

Phenomenological Study of Six Translated Material  
as Comprehended by Foreign-Born Applicants  
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## Abstract

For centuries, the United States has attracted immigrants from all continents, many of whom, on arrival, have brought with them not only different cultures and customs, but above all a language, semantically, and grammatically different from English. Today, one in five Americans speaks a different language from English at home. As a result, many government institutions and non-profit organizations have increased their efforts to translate documents into some of the more commonly used languages in the US. The Social Security Administration has created and maintains The Translation and Priority Workload Unit (TPWU), to guarantee quality translations of documents generated by SSA and foreign documents presented by applicants.

The purpose of this study is to determine the level of perceived accuracy of translated documents in three languages: Italian, Portuguese, and Russian. Research participants are native speakers of these languages, who do not have translator-level training. The *functional-pragmatic model* of translation evaluation will be used as the bases for the evaluative feedback. This model stresses the importance of using a “*cultural filter*” in translation. Using phenomenological research and thematic analysis, the researcher will give voice to immigrants in narrating their understanding of SSA documentation in their native language and gather suggestions on how the forms can be improved, as seen from the eyes of those directly engaged with these crucial materials.

## Introduction

### Factors that influence English-speaking abilities and comprehension

**Demographic factors** - The United States has attracted immigrants from all continents and different social and educational backgrounds. The last four decades have seen a major influx, mirrored in the racial and ethnic diversity of the current population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Between 1970 and 2013, the immigrant population tripled from 4.7% to 13.1% (U.S. Census Bureau/ACS, 2013). Today, immigrants and their U.S. born children constitute approximately 80 million individuals, or one quarter of the overall population (Zong & Batalova, 2015).

The diversity in backgrounds is also mirrored in the assortment of languages. While English is the main language spoken in the U.S., current data indicates that more people use at least one other language at home. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2015), at least 22% of all individuals living in the U.S. speak languages other than English at home. This number has increased two and a half times since 1980 and trends point to an upward change over the coming decades (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). This linguistic diversification in the U.S. has major implications on legislative, political, and financial decisions. English is the official language for all government related business, yet in several minority-majority states like California, Texas, and New Mexico, many official documents are available in one or more other languages. Even states with traditionally smaller minority communities such as Nebraska, North Dakota, and Minnesota, increased their efforts in translating documents in other languages because of increased immigrant populations, in particular in rural areas where large numbers of racially and ethnically diverse individuals pursue jobs in the farming and oil industries (Garcia, 2006). As a result of population migration, the demand to access translated official documents is increasing throughout the country. Some states are dedicating entire websites describing translation requirements. For example, the California Department of Education (CDE) created a website with resources about translation guidelines, parent communication, and requirements for translation of documentation (CDE, 2016).

The need for translated documents is increasing because of different levels of English proficiency among immigrants. There are a number of factors that influence English speaking ability, with demographic factors playing a strong determining role. Age is one of the most important variables that influence language fluency. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2013), more than 78% of children and adolescents between the ages of 5 and 19 report speaking English “very well,” regardless of their native language. On the other hand, older immigrants report more limited English-speaking abilities. Only 40% of respondents 60 years and older report speaking English “very well.” As a result, they are more likely to rely on others for translation of important written materials. Many individuals with limited English proficiency (ILEP) might choose to have a family member (including a child under the age of 18 years) translate an interaction with government officials. Yet, many agencies, including Social Security Administration (SSA), generally will not allow a child under the age of 18 to serve as a translator regardless of language proficiency due to the complexity of the issues in discussion (SSA, 2015).

Other demographic factors identified as important in English comprehension are level of education, poverty, and employment status. Individuals with limited English proficiency are more likely to have less than a high school diploma, be unemployed, and live below established poverty levels (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Recent studies shed light on the positive correlation between socio-economic status and language development. Children as young as 18-months old showed

disparities in language acquisition influenced by their caregivers' socio-economic status (SES; Fernald, Marchman, & Weisleder, 2012). The differences become more prominent during the schooling years. Mastering English is associated with upward mobility, as English in the U.S. is the language of education and technical information. The ability to use English properly increases the ability to advocate for personal rights guaranteed by the law (Wonderly & Nida, 1971). Besides age and SES, native tongue correlates with English proficiency. Surveys found that about 80% of individuals speaking German, French, or Tagalog at home report high English-speaking abilities compared to less than 50% of Vietnamese, Korean, and Chinese speakers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013).

