

Two Issues in Translating the SEQ

In English, at least, the SEQ draws on the connotative meaning of simple words, following the logic of the semantic differential (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957). The English language SEQ went through several iterations to identify adjective pairs that yielded clean orthogonal dimensions within each section (Depth vs. Smoothness and Positivity vs. Arousal). This required that each pair be balanced with respect to the dimension it is *not* measuring. As an illustration, earlier versions of the session portion of SEQ included the pair *safe-dangerous* (dropped in form 5), which loaded on the Smoothness dimension for clients. For therapists, however, *safe-dangerous* loaded on both Depth dimension as well as the Smoothness dimension, such that *dangerous* was deep and *safe* was shallow (Stiles & Snow, 1984). Perhaps therapists (though not clients) considered dangerous explorations as profound. Literal translations of the words in item pairs may yield different connotations, unbalancing pairs in this way. In such cases, translators may be able to find synonyms that restore the balance.

As a somewhat opposite problem, translators of a psychological instrument may be tempted to make the psychological connotations of words more explicit. For example, in English, the pair slow-fast denote simple movement. In the first draft of the German version, the SEQ-D (Arousal dimension), the translator did not suggest *langsam-schnell*, which would be the literal translation, but instead picked a psychological meaning. Armin Hartman wrote in a note:

We did not translate "slow-fast" as "langsam-schnell" which would be the right words for movement "eg. fast-slow car", we picked the metaphorical meaning like "inactive, lazy, lethargic" by translating it with "träge" (for example you are "träge" after a big meal, when the heat of the summer makes you take a siesta ...e.g. lions lying around the bones of a antelope in the African midday heat). Do you think "fast-slow" is a better represented by "measurable speed" or by "subjective willingness and ability to move"?

My response was:

The metaphorical sense is the one you identify, e.g., measurable speed for fast-slow, rather than willingness to move. In English, these words are the simple ones applied to cars and snails. However, I presume that respondents make some sort of metaphorical transformation in applying them to feelings or sessions. Perhaps this is not as easy to do in German? The goal is to assess the degree of arousal or activity, but of course in a metaphorical, psychological sense. The crucial thing is probably not so much the literal translation, however, as getting a pair that taps arousal independently of evaluation.

I'm reminded of the English translations of Freud's use of *Ich* and *Es* as *Ego* and *Id*. Presumably these Latin words made explicit the scholarly respect and perhaps the sense depth and mystery that the translator felt. But they lost the simple directness and

accessibility of the original. In trying to make context-specific connotations explicit, a translator can reduce the power of readers making the metaphorical connections for themselves.

Osgood, C. E., Suci, G. J., & Tannenbaum, P. H. (1957). *The measurement of meaning*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Another reference on similar issues of translating psychological instruments:

Caro, I., & Stiles, W. B. (1997). *Vamos a traducir los MRV* (let's translate the VRM): Linguistic and cultural inferences drawn from translating a verbal coding system from English into Spanish. *Psychiatry*, 60, 233-247.