

## FOCUS ON RESEARCH METHODS

# Translating cross-language qualitative data in health professions education research: Is there an iceberg below the waterline?

Marwa Schumann<sup>1,2</sup>  | Ashley Dennis<sup>3</sup>  | Jean-Michel Leduc<sup>4</sup> | Harm Peters<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Dieter Scheffner Center for Medical Education and Educational Research, Dean's Office for Study Affairs, Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin, Berlin, Germany

<sup>2</sup>Medical Education Department, Alexandria Faculty of Medicine, Alexandria University, Alexandria, Egypt

<sup>3</sup>Office of Medical Education, Billings Clinic, Billings, Montana, USA

<sup>4</sup>Centre de Recherche du Centre Intégré Universitaire de Santé et Services Sociaux du Nord-de-l'Île-de-Montréal, Montréal, Canada

### Correspondence

Marwa Schumann, Dieter Scheffner Center for Medical Education and Educational Research, Dean's Office for Study Affairs, Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin, Charitéplatz 1, Berlin 10117, Germany.  
Email: [marwa.schumann@charite.de](mailto:marwa.schumann@charite.de)

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### ABSTRACT

Health professions education research is an increasingly global community with culturally and linguistically diverse research teams who are challenged in how to communicate across cultures, contexts and languages. In today's diverse research landscape, language transcends its role as a mere means of communication and becomes a bridge that facilitates connections within research teams, between the team and its participants and between participants from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and the scientific community. English as the 'lingua franca' is often seen as the international language of science and 'a prerequisite for scientific exchange'. This creates a language bias within the body of health professions education literature and involves methodological challenges for conducting research in non-English speaking contexts.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The concept of cross-language research refers to studies in which translators or interpreters are used at any stage of the research process to reduce the cultural text gap. This is becoming increasingly important, as many studies are conducted in a source language that is different from the target language for dissemination and publication, which is English in most cases worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Although quantitative research paradigms view translation as a neutral and objective process, qualitative research recognises that language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a dynamic and influential force that shapes social realities and knowledge creation.<sup>2</sup>

Remarkably, only little attention is given to the translation of qualitative data, with limited consideration of the implications of language differences; this omission seems particularly peculiar given the tradition of qualitative research that inherently recognises the importance of reflexivity and contextual understanding.<sup>3,4</sup> This not only increases the challenges international researchers face in navigating the complexities of cross-language qualitative research but can also contribute to the marginalisation of non-English speaking participants, as their voices may be silenced and valuable insights are excluded from academic discourse when researchers, deterred by concerns about the high cost, the extra effort or the methodological rigour of translation, choose to avoid such studies altogether.

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As a nationally, linguistically and professionally diverse team of authors, from Egypt (MS), the United States (AD), Canada (JM-L) and Germany (HP)—native speakers of Arabic, English, French and German respectively, with proficiency in other languages—and with diverse professional backgrounds (medicine and psychology in addition to medical education) at different stages of our careers (from post-doc to professor), we have collaborated with each other and with scholars outside our team on qualitative, cross-language research projects. Through these collaborations, we have encountered complex translation challenges at different stages, from study design and data collection to data analysis, interpretation, dissemination and publication. In this commentary, we aim to share our experiences of collaborating in cross-language qualitative research projects, briefly outlining some of our reflective questions that arose at different stages of the process. We also explore the frameworks and strategies from the existing literature and relate these to other research teams who have been challenged by the complexities of translation and the difficulties they have encountered in bringing the voices of non-English speaking participants into the academic discourse.

We argue that undertaking translation work in qualitative research is not just a technical exercise but an essential means of ensuring the inclusion of diverse perspectives that might otherwise get lost. By combining these perspectives, we aim to make recommendations to move the health professions education community forward incorporating translation work into qualitative research in a methodologically robust way.