### **Systemic factors that influence translations**

According to a feminist/ecological framework (Ballou, Matsumoto, & Wagner, 2002) human experience stems from interactions of systemic influences. Each person is a product of intertwined complex contexts. Interactions between translators and readers are influenced strongly by the dynamic of dimensions in which each belongs. Thus, this theoretical framework provides an opportunity to explore the quality of translated documents from a holistic point of view that takes into account both individual and group factors.

**The inner circle (Individual factors)** – Using the feminist/ecological framework, it becomes clear that individual characteristics such as personality, innate abilities, intersection of different identities such as gender, race/ethnicity, class, educational achievement, and linguistic abilities influence the formation of each translator and reader in unique ways. In particular, linguistic knowledge is seen as a system of symbols that “mediate between our comprehension and our experience” (Ballou et al., 2002, p. 122). In the current study, Maria, a 38-year-old Italian woman, stated “*I am guessing whoever translated this might not have worked formulating government documents because some of the words are too colloquial for an official publication.*” Similarly, Anushka, a 35-year-old Russian woman said, “*the word ‘non-citizen’ does not exist in Russian. Maybe in Lithuanian, I am not sure, but certainly not in Russian. It makes me wonder if this was translated by a non-Russian.*”

**Microsystem (Immediate environment)** – This consists of a number of elements outside the individual, but with whom said individual interacts regularly (Ballou, et al., 2002). Among the most influential factors of the microsystem are the family, either biological or non-biological, otherwise known as fictive kin (Henslin, 2011); friends, peers, religious, and other community organizations. Face-to-face interactions affect language development and enrichment. Hoof (2003) found that parents with higher socio-economic status used richer lexicon and communicated longer with their children. As such, richer vocabulary has a positive correlation with higher educational achievements and better career opportunities. There is a positive correlation between advanced linguistic abilities and academic achievement of offspring, where even grandchildren benefit from increased education and employment opportunities, partially due to the influence and knowledge of English of their grandparents (Sohr-Preston et al., 2012). Similarly, children’s lexicon can enrich parental knowledge. Juana, a 29-year-old Brazilian woman stated, “*the only way my mom would understand some of these words is if I explain them to her. They might be in Portuguese, but she has no idea what they mean.*”

**Exo-system (Social Institutions)** – A society addresses needs and demands of its members by creating and legitimizing institutions (Ballou, et al., 2002). According to the Center for Immigration Studies (2014), one in five people currently living in the U.S. and its territories speak another language at home. They are either foreign born or children of immigrants born on U.S. soil (Zong & Batalova, 2015). The level of English proficiency varies, but findings of the American Community Survey (2015) suggest that 41% of individuals who speak another language at home, report speaking English “less than very well.” Considering the importance of clear communication, the SSA, a government institution, responded to the needs of its beneficiaries with two websites. The first website, *Seguro Social*, provides information to Spanish speaking individuals, the second largest linguistic community in the U.S. With the second website, *Multilanguage Gateway*, SSA acknowledges eighteen other linguistic communities as it tries to build direct communication with recipients.

**Macrosystem (Worldwide structural and environmental forces)** – The list of languages included on the *Multilingual Gateway* website provides information for over 24 million individuals whose native language differs from English or Spanish<sup>1</sup>. Combined with over 37 million Spanish speaking individuals, SSA offers some type of information for almost all immigrants arriving from Central and South America; several European countries including Armenia, Belgium, Luxemburg, Greece, Italy, France, Switzerland, Russia, Spain, Portugal and Poland; a number of Far East Asian countries such as China, Korea, Philippines, and Viet Nam; and several Arab countries that use Farsi such as Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan. Information translated in Arabic benefits individuals from a number of countries where Arabic has become the *lingua franca*. Information accessible in French benefits a large number of countries in Africa, including Algeria, Tunisia, Cameroon, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Madagascar, Mali, Rwanda, and Senegal, to mention a few. Thus, aware of the linguistic diversity in the world, SSA created bridges of communication with immigrants from a large number of countries.

