What Happens When Grounded Theory Meets Translation? Reflecting Upon the Complexities of Researching in a Foreign Language

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Abstract

This case study describes the issues encountered during a research project carried out in the Hellenic health sector. The study was qualitative in nature and adopted a grounded theory approach. The main aim of the research was to explore emotional labor within the Greek nursing profession. However, what follows is a case study that outlines how we overcame issues that arose when working in two languages simultaneously. We discovered that translation issues in grounded theory studies can seriously derail research unless they are accounted for and managed. This case study provides insight into the challenges we faced and how we overcame them. It will help students engaged in similar research because what we did well can be replicated, and problematic areas can be prepared for in advance.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Recognize the challenges of combining grounded theory (GT) with translation
- Understand how to conduct a GT study in multiple languages
- Apply lessons learned from this case study in their own research

Project Overview and Context

This case study describes our experiences of using GT to study the Greek nursing profession. This was a qualitative study that was mainly built upon interviews. We interviewed nurses working in hospitals and in General Practices (doctors' surgeries) in Greek (in Greece) to explore their main concerns in regard to their work.

When conducting our research, it quickly became clear that language was an issue that affected our understanding of the data and our interaction with participants.

The data were in Greek, but the analysis was in English because this is the lingua franca of the academic world and would be the language of future publications. Therefore, we had to translate the data into English, and this led to methodological challenges, which form the basis of this case.

Research Design: GT

Although this case is mainly focused on how translation issues affected our GT study rather than GT itself, it is helpful to provide the reader with an outline of the methodology.

GT is a general, inductive, research method that was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), which seeks to discover the main concerns of participants (Douglas, 2005). The word “discover” is important, because it implies that the theory already exists in the data: The researcher’s job is to identify it (Locke, 2001). Thus, GT research does not have a theory to prove or disprove (Glaser, 1978). Instead, the theory emerges from the data (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Although there are many forms of GT, we chose to follow the original formulation—Glaserian GT.

Glaserian GT has four stages: coding, memoing, sorting, and writing (Glaser & Strauss, 1967):

- **Coding** refers to the process by which the “essence” of the data is gathered—Labels are assigned to the data to summarize its meaning. For instance, the quote “*my job is really hard and I am under lots of pressure*” might be coded as “*stress.*”
- The writing of **memos** throughout the process allows key ideas to be captured and helps to shape the development of the emerging theory.
- **Sorting** simply means the arranging of memos into the order that best tells the story.
- **Writing** refers to the process of putting the emerging theory into words.

In practice, these four stages are not linear and that the activities overlap (Pandit, 1996). What is vital to GT is **constant comparison** where the emerging theory is developed through continually comparing data with data, data with codes, codes with codes, and so on. This detailed line-by-line or incident-by incident constant comparative microanalysis leads to a dense, rich theory that “gives a feeling that nothing [has been] left out” (Glaser, 1978, p. 58).

Research Practicalities

It is important for students to consider potential translation issues prior to data collection and analysis to ensure that the meaning of the data is not lost during the process of translation (van Nes, Abma, Jonsson, & Deeg, 2010).

Before conducting interviews, we faced a dilemma. What would the interview language be: English or Greek? The literature argues that data must be gathered in the local language (e.g., Nübold et al., 2017), but nevertheless, English had advantages. First, it was intended that the research would be published for an English-speaking audience. Also, if the data had been collected in English from participants with limited knowledge of the language, they may have used the words that were important to them, and this might have revealed which issues were most serious (Xian, 2008).

However, we also considered several ethical counter-arguments. We sought to understand the factors that affected most strongly on participants’ lives, and to do this, we had to gain an appreciation of their lived experiences. This may have been affected if participants had to speak in a foreign language. Also, participants with weak English skills might have been uncomfortable, and this was something we wished to avoid at all costs. With the intention of allowing participants to be in control throughout (Saunders, Lewis, &

Thornhill, 2012), we asked them what they would prefer, and on each occasion, they preferred to speak in Greek. Thus, each interview was conducted in Greek.

Method in Action: The Use of Translation in the Case Study

Data Collection and Analysis

Participants were contacted several weeks prior to the interview to ensure they were willing to contribute, and neutral venues were found for the interviews where it was possible for them to speak freely; 26 interviews were conducted, and these were recorded onto a Dictaphone. These recordings were then transcribed in Greek into a series of Word documents, which then formed the basis of the analysis.

Throughout the study, the key analytical tools—coding and memoing—were undertaken in English, and the key tenet of GT—constant comparison—was also achieved in English. Periodically, memos were sorted to try to develop the emerging theory. As new ideas emerged during sorting, these were themselves recorded in memos (Glaser, 1978). These memos were arranged in the sequence which best allowed the theory to be described (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Sorting was therefore an iterative process, which gradually refined the theory.

Translation of Empirical Data

Having collected and transcribed the data, the issue then was its translation into English. There were three main questions: Who should translate? When should translation be undertaken? How should translation be undertaken? Clearly, translation must be performed by someone who is fluent in the language (Nurjannah, Mills, Park, & Usher, 2014). However, it is important that translators are involved in the research so that they can ensure that context is considered (Tarozzi, 2013). This also helps to ensure that participants' intended meanings are preserved—especially when contextually specific phrases are used (Nurjannah et al., 2014). For these reasons, in the present study, the researchers themselves translated the data.

The next issue was when the translation should be carried out. Should the translation be done after data transcription, should it be done during the analysis, or should it be done prior to writing up the research for publication? The only realistic option was to translate immediately after transcription and before the analysis began (Nurjannah et al., 2014) to support the process of coding and constant comparison, which were in English.