Given the central role of language in qualitative research and the fact that linguistic expressions are inherently embedded in historical, cultural, political and institutional frameworks, the translation of qualitative data can introduce distortions or, in more serious cases, lead to the loss of nuanced meanings.<sup>5</sup> The dynamics and multi-layered complexity inherent in language go beyond its practical function as a mere tool for conveying meaning. Because of these potential challenges to research integrity, from our experience in the research community, there has been a tendency to avoid and minimise translation work in qualitative research.<sup>6,7</sup> Furthermore, there is not established guidance for researchers in how to address the methodological challenges that arise in qualitative translation work. In our experience, researchers are left by themselves to make independent decisions about who translates, when to translate and how to translate, which introduced complexities and potential nuances that may not be perfectly captured across languages.<sup>5,8</sup> Although there are standards of rigour for the collection, analysis, interpretation and reporting of qualitative data, there are no such standards for its translation.<sup>5,9,10</sup> For example, the 32-item Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Studies (COREQ) checklist, which is widely used by scientific journals to ensure comprehensive and transparent reporting of qualitative research, does not address translation-related considerations. This is not only particularly challenging for novice researchers but also may limit the completeness of reporting in multilingual studies, potentially affecting the overall robustness and reliability of research findings.<sup>11</sup> Without guidance or standards, this may create quality issues, which has multiple implications for individual researchers but also the research community.

Over the past few years, we have been engaged with the complexities of translating cross-language qualitative research, reflecting on both the methodological and ethical considerations involved.<sup>8,12</sup> Abfalter et al.<sup>1</sup> summarises many of key translation challenges in qualitative research, framed by essential questions: why translate, when translate, what is translated, who translates, how it is translated, where translation occurs and by what means. Although this framework was not originally developed for health professions education research, it is highly applicable in this context, as it relates directly to the issues identified in the literature and to our own experience. We will systematically go through these challenges addressing our experiences with them and providing examples from the literature. We will then provide recommendations about how researchers might want to consider approaching them to enhance the quality and robustness of the translation practices in qualitative research.

To contribute to this discussion and to inform our work, we conducted a focused literature review on frameworks, strategies, challenges and lessons learned in translating cross-language qualitative research, although we did not aim for a systematic review. We searched academic sources, journal articles and online publications using PubMed and Google Scholar, selecting the keywords translation, cross-cultural translation, linguistic translation, qualitative research, qualitative study, qualitative data, experiences, challenges, reflections, insights, perspectives and used Boolean operators (AND, OR and NOT) to refine the search. Relevant articles were identified by reviewing titles, abstracts and keywords and then read in full for quality assessment. Inclusion criteria focused on translation strategies, experiences or challenges in qualitative research, particularly in health professions education. Articles on the translation of measurement instruments, such as questionnaires or scales, or on the translation of knowledge or research were excluded. We also reviewed the bibliographies of selected articles for additional resources.

The analysis carried out supports the paper's main idea of the 'iceberg phenomenon' observed in the literature on the translation of qualitative research. The visible 'tip of the iceberg' consists of papers that explicitly discuss the dilemmas and challenges of translation and offer strategies and recommendations. Below the waterline, however, lies a more substantial body of work—papers that address translation as part of qualitative research, without sufficiently elaborating on their translation processes or the challenges they face. These publications can often be identified by titles that include 'qualitative research' in conjunction with the name of a non-English speaking country. A detailed analysis reveals a continuum ranging from the complete avoidance of translation<sup>6,7</sup> or its implementation without explicit acknowledgement,<sup>13–15</sup> to a more engaged approach that offers only a cursory acknowledgement of translation, limited to brief statements—often consisting of only one or two sentences—about the translation decisions made.<sup>16,17</sup>

Omission of crucial details—such as the source language, the language used for data collection and transcription, the process of translation into English and whether a translator or the researcher conducted the interviews—often results from a focus on the outcome, i.e. presenting the data in a coherent and meaningful way, rather

than on the process, i.e. addressing language issues.<sup>5,18,19</sup> Although this emphasis on outcomes is understandable, it is essential for researchers to clearly articulate their decision-making processes, particularly in cross-language qualitative research. Given that qualitative research is often criticised for potential bias due to its subjective and interpretive nature, transparency in methodology becomes even more critical. By openly reporting and discussing translation decisions, researchers can greatly enhance the credibility and rigour of their studies by ensuring that the complexities of language and interpretation are properly addressed and not overlooked.