### Linguistic factors

Many government agencies and local non-profit organizations, aware of the large influx of ILEP, address the growing need for documents in multiple languages. Translation of any material goes beyond simple word match from one language to the other. The level of difficulty depends upon the degree of linguistic and cultural diversity between languages (Nida, 1958). A language grows and develops as part of a culture; it is influenced and reinforced by it. Words represent symbols meaningful to that culture and undergo interpretation only within the linguistic context generation. When a culture focuses on a particular content area, its members are likely to develop greater, abundant vocabulary that reflects the cultural relevance of the topic.

Because of these cultural influences and distinct vocabularies specific to languages, proper and meaningful translation entails linguistic procedures and techniques that aim at minimizing distortions from one language to the other (Cary & Jumplet, 1963). Distinct grammatical and semantic structures require a translator to analyze and restructure, while remaining faithful to content in the originating language (Nida, 1969). The translator must be aware of the arbitrariness of symbols in use in both original (or otherwise known as source language) as well as in the language the material translates into (otherwise known as receptive language). This is important because there are no two languages that segment symbols the same way. It is impossible to translate information word for word and retain comprehension (Nida, 1959). Even among

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<sup>1</sup> Author's calculations based on ACS, 2015.

languages usually clustered together due to having generated from a common root (for examine Romance languages), there are symbolic, lexical, and grammatical differences.

Most people use about 25,000 lexical units to describe millions of concepts, objects, and events. This implies that many of those units have multiple meanings and use within a particular language. The meaning of the unit is determined in two ways, either by syntax structure or through the modification of the meaning of a word by interaction with surrounding words (semantic structure). A translator cannot simply transfer sentences from English to a receptive language, as it is necessary to restructure the sentence targeting the audience of the receptive language. Most translation scholars agree that translation of any material involves loss, addition, and skewing of information (Fang, 1959; Nida 1959, 1969). Yet, the translation from source to receptive language does not necessarily mean content will be lost. When cultural symbols are taken into account, the transformation can greatly reinforce comprehension of the material by ILEP. For example, in the publication “*Understanding the Benefits*” (SSA, 2016), the first sentence reads: *Social Security reaches almost every family, and at some point, touches the lives of nearly all Americans.*

The Italian translation, while not incorrect per se, uses words that do not have the same semantic meaning. *Social Security è importante per quasi ogni famiglia e a un certo punto toccherà la vita di quasi tutti gli americani.*

The word “*toccherà*” (future tense of *toccare* – to touch) translated correctly. However, the word “*toccare*” is used much less in such a context in Italian. Some more commonly used semantic examples include “*toccare il libro – touch the book*” or “*quella canzone mi ha toccata molto – I was moved by that song.*” A more appropriate word for “*touch*” in the above-mentioned publication is “*influenzare*,” which in English is more similar in meaning to the verb “*affect*.”

This example further underlines the importance of translating groups of words otherwise known as “*bundles of componential features*,” rather than precise words (Nida, 1969, p. 50). This translation of *componential features* requires restructuring of sentences based on the functionality of the receptive language. Restructuring has a number of elements for formal and technical level of translation, which in the Italian version of the “*Understanding Benefits*” publication appears to have been retained. However, it is the dynamic dimension of sentence restructuring when translated into the receptive language that determines if such translation is satisfactory. Mastery of both source and receptive languages on the part of the translator can ensure that a message decodes properly. In his influential essay “*Science of Translation*,” Eugene Nida (1969) stated that the material translated into the receptive language would be somewhat different from the original in the source language. However, a competent translator would retain both the meaning and style of the original document. Fidelity to content is very important in the translation of government and legal documents. Yet, transformation of the material in a way that facilitates comprehension in the receptive language helps the reader understand and meet the requirements at hand.

