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Power and translation in social policy research

The need for cross-national and comparative research in social policy has been growing fast in recent years. Globalisation links countries more closely to world systems and at one level the world and its policy problems have come to appear more homogeneous. As Castells says 'for the first time in history the whole planet is organised round a largely common set of economic rules.' (Castells, 2000: 369). States and policymakers face problems that are apparently similar across nations and are encouraged by supranational organisations such as the European Union, OECD, World Bank or IMF to apply standard solutions (Deacon, 1997). Researchers are called on to provide data that allow comparison of policies across nations and that bolster beliefs that policy makers in one country can learn from the success or failure of policy making in another. 'Within a more integrated European environment, it is becoming increasingly important to allow access across national and linguistic boundaries so that decision-makers can be provided with a broader, comparative picture of society across the continent' (Matthews and Wilson, 2000). Such statements imply an approach to the translation of information that will eliminate as much cultural variation as possible in order to produce standardised and comparable data. It is also an approach that obscures the power relations inherent in the production, translation and use of information.

However to suggest that globalisation is a set of processes that simply homogenise nations would be one sided. The 'paradox' of globalisation applies in the field of translation as in most others. Historical or cultural differences may be ignored or taken for granted until they are highlighted by the import of concepts or policies that are acceptable in an international global context but begin to appear alien once they come into contact with local realities. At the same time as acting as a homogenising force, the attempt to translate information across nations or from international to national or local levels may make cultural and historical differences between countries more salient.

The issues of culture and power relations outlined above can be considered in terms of the different paradigms that frame the efforts of translators. The highly 'scientific' is seen as the standard for one paradigm and the highly contextual as another. In either case there are issues of power relationships but the 'scientific' paradigm is virtually certain to incorporate top down power relationships, while the contextual can, but often does not, take a bottom up approach. The roots of the 'scientific' paradigm lie in early beliefs about the language of the natural sciences which were, and still may be, deemed to be culture free (see quote from Matthew and Wilson below). Social scientists aimed to emulate natural science and develop technical languages that all practitioners in a discipline would use and that would become international modes of communication, recognised by all. Terms and concepts were to be precisely defined and meanings were meant to be value free and unambiguous. Economics and the more positivistic branches of demography have been able to develop this paradigm most successfully (even though some would dispute that demography was a social science (Caldwell, 1996). Many researchers and policy makers subscribe to this ideal of value free research, and they provide strong support for translators who work within a scientific paradigm. Translation becomes much less problematic if it can be assumed that each country has its own set of technical social science terms that are clearly defined and are either used internationally or are subject to internationally recognised forms of translation. If the actual data is in the form of numbers then, according to this paradigm, the only issue of one of definition. Numerical data can be seen as more or less culture free once they have been satisfactorily harmonised. For example every country in Europe collects statistics on part time working in ways that suit their own local administrative systems, but careful definition and annotation can harmonise them into cross national data sets with standardised categories, at least in theory (see below).

The translation of data becomes very much more obviously contestable once researchers step outside the scientific paradigm. Data of any type are produced by different actors: those who collect

the data; those who will read or use text or tables in the original country or language; those who will translate it; and users in other countries or international organisations. All are likely to bring different cultural influences to their understanding of the meaning of the data, and they are likely to operate within different systems of power relations. The raw material for social policy research is usually produced via administrative, social and political systems that embody power relations that are rooted in history, culture, and economic organisation, among other aspects of society. Data in the form of administrative records of one sort or another "are shaped by the political context in which they are produced and by the cultural and ideological assumptions that lie behind it. They are most obviously shaped by general cultural assumptions with specific manifestations in such ideas as 'individual responsibility' and 'the sanctity of life', and widely accepted sexist, patriarchal and racist values." (Scott, 1990: 60). These values may seem entirely 'normal' or 'natural' to those who produce the text, and those for whom the text is intended. On the other hand they may arouse strong feelings of hostility or disempowerment in others who are opposed ideologically to aspects of dominant culture, or who feel oppressed or threatened by a status quo that excludes them in some way. When such texts are translated, those who accept the dominant values may find nothing to contest. They can ignore the power relations embodied in the data because they are at home within them and can assume (possibly correctly) that meanings, which they attach to text embodying dominant values, are similar across cultures. Others, such as women or ethnic minorities, may find the translation even more unsatisfactory than home grown dominant discourses.

A related point for cross-national researchers is that different values systems and power relations can result in different data gaps. The policy agenda is controlled in ways that allow some problems to emerge and others to stay hidden. The same goes for data collected. For example there may be legal texts dealing with domestic violence in one country but none in another. On the statistical level, youth homelessness may exist as a category or it may not. Its absence should not be interpreted as indicating that there are no youths without homes. Larger numbers are involved in the massive under enumeration of women headed households in most of Latin America (Moser,) or the failure to count certain minority groups.