## 2 | WHY

Translating qualitative data is essential for a number of reasons, the most important of which is the strong recommendation in the literature to conduct interviews and focus groups in the participants' native language to ensure that the original meaning of words, phrases and concepts is preserved within their contextual nuances, thereby minimising the risk of misinterpretation.<sup>20,21</sup> However, some authors have adopted a foreign language approach, such as conducting interviews in English for Arabic-speaking participants<sup>6</sup> or allowing participants to choose to be interviewed in the language of their choice (e.g., English or Afrikaans).<sup>22</sup> This decision has been defended on several fronts, including the fluency of the participants in English, the prohibitive cost of professional translation and the inability to conduct a full discourse analysis of the translated data, which has been a common drawback of translation in most of the translated qualitative studies.<sup>6,23</sup>

Other reasons of translation include linguistic comfort (researchers and participants may feel more comfortable interpreting and sharing their data in their native language), value to the academic community (researchers then need to translate quotations so that the global academic community can benefit from the research) and to enhance academic careers (international publications are required for academic promotion in many countries).<sup>24</sup>

For international research teams that include members who do not speak the participants' native language, translation of the data collected is essential to bridge the communication gap between participants and some of the researchers on the team. This is particularly important in cross-language postgraduate research projects where the research team is made up of novice researchers (master's and PhD students) and their supervisors, who need to fully engage with and analyse the data in order to maintain the rigour of the research process and ensure an accurate representation of the data. In our experience, MS and JM-L were masters and doctoral students supervised by AD and HP at the University of Dundee and the Charité University of Medicine. As international students whose native language is not English, we conducted our master's and doctoral research projects at our home institutions, collecting data in Arabic and French, respectively.<sup>16,23,25,26</sup> Given that our supervisors AD and HP did not understand the languages of our participants and needed to support the data analysis and management process, we had to translate either a significant part of or our whole data set. Finally, a key driver for translation may be for publication purposes.

## 3 | WHEN

The timing of translation is particularly important when members of the research team do not all speak the same language or dialect and can take place before data collection, during data collection, during data preparation, during data analysis and during dissemination of results.<sup>1,10</sup> Whereas some recommend staying in the source language as long as possible, others suggest that translating the entire dataset prior to analysis increases the rigour of the research process, a perspective that matches our own experience of translating the entire dataset.<sup>27,28</sup> In a scoping review examining how researchers conduct qualitative health professions education research with Arabic-speaking participants and the timing of data translation, it was found that most of the translation process took place at an early stage, with raw data being translated, analysed and published in English.<sup>10</sup> Researchers based their decision depending on the composition of the research team and other contextual considerations. Whereas translation at an early stage can ensure homogeneity of concepts and language, potentially saving on translation costs, translation at a later stage can lead to higher quality results, as researchers can gain new insights by analysing the data in their native language. Nevertheless, this approach can be costly and time-consuming, highlighting the trade-offs involved in the translation process.<sup>24</sup>

## 4 | WHAT

An important question for cross-language research teams to consider is what is the most appropriate research design? Although most qualitative approaches can be adapted to cross-linguistic designs, phenomenological studies present particular difficulties because they require an in-depth and precise examination of how participants use language to express their experiences, which presents more methodological challenges than alternative approaches.<sup>21</sup> This is supported by empirical evidence from cross-language phenomenological research, for example, with non-English speaking Hispanic patients hospitalised in the USA,<sup>29</sup> where the researcher was unable to communicate directly with the participants in Spanish, necessitating the use of an interpreter.<sup>29</sup> In their limitations section, the authors explained that the interpretation process interrupted the natural flow of the interviews, potentially affecting the quality and richness of the data, which may have affected participants' ability to provide detailed, nuanced descriptions of their experiences. This was similar in other studies, e.g. Indonesian novice nursing students in the Bachelor of Nursing program<sup>30</sup> or South Asian students in the USA,<sup>31</sup> where the researchers' ability to obtain full and detailed descriptions of participants' experiences was limited by translation.