### **Functional-Pragmatic Model of Translation Evaluation (FPMTE)**

Translation of material from *source text to target text* has been a practice likely as old as human language development. Concerns about translated work matching the quality of source text have been documented since antiquity (Kelly, 1979). The quality of a translation depends on how it represents information within the structure and limitations of the receiving culture (House, 2001). Simply translating a text from one language to another is an automatic and insufficient

action, even if both languages have many similarities in syntax and symbols. House (2001) suggests that quality translation takes place only after three levels and an analysis are accomplished. Attention to pragmatics, or the appropriate use of language in context; and semantics, the inherent meaning of symbols, representations, and denotations (Mey, 2011) add and improve the quality of translations (House, 2001). Thus, translated text is not a simple reproduction of source text, but “*a pragmatic concept of function*” (Valles, 2014). The context in which source text is generated becomes part of the process and a translator has to represent that context in the target text, remain faithful to the original, yet convey both its cognitive and emotional meaning (Valles, 2014). As such, the target text is not simply an overt translation of words, but it must convey the covert cultural meaning that the source text carries (House, 2001). Understanding the cultural filter of the source text, capturing it in a meaningful way, and conveying it in a culturally meaningful manner in the target text, while still remaining faithful to the overt meaning, requires good understanding of both cultures in which these texts are generated. The translator’s social location (Henslin, 2011), his or her country of origin, social attitudes and expectations, and personal stances on political or social issues all influence the cultural interpretation of a source text.

Linguistic preferences of orators of a particular language have been found to vary. House, a German linguist and scholar, found that Germans preferred a more direct style of communication while Americans use a more implicit style (House, 2006). Brazilians prefer an expressive and detailed style of writing, which mirrors their spoken language, a style that Americans find somewhat confusing (Moran, Harris, & Moran, 2007). In his comparative study of texts in Italian and English, Owtram (2010) found that English paragraphs were more restricted and shorter than Italian. Similar to Brazilian readers, Italian readers seem to prefer a more elaborate and explicit text, rather than a more minimalistic text as seen in English and requires more processing on the part of the reader. Strakšienė (2010) suggests that translation by description might extend the paragraph in Russian, but it is preferred if the equivalent of the idiom or phrase only exists in English. Owtram (2010) suggests that a good translation of a target text will contain the cognitive outcomes and points of the source text, but will not require high processing effort. The target text should create a similar reaction on the target reader, as the source text creates in the source reader.

## **Method**

### **Study design**

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological methodology that created the opportunity for native speakers of Italian, Portuguese, and Russian to provide feedback regarding comprehension level of some of the SSA documents translated in these languages. Phenomenology was used as a descriptive approach because it allowed individuals to observe, to analyze, and to describe their understanding of this complicated process (Packer, 2011). According to Hycner (1999, p. 156), “the phenomenon dictates the method (not vice-versa) including even the type of participants.” Focus groups were used as the method of data collection for this study. Researchers obtained approval from the University Institutional Review Board. Participants were presented with a number of questions previously reviewed by the researchers. Using focus groups as a method of data collection takes advantage of the communication interaction between research participants. It is particularly helpful when research participants are asked semi-structured or open-ended questions, and provides an opportunity for further exploration of ideas, even from people that are less likely to share information during a one-on-one interview (Kitzinger, 1995).

## Participants

To qualify for this study, participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria: (a) adults over the age of 18; (b) had obtained a high school diploma or higher, to match the reading grade level of SSA publications; (c) native speakers of Italian, Portuguese, or Russian; and (d) all participants were immigrants and had arrived in the U.S. as adults.

A total of thirty-three (33) individuals agreed to participate. Ethnic backgrounds included 10 Italians, 10 Russians, and 13 Brazilians. The age range was 25-48 years. There were a total of 11 men and 22 women. The level of English proficiency was not measured, but all participants reported to have at least working knowledge.

