literature on this subject in general psychology is scarce, to say the least. In other social science fields, mainly anthropological research, a tradition exists for using interpreters in fieldwork in foreign settings.

Selecting an interpreter

Ideally, an interpreter should have the qualifications required of a competent interviewer (see Kvale, 1996: 148-149). To demand this in practice is not realistic in most cases. To which extent this is possible depends on the background of the interpreter and the amount of training he or she undergoes in collaboration with the researcher.

A researcher working in a foreign culture should realize that an interpreter could have more functions than purely to translate what is being said during an interview. The interpreter is also an informant in an ethnographic sense, which can be of great help to the researcher. He or she is, as a member of a foreign culture and society, in a special position to explain things that are relevant to the researcher and the research project. This information can be invaluable in order to interpret the interviews correctly and to clarify things that otherwise could be misleading, especially in cultures that are highly dissimilar from Western industrialized cultures.

Pareek and Rao (1980:165) point out that "Unless the interviewer is well acquainted with the various topics of the interview, he is not likely to be effective." Kvale (1996:148) says of the interviewer qualifications: "He has an extensive knowledge of the interview theme, can conduct an informed conversation about the topic; being familiar with its main aspects the interviewer will know what issues are important to pursue, without attempting to shine with his or her extensive knowledge." This equally holds true for an interpreter, that is to say, if a researcher is lucky enough to find and persuade a person with these qualifications to work with him or her. It is his responsibility to train the interpreter so that he or she will be able to do the job in a satisfactory way.

The interpreter engages in a special kind of conversation with the person being interviewed, and may lose face and credibility in the eyes of the interviewee if he or she appears ignorant on the topics being discussed. The researcher must make sure that the interpreter is not likely to make this kind of pitfall. The interpreter who worked with me in Thailand had, for example, earlier in his life been both a worker and a foreman in agriculture, so he did not have any difficulties discussing topics related to the research questions about leadership, motivation and job satisfaction with workers and foremen in Thailand.

The interpreter should preferably be an inborn native of the concerned culture, and thus speak the language fluently. The researcher must realize that in many countries, several languages or dialects may be spoken. It is therefore best if the interpreter comes from that part of the country in which the research takes place, as the use of a different dialect may be disturbing to the interviewee; even if he understands it, it is not his or her everyday language. Pareek and Rao (1980:166) emphasize the cultural familiarity necessary in order to conduct interviews in a foreign language: Cultural norms should be respected and channels of communication may not be open if that is not the case.

The interpreter must necessarily be a fluent speaker of English or another language he or she has in common with the researcher. In the case of my own research, the interpreter was a teacher of English at the local high school.

The social status of the interpreter in the community may be an important factor in societies where there is a marked and open ranking of social class. In developing countries, knowledge of English is not as widespread as in the industrialized Western world. A second thing is that higher education is usually linked with the upper and economically well to do social classes. Interpreters from a higher social class may possibly adversely affect the free flowing of discourse by their very presence in the interview situation. People from a lower class may present quite different views on things to interpreters of their own social class. In short, the danger is that a tendency for social desirability may be enhanced. What can the researcher do about this? One method would be to choose an interpreter who was unknown in the local community and try to de-emphasize any class difference, for example by using clothes that were not markedly different from those used by local people. The same holds for the researcher up to a degree.

Training an interpreter

Training an interviewer involves two basic things: The practical aspects of interviewing and how to prepare for this kind of research process.

First, the reader should notice that I speak of an interpreter in the singular. I argue that in a study based on qualitative research interviews it will generally be impractical for reasons of the time it may take to train an interpreter thoroughly to use more than one interpreter in each language or dialect. The cooperation and mutual understanding of researcher and interpreter is something that takes time to develop. The task of the interpreter is not only translating what is being said during an interview; the interpreter is active in the interview situation and a successful outcome of interviewing is dependent on how the interpreter is selected an trained. The interviewer is him- or herself the research instrument" (Kvale 1996:147) and the interpreter is therefore also a part of the research instrument in the active interview situation.