In contrast, ethnographic approaches are better suited to dealing with the complexities of translating qualitative data and capturing participants' experiences with fewer methodological problems associated with translation.<sup>32</sup> An example to support this claim is an ethnographic approach conducted over an 18-month period to explore the impact of culture on women's experiences of miscarriage in Qatar—prolonged involvement and persistent observation of participants by bilingual researchers was considered to reduce bias.<sup>33</sup>

## 5 | WHO

The decision as to who would carry out the translation is influenced by factors such as the composition of the research team, the availability of resources and institutional regulations. In our experience, and as postgraduate students at the time, professional transcription and translation services were not allowed, so we (MS and JM-L) had to undertake these tasks.

Research teams with at least one or more bilingual researcher(s) may choose to work without expensive professional translators if the bilingual researchers choose to be the ones responsible for conducting the study from start to finish. In addition to being proficient in the language of the participants, the bilingual researcher(s) will need to have high levels of socio-cultural competence and significant background knowledge of the country/study site, enabling them to switch between the source and target languages and build bridges with the participants.<sup>16,32</sup>

The insights drawn from the literature underline the fact that the use of professional translators in qualitative research endeavours is a double-edged sword. Although it increases the credibility and reliability of the data collected, the accuracy of translation and interpretation is influenced by the personal background, social context and worldview of the individual translator, whose role extends beyond language translation to what has been described as 'cultural brokerage'.<sup>34</sup> In this role, the translator not only conveys the linguistic meaning but also acts as a bridge between the different cultures, worldviews and 'lifeworlds' present in the interaction, interpreting other aspects relevant to the setting that are critical for accurate understanding.<sup>35</sup> This was demonstrated by a research experiment in which three bilingual translators were asked to independently translate a Cantonese interview about the ideal roles of men and women in Chinese culture.<sup>36</sup> Although all three versions of the translation captured the content of the participants' views, there were significant differences in how each translator interpreted the narratives to produce his or her own text.<sup>36</sup> To mitigate these problems, it is advisable to have reflexive translators/interpreters for data collection who have been thoroughly briefed on the research objectives and their specific role (which is different from that of a co-interviewer) and who should also have grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic and strategic skills.<sup>1,37</sup> It is also crucial to anticipate and be transparent about ethical dilemmas that may arise during the translation process, as translation decisions often involve complex cultural and contextual considerations that can pose significant ethical challenges, yet these challenges are rarely disclosed or explicitly framed as ethical issues.<sup>38</sup> As a result, these translation-related dilemmas are often absent from broader discussions of ethics in qualitative research, leaving an important gap in how such challenges are addressed and understood within the research community.

## 6 | HOW

The decision on how to translate includes the techniques to be used in the translation, whether back-translation is required and specific

linguistic features such as metaphors and idioms in the data or content to be translated.<sup>1</sup> Although this is a time-consuming and resource-intensive process, it is recommended to carry out several iterative rounds of translation.<sup>39</sup> Other methods to increase trustworthiness include respondent validation/member checking and/or a bilingual panel of experts to review the final target language version, and some authors recommend blind back-translation of the analysed data (not the collected data), but the latter is a controversial issue.<sup>39,40</sup>