## Sampling Techniques

Recruitment of participants took place in Massachusetts using a snowball technique. A convenience method, snowball sampling is often useful with populations that are small compared to the general population (Heckathorn, 2011). Using contacts within the Italian, Brazilian, and Russian immigrant community in Massachusetts, recruitment of subjects started with a small number of potential participants who then reached out to others in their respective communities (Lewis-Black, Bryman, & Futing Liao, 2004).

## Publications

A select number of SSA publications were analyzed in Italian, Portuguese, and Russian. These languages were chosen for two reasons: the same exact documents are accessible in all; and second, the ease of accessibility to native and fluent speakers in the geographic area where the investigators reside. The same documents were selected across all three languages to maintain consistency. The goal was to complete a cross comparison of between English and a target text and obtain feedback from participants of their perceived accuracy. The following documents have been translated in Italian, Portuguese, and Russian by The Translation and Priority Workload Unit (TPWU), responsible for translations within SSA (SSA, 2016):

- Form SS-5 (08-2011) – Application for a Social Security Card.
- EN-05-10024 – Understanding the benefits
- EN-05-10029 – Disability benefits
- EN-05-10043 - Medicare
- EN-05-10058 – Your right to question the decision made on your claim.
- EN-05-10095 – Working while Disabled – How can we help?
- EN-05-10003 – Update<sup>2</sup>

## Results

### Systemic factors that influence understanding of translations

Using a feminist/ecological framework (Ballou et al., 2002) researchers explored the impact of micro-level and the influence of exo- and macro-level factors on participants regarding the understanding of translated materials. It was an opportunity for participants to provide direct feedback on how the information translated in their native language.

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<sup>2</sup> This document was not reviewed by participants. Investigators added while this paper was being written. The English document was published on the Multilanguage Gateway website very recently.

**The inner circle (Individual factors)** – According to Ballou et al. (2002), each individual develops unique characteristics that are the result of innate traits and environmental influences. Level of education and English fluency varied even among immigrants of the same community. If an immigrant interacted with SSA previously, they could grasp the information better. Gianni, a 39-year-old Italian man stated, *“there are too many words in English here, but I know what the word Medicare means. I have to deal with them all the time.”* Lulu, a 40-year-old Brazilian woman said, *“good thing I know English, because I don’t even know what is the point they are trying to make. The words are in Portuguese, but I understand the point better in the English brochure.”* Valeria, a 37-year-old Russian woman, suggested that some of the brochures in Russian were translated by someone who had been living in the U.S. for a very long time. She pointed out that language is fluid and evolves with culture and society. Vocabulary evolves through enrichment with new words while shedding older ones. Valeria believes that at least one of the Russian translators had not kept up with linguistic advances in Russia as there were a number of *“archaic words no one uses, maybe my mother, she uses some of them.”*

**Microsystem (Immediate environment)** – It consists of a number of elements outside the individual, but with whom said individual interacts on a regular basis (Ballou et al., 2002). A common theme emerged among participants of all the languages: unless one was familiar with the ideas presented in the brochure, it would be difficult for someone with limited English proficiency to grasp the content of the brochures. Dayanara, a 31-year-old Brazilian woman stated, *“I can tell you that my mother will not get it. She will need me to explain it to her.”* Alex, a 26-year-old Russian man, expressed similar concerns *“there are expressions used that make no sense. I have no idea where they came from. To be honest with you, if my father needed this, I will bring the English version too.”* Through these and similar statements, participants brought up concerns about the quality and veracity of the target text. To help their relatives who would be using the target text, participants stated they would have to fill-in the void.

**Exo-system (Social Institutions)** – Every society has created a number of institutions to regulate the needs of its members (Ballou et al., 2002). Italy, Brazil, and Russia have the equivalent institution of the SSA, although named differently in each country. While there are some commonalities in the names, participants brought up the importance of providing a reference of a similar institution in the readers’ country to facilitate comprehension. For example, in Italy, SSA is *L’Istituto Nazionale per la Previdenza Sociale*, which translates word for word to mean *“The National Institute for Social Support.”* In Brazil, benefits for illness, disability, maternity, pensions, and death are administered by *Previdência Social*, which word for word translates into *“Social Foresight.”* In Russia, the word “social” is not at all part of the name of the institution that administers pensions and disability benefits. It is called *Пенсионный фонд Российской Федерации* or *Pension Fund of the Russian Federation*.