One strength of text, as opposed to numerical data, is that problems with words or concepts can be signalled in different ways. Words or concepts representing cultural differences can be left untranslated on the grounds that cultural differences are best signalled by leaving words in their original language and making no attempt at translation. This approach has the advantage of clearly indicating that a word, phrase or concept cannot easily be translated. It is flagged as problematic by italics or some other typographical indicator that a different language is being used. Readers can choose whether to inform themselves of the cultural background that makes this practice advisable, or they may not. However unless they go further they will not be aware of the power relations that produced the cultural difference being signalled. One alternative as in MIRE (date ? Jean Paul How do we reference your glossary) is to provide cultural information that not only highlights policy related historical differences across countries, but is specifically aimed at policy makers and so implicity takes a top down perspective.

Although the influence of culture, theory and power relations can be seen clearly in text (for those who wish to recognise them) the same influences are at work in quantitative data. Mukherjee and Wuyts (1998) for example address their readers in the following terms ….'data are always theory inspired. But this should not lead you to think that the substance of data is entirely reducible to theories and concepts or is purely subjective in nature……To say that national accounts data are theory inspired means that theory determines which data are deemed to be relevant and informs the way that these data are collected and structured into meaningful policy-relevant macro-aggregates such as GDP, national income, consumption, investments, savings , and so on' (Mukherjee and Wuyts, 1998: 248). Although they see the value of standardisation of theoretical frameworks across data sets and countries, they are aware that the attempt to eliminate local differences can lead to a

uniformity or comparability that may be highly misleading. They go on to say. 'This often leads researchers who work with secondary data and who are mostly consumers (rather than producers) of these data, to see them as hard facts because a lot of the variability and uncertainty within such data have been carefully removed…. Not uncommonly, therefore, these researchers (macro-economists, sociologists working with survey data, or demographers) tend to be more affirmative in their views of reality, and see their conclusions as being more objective than those of researchers involved in field work.' (Mukherjee and Wuyts, 1998: 248). Such uncritical approaches also imply a passive or even an active acceptance of the power relations that informed the collection of the data. Feminists, for example would see the failure to count women's unpaid work as part of national accounting data as a serious source of bias. Mainstream economists or policy makers are more likely to view the data as sound, and feminists as biased – at least until opinion in their countries moves in favour of feminist theories of reality. Translators can work with or against the values of those who produced the original data.

The location and contextualisation text or numbers within their own cultural or national backgrounds is greatly to be welcomed. Translation and comparison is less likely to be misleading or to result in the failure of policy transfer if differences can be signalled. On the other hand the problem of the contextualisation of power relations remains. The question becomes: whose history or culture is relevant to the data under consideration? It may be reasonable to assume a common understanding of power relations. For example statistical data that are used in a pan European context are virtually all collected by government or under government auspices (academics financed by government or quasi governmental bodies). They are likely to incorporate top down values and common European patriarchal and racist attitudes. However the impact of common values can still differ across religious or historical contexts. For example the definition of single parent families and the collection of data that is deemed to be policy relevant in most European countries (Finland has no tradition of differentiating between children with one or two parents) differs by country. Beliefs influencing the formulation of policy problems are relevant: Is single parenthood is seen as a problem for mothers (how many single parents are there?) or for children (how many children live in single parent households?). It might seem obvious to collect data on both aspects but this is not a pan European standard. (Corden, this vol).

Meta data

Whatever the problems of contextualising translated data, the reality is a massive upsurge in cross-national data sets. They have in the past been produced mainly by international organisations but in the future the data archives of individual countries will be accessible cross-nationally. The possibilities of comparison are almost limitless. Some will deny that such data can be used without intense annotation, but others will use it anyway. The question then becomes: What constitutes 'good enough' cross-national data? As noted above by Mukherjee and Wuyts, quantitative archives appear to present less challenges to translators than qualitative and they are also more likely to be used by policy makers who see them as 'scientific'. Since the data are already numerical there is no need to translate the vast bulk of it but researchers still need to access the data by name or definition. The response is to develop meta data which can describe existing data sets. For example the UK Data Archive has over a 20 years period developed the Humanities And Social Science Electronic Thesaurus (HASSET). Even within this monolingual thesaurus Miller has noted that there are areas where the terms used have become very culturally and institutionally biased (Miller, 2000). The thesaurus provides a 'controlled vocabulary' which is arranged in hierarchies so that for example a search for 'old age' will produce 'elderly' as a narrower term and 'ageing', 'geriatrics', 'social disadvantage', 'social problems' as related terms, while the whole search falls under the top level heading of 'age groups'. It is clear that the thesaurus embodies a negative view of old age and its meta data would be seen as ageist by any critical gerontologist.