Evidence from the literature shows that the challenges of translation encompass a spectrum of issues ranging from idiomatic expressions or culturally specific concepts that may have no equivalent in another language, to variations in grammatical and syntactical structures, to the absence of direct equivalents for individual words. In a study conducted with female managers working in the Saudi public sector, the main challenge was the cultural translation of the narratives from Arabic to English, especially because some of the quotations in the participants' narratives referred to the Qu'ran (the Islamic holy book).<sup>5</sup> An illustrative example was the translation of a quote from an interviewee who referred to the Qu'ran and cultural beliefs when asked to clarify her statement: 'It is difficult to deal with men'. In her response, she used the terms 'وَنَاصِرِينَ' (guardians) and 'تَضْف' (preference) to describe how men are perceived as guardians of women, reflecting deeply embedded gender dynamics in Arab societies. The researcher translated her statement as 'Dealing with men at work is very difficult because they believe that they are our [women's] protectors and that they are better than us [women]'. In order to effectively convey the intended meaning to an English-speaking audience, the researcher undertook a process of domestication, using cultural and religious resources to preserve the original context. In other cases, foreignisation is the right strategy to preserve the cultural distinctiveness of the source language while making it accessible to the target audience. For example, the translation of culturally specific terms such as 'wasta' presented particular challenges, as wasta refers to the use of personal influence or connections within social networks, rooted in the Arabic word 'wast', meaning 'to be in the middle'.<sup>41</sup> And because this concept, which reflects social hierarchy and communal values, has no direct equivalent in English, the authors decided to retain 'wasta' with a cultural explanation for English-speaking readers.<sup>42</sup>

An even greater challenge is the translation of certain sayings, proverbs or metaphors, which requires paraphrasing in terms of their historical and cultural context, e.g. the Arabic expression 'my life has fallen from the sky' used to describe the negative effects of diabetes on patients' lives,<sup>43</sup> or the Chinese idiom 'One who mixes with vermilion will turn red, one who touches pitch shall be defiled therewith' used to describe the influence of friends on the behaviour of HIV-positive drug users<sup>44</sup> cannot be translated literally into English because they would be perplexing to English-speaking readers.<sup>5,43</sup>

In an international team of authors from Brazil, Canada and the USA, the Canadian co-researcher found it difficult to understand some of the quotes from participants in the results section, mainly due to her limited familiarity with the Brazilian culture and health care system. In her review of the quotes translated from Portuguese to English, she noted that the term 'professional attitudes' needed

further clarification, as it was rather vague and she could not fully understand the cultural context.<sup>1</sup>

The grammatical structure of some languages can pose additional challenges; for example, Arabic has complete sentences without verbs, the words have a grammatical gender (e.g. the word *manager* in English has 2 translations in Arabic, depending on whether it means a male or female manager) and a dual form in addition to singular and plural.<sup>45</sup> A translation that sticks too closely to the syntactical and lexical features of the original language (word for word, comma for comma) will sound artificial to English-speaking readers, e.g. the literal translation from Portuguese 'I **said to** my husband that if I died **in childbirth**, it was **for him** to take care of my child' compared to the more authentic retranslation 'I **told** my husband that if I died **while giving birth**, he **would have** to take care of my child'.<sup>1</sup> Unlike English, Portuguese is marked by grammatical gender, specifically the reference to a person and self-descriptions (e.g. PT *Eu sou bonito* (masc.)/*eu sou bonita* (fem.)—EN *I am beautiful*). As qualitative research is concerned with personal experiences and attitudes, adaptation is necessary to keep it gender neutral.<sup>46</sup> Similar experiences were reported in the translation of qualitative data from Mandarin,<sup>44</sup> Dutch,<sup>47</sup> Indonesian,<sup>48</sup> Amharic,<sup>49</sup> French<sup>50</sup> and German.<sup>51</sup>

