5th European Working Conditions Survey: translation process for the questionnaire
The translation challenge

For every cross-cultural survey, translation is a challenge: even a carefully designed questionnaire does not guarantee good-quality survey questions in all the participating countries. It is important that the questions depict the intended concepts accurately but it is equally important that the respondents are familiar with the question’s wording in their native language.

Harkness et al (2010, p. 117) describe the goals of translation: ‘a successful survey translation is expected to do all of the following: keep the content of the questions semantically similar; within the bounds of the target language, keep the question format similar; retain measurement properties, including the range of response options offered; and maintain the same stimulus’. The authors state that best practices in survey questionnaire translation have been developing over the years, from back-translation to team-based translation and pretesting of the translated questionnaires. Furthermore, documenting the steps in the translation process is considered very important, both for ensuring the quality of the translation as well as for ongoing improvement (Harkness, 2007, pp. 88–89).

In the fifth European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS), the same questions were asked in all the participating countries. This means that the English (master) survey questionnaire needed to be translated into the so-called ‘target’ languages (Harkness et al, 2010) of the countries where the survey is carried out – both the national languages and the key minority languages. However, this means that any differences between language versions of the master questionnaire can affect the comparability of the data; hence, the translations needed to be systematically carried out and reviewed to ensure accuracy and consistency.

In all, 32 languages were used in the interviews, more than in any previous wave (Table 1). Of these 32 languages, nine were used in more than one country, being adapted to each country’s cultural context where necessary. For instance, the German-language questionnaire was adapted for use in Austria and Luxembourg.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey country</th>
<th>Languages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>German</td>
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<td>Albania</td>
<td>Albanian</td>
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<td>Belgium</td>
<td>French, Dutch</td>
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<td>Croatia</td>
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<td>Czech Republic</td>
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<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Danish</td>
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<td>Estonia</td>
<td>Estonian, Russian</td>
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Step 1: Reviewing trend questions

Four waves of the EWCS had already been carried out at the time that the questionnaire was being prepared, with many of the survey’s questions – the so-called ‘trend’ questions – dating as far back as 1991. In order to ensure the consistency of trend data for such questions, it was necessary to make a distinction between these trend questions and new questions.

For the fifth EWCS, it was decided to check the translations of trend questions against the master questionnaire, in order to ensure that these translations were correct. This decision was taken
following the detection of some (albeit very few) errors in the questionnaire used in the fourth wave of the survey.\textsuperscript{1}

The national agencies of Gallup Europe in each country undertook this checking, managed by Gallup Europe itself. Experts proficient in English as well as the target language carried out the initial checks. Translation issues were identified as minor or major.

- Minor issues would typically be technical differences or nominal differences in translation, where functional equivalence was plausible.
- Major issues were defined as a significant discrepancy in the meaning of the translated question and the English question.

Minor issues were not addressed, in order to ensure complete consistency with the wordings in previous waves of the survey. For major issues, the national experts proposed corrections to Gallup Europe, who submitted the changes to Eurofound for approval.

The Eurofound EWCS team and Eurofound staff, being multinational in nature, was – in many cases – able to decide whether to accept these changes based on the team’s own knowledge of the languages concerned in many cases. However, lacking a knowledge of all the survey languages, in most cases national experts (via Gallup Europe) explained the meaning of the alteration of the trend question in English to the Eurofound team; in such cases, the team could only recommend adopting the change (or not) on the basis of the qualitative explanation given, and leave the decision to the target-language translators. The suggested changes concerned both the survey questions and other elements in the questionnaire, such as response categories and instructions (the survey questionnaire items).

**Step 2: Translating the English master questionnaire**

Gallup Europe and the national agencies translated the new survey questions. In order to develop a valid and reliable measurement instrument, one that is internationally comparable, the following steps were taken in translating the questionnaires.

1. For each target language, two native speakers (proficient in English) each performed an independent translation of the master questionnaire.

2. A third translator then combined the two versions into one.

3. A fourth translator (not familiar with the material) then translated the questionnaire back into English (so-called ‘back-translation’).