Brislin et al. (1973) recommended that interviewers in a foreign culture should be trained in such a way as to be able to react to foreseeable problems during the interviewing. This recommendation also applies to an interpreter and after some pilot interviews both researcher and interpreter will have a general idea of the problems likely to be encountered during interviewing.

It is necessary to take some time to train the interpreter by conducting pilot interviews. The interpreter must understand basic issues about the nature of qualitative interviewing and how the researcher wants to conduct them. Making things clear during in-depth discussions between researcher and interpreter takes some time, and both parts have acquired sufficient experience can they start the interviewing.

If the interviews are conducted in order to test hypotheses or theories, it is a question how much the researcher should tell the interpreter about it beforehand. The reason is that such knowledge may unconsciously and unintentionally bias the interpretation and the questions the interpreter asks. In the case of my own research, there was a clear hypothetico - theoretical background to the interviews but I did not find it necessary to go into details about this matter with the interpreter.

Pareek and Rao (1980:167-8) suggest training and selection along these lines:

1. Understanding the subculture of the respondents.
2. Understanding the dialect of the respondents.
3. Understanding the phenomena to be studied.
4. Establishing report.
5. Asking questions.
6. Sensitivity to response biases.
7. Communicating neutrality and avoiding biases.
8. Sensitivity to cultural effects and differences in behavior, and to phenomena that are likely to be distorted in cross-cultural comparisons.
9. Flexibility in interviewing, so that the interviewer can change, within permissible limits, the order, structure, etc. of the questions, to get authentic answers."

The interview guide and the level of structure

The interview guide is one of the first things a researcher will show to an interpreter when approaching him or her in a foreign country. The interview guide should be designed considering what special demands are made to it in this type of research. It should be designed in such a way that the interpreter can easily use it, and that it is clear and concise. The interview guide is the main tool the interpreter relies on, and it is important to ensure that the interpreter will conduct the interviews in the way intended by the researcher.

Interviewing through an interpreter is less flexible than "direct" interviewing, and more time consuming. After a few pilot interviews, the value of a good and focused interview guide became very clear to me. As the interpreter can only "hold" a limited number of sentences ready for translation at a time, the interview guide should be made in such a way as *to allow for short and* *well-focused questions, preferably questions that follow naturally and logically from each other*. The researcher must also be prepared to pose new questions, to probe deeper into things if they are unclear, and to verify that he or she has understood things correctly, but in this process the interview guide is the red thread running through the whole interview. The interpreter relies very much on the interview guide and must be trained in order to use it correctly.

Qualitative interviewing can be done at different levels of structure, and the interview guide reflects, or is the key, to how structured the interviews will be. My experience is that interviewing in a relatively structured way is more likely to be successful when using an interpeter in this kind of research than the very open and unstructured type of interviewing. One must consider the time it takes to translate everything that is said, and it can be tiring for the interviewee to wait while things are being translated. The researcher must consider that it is doubly important that the interviews will be as methodologically sound as possible, as it may not be possible for him or her to re- enter the field in order to make new interviews later.

The contact with the interviewee

An important part of a qualitative research interview is the contact between interviewer and interviewee and the non-verbal communication that takes place during an interview. Using an interpreter limits the non-verbal contact between researcher and the person being interviewed.

Further, there may be cultural differences in the mode of non verbal communication that are not comprehensible to the researcher, even after a prolonged stay in a foreign culture. And as he or she does not speak the native language, a change of tone or emotional expression of speech will escape his or her notice. Similarly, it may be difficult to interpret facial expression correctly.

Despite this, the researcher can do several things in order to establish some contact with the interviewee. It may be helpful to the researcher to learn how to say a few phrases in the foreign language. In my own case, I customarily greeted the interviewees in their own language.