## 7 | WHERE

The question of where to translate concerns the socio-geographical location of the translator during the translation process, which can have three options: translation within the socio-geographical environment of the source language, translation within the socio-geographical environment of the target language and translation outside the socio-geographical environment of both the source and target languages.<sup>1</sup> Researchers need to recognise that choosing one of the three translation options will inevitably have its own set of advantages and disadvantages. Although translating within the socio-geographical environment of the source language preserves more contextual information and the original meaning of the respondents, the translations may not be well aligned with the scholarly discourse and the expectations of the target audience. However, the third option, translating outside the socio-geographical contexts of the source and target languages, can lead to translation problems because neither the social identities of the source nor the target languages are implicitly represented.<sup>1</sup> None of the papers we found provided information on where the translations were carried out. This highlights the challenges of assessing the impact of socio-geographical contexts on the translation process and its outcomes, and without this crucial information, it becomes difficult to assess the effectiveness and relevance of translations in relation to their source and target languages.

## 8 | BY WHAT MEANS

Translating qualitative data can take a lot of time, effort and money, which is why supplementary tools for text translation, such as IT applications, machine translation, computer-assisted translation tools,

online databases and artificial intelligence, are used. Although AI is becoming increasingly important in qualitative research projects and has primarily been used as an analysis tool, it has not yet been used as a translation tool in qualitative research.<sup>52,53</sup> Translation studies have shown that although AI can certainly facilitate the translation processes in terms of efficiency, maintaining accuracy and cultural sensitivity in translations requires a balance between the benefits of AI and the critical role of human translators.<sup>54</sup> Errors in AI-assisted translation often arise from ambiguous source texts, leading to different interpretations by AI and human translators. Although AI systems are proficient in technical aspects such as spelling, they struggle with contextual nuances that human translators are better at navigating, but both AI and human translators struggle with culturally sensitive terms, highlighting the need for improved translation methodologies.<sup>54</sup> Another critical factor to consider is the role of contextual knowledge, which is essential for both human and AI translators. Discussions in the literature have highlighted the importance of cultural understanding and language skills, which can vary from language to language, such as distinguishing between colloquialisms or regional dialects (e.g. translating 'crow' vs. 'French'). In addition, subject matter expertise and contextual knowledge are equally critical to accurate translation, whether performed by human translators or AI systems.

## 9 | CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it is important to find the right balance between methodological rigour and practical feasibility in qualitative research projects with multilingual teams, and this balance needs to be maintained in order to ensure that the research is relevant to the needs of the target group. Because there is no neutral position from which to translate, researchers need to remain reflexive at all stages of the research project, for example, by keeping a researcher's diary in which they reflect on their translation-related decisions made before, during or after a study. Being reflexive has a direct impact on the trustworthiness of the translated findings and, consequently, their applicability to participant populations and the overall rigour of their studies.<sup>37,43</sup> Reflexivity about consistent and appropriate translation-related decisions, as well as potential limitations that the translation work may have created in the process, should also be shared with the readers.<sup>21,43</sup>

As multilingual research and writing team, we recognise the epistemological role of translation in the conduct of research and how failure to address language issues and methodological challenges can threaten the credibility, transferability, reliability and confirmability of cross-language qualitative research. With this commentary, we seek to contribute to the discourse on the translation in health professions education and research to achieve better representation of non-English speaking groups. We believe that the health professions education community (both scholars and journal editors/reviewers) needs to develop rigorous processes and best practices for qualitative cross-language research. By avoiding or failing to translate qualitative research, we are silencing important perspectives in our health professions education community. We need to shift the conversation to



how we give voice to participants across multiple languages, cultures and contexts in the most methodologically robust way as possible.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**Marwa Schumann:** Conceptualization; writing—original draft. **Ashley Dennis:** Supervision; writing—review and editing. **Jean-Michel Leduc:** Writing—review and editing; supervision. **Harm Peters:** Writing—review and editing; supervision.

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## ORCID

Marwa Schumann  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7498-7245>

Ashley Dennis  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2744-423X>

Harm Peters  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1441-7512>

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