4. The results of the back-translation were reviewed centrally.

5. Finally, Gallup Europe approved all final target-language translations.

\textsuperscript{1} These findings arose from a qualitative post test carried out after the fourth wave of the survey. The post test sought to detect any cross-national differences in how questions were comprehended and answered, in order to better understand the survey findings and to assess the technical functioning of the questionnaire. It included qualitative interviews in five countries – Austria, the Czech Republic, Finland, Portugal and the United Kingdom – and dealt with a limited range of EWCS questions (focusing on the topic of development at work, and employability).
For the modified trend questions (when a question that had previously been asked in the survey was modified for the fifth EWCS questionnaire) the process was simplified to four stages.

1. One translator modified the previously existing question according to the English master.
2. The question was back-translated into English.
3. The translation was checked centrally.
4. Finally, Gallup Europe approved the translation.

(If a problem was found in any of the trend questions, the translator would propose a change. This proposed amended question was then back-translated to English; the change was reviewed and – if appropriate – Eurofound and Gallup Europe would approve it.)

In those countries where a target-language questionnaire already existed (as in the case of the German-language questionnaire) but needed to be adapted to a different national context (that of Austria or Luxembourg, for instance) two research professionals reviewed the questions independently and either accepted the questions or else proposed adaptations. A third person reviewed the suggestions and finalised the adapted target-language questionnaire.

**Step 3: Validating the translations**

After Gallup Europe had arrived at the final target-language versions of the questionnaire, correspondents from Eurofound’s European Working Conditions Observatory (EWCO) validated these translations for each language used in the EU27 and Norway, Eurofound managing this particular process. These correspondents – experts in working conditions at national level – were responsible for checking the questionnaire in their native language (and also in most of the minority languages in their countries). The process of validation proceeded as indicated below.

1. The task was presented to the experts in a meeting and written instructions were given before they began work.
2. The experts were first asked to compare the target-language questionnaire with the English master and make note of any possible translation errors. It was highlighted to them that their objective was to focus solely on the wording of the items in the questionnaire and to identify only translation problems.
3. After making the comparison, the experts were asked to conduct between three and five survey interviews, using the target-language questionnaire, with people who are working. The purpose of this exercise was to ensure that the language had been properly understood and that the questions read naturally, the focus being to ensure that the translations were correct and fluent. The experts were advised to select respondents from different age groups and occupations, interview both men and women, and note the length of the interview.
4. Having compared the questionnaires in the target language and in English and having conducted the survey interviews, the experts were now equipped to make informed suggestions where they had found issues in the translation of the master questionnaire into their native language. It was stressed to the experts that different treatments were required for trend items and for new items.
   - Changes in the wording of trend items were only to be proposed in the case of mistakes – where the translation was wrong or where the translated question referred to a concept
other than that described by the English master question. In these instances, the expert was required explain their reason for proposing a change.

- For new survey questions, the expert was allowed to suggest better alternative translations, but was required to explain why they were proposing an alternative.

5. The EWCO experts carefully reviewed the questionnaires in the target languages and where necessary made suggestions for improvements. These mostly concerned the newly translated questions, but further errors were still spotted in trend items. (As described earlier, the national agencies had already checked the trend items at the beginning of the translation process.)

(There are no EWCO experts in Albania, Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Turkey. Hence, in these countries, Gallup Europe organised the same translation validation exercise, in consultation with Eurofound where necessary. The task was carried out by professionals in the field of surveys and social sciences in the countries.)

**Step 4: Reviewing validated translations**

The validated translations then underwent a further review process. Gallup Europe, in cooperation with both the national agencies and Eurofound, reviewed the suggestions made by the experts. In practice, this meant that Gallup Europe compiled the most important suggestions in Microsoft Excel sheets (one worksheet per language) and asked for Eurofound’s guidance on whether a change should be accepted.

- For those languages where Eurofound has expertise in-house, Eurofound staff members reviewed the suggested changes and approved or rejected them.

- For other languages, Eurofound gave its opinion on whether the arguments for making a change (given in English by the experts) were valid. When necessary, Eurofound asked Gallup Europe to go back to its national agencies.

**Documenting the translation process**

The translators from the national agencies and the EWCO experts all worked in a web-based translation system, called WebTrans. They used this for all the steps in the translation process – reviewing the trend questions, translating new and modified questions, translating into new target languages, and validating the translations. WebTrans stores all the survey items centrally and includes comment fields for providing qualitative documentation on each step in the translation process – for instance, an explanation for why wording has been changed. This means that all translations, changes and suggestions – for each country and language – were systematically documented in one place, providing a history log of the full translation process for future reference and quality monitoring purposes.

**Bibliography**


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