In between interviews, the researcher and interpreter should discuss how things are going, give feedback and evaluate the quality of the work. Doing so is important for both parts for obvious reasons.

During the interviews, the researcher should try to maintain contact with the interviewee, such as occasional eye contact, nodding and smiling etc. in order to make it clear that he has understood what has been translated. This will ideally build trust between the researcher and the interviewee.

Before I started working on the interviews with an interpreter, I was worried that the persons interviewed would be stressed or felt some kind of social pressure to express things in a biased way, for example, with regard to social desirability. This was connected to the subject being researched; interactions between workers and foremen in the workplace, a matter that could well be sensitive to some people, who would maybe be tempted to want things to appear in a socially positive or favorable way. This did not turn out to be a problem. Although the interview situation was doubtless something both workers and foremen had never experienced before (with a tape recorder running and a foreign researcher present) the interviews mostly ran smoothly. As the interview persons realized that they were just asked to describe situations and experiences from their daily workplace, the ones who appeared a little stressed ad the beginning relaxed and talked freely about their experiences after a few moments.

Limitations and advantages

There are some obvious limitations in interview work of this kind, but they can be amended. The first thing is time; to train and conduct interviews through an interpreter may be a time consuming process. There is less flexibility and spontaneity than in direct interviewing. With training, the interpreter can become quite skilled at his or her work. Second, there is the disadvantage of interpreting the non-verbal communication mentioned before and the fact that different languages have different concepts that may not be possible to translate directly. As Munroe & Munroe (1986: 120) point out, there is a great difference between translation of "equivalent meaning" and precise translation. It is the job of the interpreter to translate, but it may be impossible to do so in a straightforward way in the case of some terms which have no correspondent word in English. A good interpreter is aware when there is no equivalent meaning in English for a word and should at once comment on this when it occurs during an interview. This is a part of the training process that the interpreter undergoes. I give an example of such an occurrence here.

In Thai, there are numerous words and concepts commonly used that have no equivalent single-term meaning in English. For example, the term 'nam djai' is common in everyday Thai speech. Literally it means "water flowing from the heart" and stands for a combination of pity, understanding, general good will, humanness and generosity: a person having 'nam djai' is considered to be of an exceptionally good and benevolent disposition. There are several other Thai words that refer to the heart and in all cases a direct translation is difficult. In Thailand, it is an ancient custom to place a jar with water outside homes for passers-by to drink from. This is both practical and signifies the traditional hospitality of the Thai people. One metaphorical meaning of 'nam djai' is giving a thirsty person a drink of water; helping in any way that is needed. In cases such as these, the interpreter must explain the meaning in detail to the researcher, for example with a reference to real life situations and by using metaphors, and the best that can be hoped to come out of this is some form of equivalent meaning. From the perspective of transcription, the researcher must explain concepts like 'nam djai' in depth in a glossary of terms, in footnotes or by other similar methods. Last but not least, the researcher should in my opinion test his understanding of possibly ambiguous terms in discussions with indigenous English-speaking people who have knowledge of the topics. The meaning can then be compared to the translation of the interpreter.

A different method that I have used with some success is to explain to the interpreter that I have a problem with some term like 'nam djai'. I then ask the interpreter to independently conduct interviews and discuss the meaning of this term with others and restrict the interviews to this topic. A group interview with a small group is a good idea in this case as the people can then enter in a general discourse on the meaning of the term. The researcher should be present as it is explained to the group that he needs more information about a certain term or concept, but he does not otherwise participate in the process. Everything that is said during the session is recorded on tape. Usually, only a short time is needed for a small group to elaborate the meaning of the concept the researcher wishes to make clear. The tape is than handed over to a secretary who types it out in the original language. The researcher then has a verbatim version of what was said and can get it translated into English. This text can be shown to several people who speak the original language in case the researcher wants to check the validity and reliability of the translation.