The final question was how should translation be undertaken? "Equivalence" is a key tenet of translation studies. Essentially, this seeks to ensure that the translated text is similar to the original text (Venuti, 2012). The problems can be illustrated by a simple example. The phrase "*σήμερη κάνει ζέστη*" means "*it's hot today*," but a more literal translation is "*today does heat*." Therefore, translation can say *almost* the same thing as the original (Derrida, 1998), and there is rarely a single "correct" translation (Tarozzi, 2013).

Even if the translation is "accurate," it does not necessarily convey the intended meaning and it does not take account of cultural or contextual differences (Su & Parham, 2002). Furthermore, equivalence may not always be achievable. For instance, the English expression "*it's raining cats and dogs*" cannot easily be understood by someone who does not share a common cultural background, even if they speak English well (Tarozzi, 2013).

Hence, the authors faced many problems. Early in the process, we wished to satisfy ourselves as to the "equivalence" of the translations made up to this point. It was possible that two people might assign different meanings to the same text. Three representative examples are provided below, where a selection of participants' statements have been translated into English by one of the authors and by another Greek speaker.

Example 1. Different translations from the same data source: Work volume

Participant's original statement	**Author's translation**	**Translation from another Greek speaker**
Ναι είμαι, αλλά δεν υπάρχει εργάσια, όσο είναι να κάνω. Τι να κάνω άλλο. Δεν μπορώ να κάνω το γιατρό. Εγώ πάω, κάνω ότι Βρίσκω. αυτό δεν μπορώ να αλλάξω κάτι.	Yes, I am, but there is no work, I do as much as I can. What else can I do? I can't be the doctor, I go to work, do what I find. I can't change anything	Yes, I am, but there are no jobs, I do few things. What else to do? I can't be the doctor, I do whatever job I find. This is the situation. I can't change it

Example 2. Different translations from the same data source: Staffing issues

Participant's original statement	**Author's translation**	**Translation from another Greek speaker**
Τι κενό να καλύψουν, όταν έχουν φύγει τόσοι σε σύνταξη, έχουν αλλάξει, τόσοι ρε παιδί μου. Εεε, ειδικότητα, δηλαδή κάποιοι νοσηλεύτες, μπήκαν στο διοικητικό ή φύγαν τελείος από το νοσοκομείο ρε παιδί μου	It is impossible to cover these gaps when so many people have retired or have changed specialization. Some nurses have entered administration or left the hospital completely	It is impossible to cover these gaps when many of them have retired. In specialisms, some of the nurses moved to administration or they left the hospital

Example 3. Different translations from the same data source: Need to feign ignorance

Participant's original statement	**Author's translation**	**Translation from another Greek speaker**
Σου λένε κάνε την πάπια	Pretend that you don't know	Pretend you are a fool

In each of these examples, the translations are similar but not identical. However, the essential *meaning* was the same (Im et al., 2016). This was crucial in this study because of the GT methodology, where understanding the meaning is much more important than accurately recording direct quotations (Glaser, 1998).

Translation of the Literature in the Case Study

We used two main sources of literature in this study. All theoretical literature was in English (and hence needed no translation), whereas context-related literature was in Greek, such as internal memoranda and newspaper articles (which needed to be translated). This is another reason why we opted for the early translation of the empirical data: All data (empirical and literature) were in the same language and this simplified the constant comparison process. This ensured that we remained true to the GT methodology.

Practical Lessons Learned

One of our biggest challenges in using translation was adapting it to the GT framework, and we had no prior literature to help us. However, Glaserian GT offers guidelines and a framework, rather than a prescriptive set of rules that must be followed. Using translation in this way took us out of our comfort zone, because neither of us had any training in translation or experience of using it in this way.

Combining GT and translation was not always straightforward. However, our view is that translation forces researchers to really get close to their data and make detailed efforts to understand its meaning. It therefore adds an extra layer of rigor to the constant comparison process and, if used correctly, strengthens the GT process rather than diminishing it.

From our experiences, we would suggest the following lessons that future students might wish to adopt:

- Gather data in the local language—This maintains the accuracy of the data and enhances ethical considerations.
- Before commencing data collection, researchers need to decide on three basic questions: Who should translate? When should translation occur? How should translation occur?
- Transcribe data as soon as practical after its collection—again in the local language. This provides the basis for the subsequent analysis.
- Write memos as soon as possible after data collection. This means that researchers' initial thoughts are captured as part of the process, and these can be compared with later thinking as ideas develop.
- Check the faithfulness of the translation early in the process by comparing the work of different translators. If the essential meaning is the same, differences in wording are relatively unimportant, because meaning is what is important in GT.

Conclusion

Our experience was that having different linguistic abilities within the research team considerably enhanced creativity as ideas were discussed. Moreover, using translation strengthens the GT process, because it forces researchers to get close to their data and gain a deep understanding of it. Translation is therefore an extra layer in the process because comparison happens twice: during the translation process when meaning is being sought, and after the data have been translated when themes are being discovered.

Therefore, rather than being an impediment to GT research and something to be avoided, it could be something that students may wish to embrace because it can provide a richness of data that cannot be obtained by "traditional" means.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. Outline the strengths and weaknesses of using translation in GT research.
2. What ethical issues might you encounter when conducting translation-based research?
3. What problems might you encounter if you are about to embark on a GT study that requires translation? How might you design your study to overcome these?
4. Are there any other methodologies that might need to adopt translation as part of the process? Would there be any differences in approach as a result?

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Web Resources

http://www.groundedtheoryonline.com/

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