A monoliguistic culturally biased thesaurus in one thing, but multilingual thesauri have to face much more severe problems. In the future there will be multi-lingual tools for user access to data in social science archives across Europe. Still more complex, this data will be integrated with data from non-social science domains. Users will be able 'to retrieve and communicate it in the language(s) of their choice, as a basis for further research, policy making and planning by individuals, companies and government organisations. . . . It will also allow data from social policy sets to be correlated with information from other domains, such as environmental (e.g. weather, pollution), geographic (e.g. GIS) and health (e.g. genetics)' (Matthews and Wilson, 2000). These are areas which may in future be part of social policy and access to more cross-cultural data could strengthen new developments in social policy formulation and research. At the same time, broadening the scope of the meta data required to access the archives will raise still more problems in terms of cultural difference and power relations. For example, anything that opposes local needs to the interests of global capitalism, as issues of pollution so often do, also involves careful consideration of power relations. The absence of data in sensitive areas, as noted above, also needs to be recognised as political.

The basic language of development for the Language Independent Metadata Browsing of European Resources (LIMBER) project in English. Given the way that UK social policy has diverged from that in the rest of Europe, this maybe a handicap as far as social policy researchers are concerned. There is likely to be more cultural similarity between the countries of continental Europe and a different core language might have been a better choice. The developers are aware of the problems even though they operate largely within the scientific paradigm. Matthews and Wilson (2000) state that a 'major problem in providing terms in other languages, is that the "equivalent term" in other languages may not provide an *exact match* (my emphasis); this is particularly a problem in social science (as opposed to the physical sciences) where the exact meaning of terms is culturally dependent. This problem may be further exacerbated when the thesauri are arranged in hierarchies. The broader or narrower terms appropriate in one culture may not be appropriate in another'. Ken Miller (2000) in a report on a different workshop notes that 'Translating from English to each language might lead to non-equivalence between the other languages. The need for backward and sideways translations was thought essential'.

As noted above the data itself will not require translation but the definition of fields and values will have to be translated in ways that make clear how the numerical data can be interpreted. For example part time and full time work are categories that overlap even within countries. The number of hours of work per week that determines the boundary between work classified as part time and work classified as full time is very different across countries. Simple totals of the two categories will be highly misleading if tabulated cross-nationally. On the other hand meta data that clarified definitions for each country would help greatly in allowing researchers to compare like with like, or to highlight sources of inaccuracy or bias.

Conclusions

Translation from one language to another can be considered on a continuum from the uncontested to the highly contested. However it can be argued that all data used in social policy research and practice represents the taken for granted assumptions of a certain set of beliefs and power relations and so social policy translation is always contestable. The production of numbers obscures but does not eliminate issues of culture and the relationships of power, but the processes involved are clearer in translating text.

We can therefore contrast text and numbers in terms of the overt problems they pose for translation and for cross national social policy research. Text composed of words, phrases, sentences or in particular forms such as legal documents, is easily linked to history and culture. If differences are noted, readers can position themselves in relation to the data, as supporters of the status quo or other dominant discourse, supporters of an alternative set of values or ideological positions, or take some other, even apparently neutral, stance. We may contrast text with the process of accessing quantitative survey data across national and linguistic boundaries. New developments involving the production of meta data that 'translate' national statistical categories into any European Community language and allow researchers to access data in their own languages may be seen as the ultimate case of the apparent obliteration of history, culture and differential power relations from the presentation of policy related data. Those who are developing this meta data are aware of the problems, even though they work within a highly scientific paradigm of translation where equivalence of terms is deemed possible, though problematic. There will be purposes and users for whom this data is 'good enough', but there will also be many cases where the concerns of the developers are ignored and data is assumed by users to be culture free.

Any translation may reinforce the limitations of the original data by ignoring cultural difference. It may also reinforce unequal power relations by its implicit acceptance of the position of those who created the data, or those who will be using them when translated. Ethical questions may arise here since so much of social policy already deals with deprived groups and as globalisation multiples the forces of social exclusion (Castells, 2000). Translations then become contested not on the grounds of cultural difference but because they represent manifestations of contested power relations.

The outcomes of globalisation are contradictory. On the one had there is much greater understanding of the problems of translation as concepts and policies are transferred and the short comings of simple translation become clearer. On the other had the thrust to make data bases available to supra national organisations and comparative researchers appears unstoppable. The outcome is likely to be growing harmony and comparability of both text and numerical information. This will be accompanied by a degree of obliteration of history and culture in the interest of producing standardised and more fully comparable data sets. The same process will encourage the choice and prioritisation of certain, mainly top down power relationships, but this too is likely to highlight the need for alternative data sets that manifest other values and other power relationships

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