From the perspective of the interviewee, it is obvious that the researcher finds what they have to say interesting and worth getting, as he or she goes through the trouble of travelling far to ask them about things. I could sense, in most cases, that the interviewees were sympathetic and wanted to do their best in order to help the researcher, and this was also the impression of the interpreter. The goodwill toward the researcher can definitely be of advantage.

Rogers (1997) remarks that interpreter's tendency to paraphrasing is marked. Even so, he concludes, "...even heavily paraphrased translations adequately carried the themes". Heavy paraphrasing should be avoided, in my opinion, as it obviously limits the informative quality of the interviews. If interpreters tend to standardize their translations of responses to interview questions the researcher should step in and explain that this is hardly acceptable. One part of training an interpreter is therefore to avoid tendencies to paraphrasing.

Validity and equivalence of meaning

A basic issue of communicative validity is that the researcher has correctly understood and interpreted the meaning of what the interviewee says (Kvale 1989:85). This can be done during the interviews with the help of the interpreter. It is the responsibility of both researcher and interpreter to ensure that an understanding has been reached and to check if things have been interpreted correctly. How can the researcher evaluate the quality of the translation of the interpreter? I decided that this could best be done by taking the tapes to a secretary who had a good command of English, and had parts of the interviews independently translated by her during a break between interview sessions. Doing so, I could check the quality of the original translation. It will soon become apparent if the quality is satisfactory or not. I strongly recommend this method. Another way, although expensive, would be to have a third person independently translate and transcribe all the interviews and compare the results with the translation of the interpreter. This should not be necessary if care has been taken to choose a good interpreter and to train him or her sufficiently for the work.

The question of validity of translations is related to the general problem of equivalence of meaning. Sechrest, Fay and Zaidi (1972) discuss this issue at some length and distinguish between five different categories of meaning equivalence, some of which have been mentioned above. *Vocabulary equivalence* may be obtained by using translators who use the same kind of language as the research participants. Translators from 'higher' or different social class may use a different kind of language that does not carry the original meaning of what people say during an interview. One should therefore choose translators who use the same vocabulary as the research participants. *Idiomatic equivalence* may be difficult or impossible to achieve. "'A manifestation of the peculiar' is the closest possible translation of the Greek word. In the realm of speech this may be applied to a whole language as particular to a people, to a dialect as peculiar to a district, to a technical vocabulary as peculiar to a profession...'an idiom' is any form of expression that has established itself as the particular way preferred...over other forms" (Fowler, 1970: 261). Sechrest et al. recommend that translators try their best to find equivalent idiomatic expressions in the two languages. *Grammatical-syntactical equivalence* refers to differences in meaning that may arise because of different grammatical structures of languages. A general, simplified rule here is that shorter sentences may translate more easily than longer ones. In Thai for example, verbs do not have past or future tenses and the personal pronouns are the same for both sexes. This is not a problem unless one takes isolated words or bits of sentences out of context. *Experiential equivalence* refers to the possibility that people in different cultures have different experiences and perceptions of reality. In order to achieve this kind of equivalence, translators should employ words and terms that refer to things that are certain to be familiar to the research participants. Sechrest et al. use as an example the word 'florist': in some parts of the world there are no flower shops and the term is therefore unknown. *Conceptual equivalence* has been referred to above in the case of 'nam djai' leadership style. There is a twofold problem here; namely, that a dictionary translation of a term may seem straightforward but the meaning of the concept is in fact different across cultures. The second thing is the possibility that no equivalent concept exists.

Last, but not least, Sechrest et al. draw attention to what they call the *paradox of equivalence*: If, in cross-cultural research one achieves perfect equivalence between two languages, then one has less probability of finding cultural differences. This is obvious from a relativist position of indigenous psychologies where perfect psychological conceptual equivalence of meaning across cultures is unlikely to exist. Translations can never be perfectly equivalent, but a researcher may approach the ideal goal of the several kinds of equivalence by using in-depth explanations in an explorative research design.

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