Thus, distinctive countries use different vocabulary to describe the institution that administers benefits similar to those provided through SSA. Beside the names, they also cover different benefits. For example, in Brazil, *Previdência Social* covers maternity leave, benefits not covered by the U.S. SSA. It is no surprise that for an Italian, *“Social Security,”* for a Portuguese, *“Seguro Social”* or *“Seguridade Social,”* and for a Russian *“Social Security”* (written with Latin and not Cyrillic alphabet) does not hold the same meaning as *“Social Security”* holds for a citizen of the United States of America.

**Macrosystem (Worldwide structural and environmental forces)** – The political, social, and economic climate in the various countries of origin plays a crucial role in decisions to immigrate to the U.S. (Doerschler, 2006). National factors influence government regulations. Individual rights vary from country to country, as does the ability and opportunity to interact with government officials. Many foreign-born nationals in the U.S. arrived from countries where government benefits were limited and there were no channels to question decisions made by state officials. Even in developed countries, the ability to reach out and collaborate with government officials varies. Anna, a 41-year-old woman, laughed upon reading one of the brochures when she thought about her 73-year-old mother in Italy. *“If it wasn’t for il ragioniere (accountant), my mother would not understand even INSP (L’Istituto Nazionale per la Previdenza Sociale). She needs it simple and straight. And this is not.”*

### Overall feedback from participants

There was a consensus among participants, regardless of their background, of the lack of consistency in translated documents. Below is a list of some of the overall inconsistencies.

1. Discrepancies in translation of the same entity, such as *Social Security*, within the same document.

This document was considered the best translation among Portuguese speaking participants. There were almost no grammatical or spelling errors. However, Social Security is translated differently in two pages as documented below.

Form - PE-05-10058 – *Your right to question the decision made on your claim.*

Como recorrer	Direito à representação
O pedido de apelação deve ser feito por escrito. Entre em contato conosco e solicite o formulário de apelação ou envie-nos uma carta assinada com o número de <b>Seguridade Social</b> , indicando que pretende recorrer da decisão sobre o seu caso. Caso tenha se inscrito para benefícios por incapacidade de	Você pode pedir a alguém para ajudá-lo no seu recurso ou para representá-lo. O representante pode ser um advogado ou outra pessoa qualificada familiarizada com você e com o programa do <b>Seguro Social</b> . Trabalharemos com seu representante como se estivéssemos trabalhando com você.

2. Discrepancies of translation of the same information between two documents.

Some of the issues that surfaced were the discrepancies and mistranslations between documents as presented in the example below. The information in two different documents is the same, but the translation is different. Participants preferred the quality of Document - PE-05-10024, both for lexicological and stylistic issues.

**Ligue para nossa linha gratuita**

Além de usar nosso site, você pode ligar gratuitamente para 1-800-772-1213. Todas as ligações são confidenciais. Se você fala Espanhol, aperte 2. Para todos os outros idiomas, aperte 1, fique na linha em silêncio durante o pedido automático de voz em Inglês até um representante atender. O representante irá contatar um intérprete para ajudar na sua ligação. Os serviços de intérprete estão disponíveis sem nenhum custo. Nós podemos responder perguntas específicas das 7 a.m até às 7 p.m. De segunda-feira à sexta-feira. Geralmente, vai ter que esperar pouco tempo se você ligar durante a semana após terça-feira. Nós podemos lhe fornecer informações em Inglês através do serviço de telefone automático 24 horas por dia. Se você é surdo ou tem deficiência auditiva, pode ligar para nosso número TTY, 1-800-325-0778.

Queremos também ter a certeza de que você beneficia de um serviço correto e atencioso. É esta a razão pela qual possuímos um segundo representante de Seguro Social que monitoriza algumas chamadas telefônicas.

**Ligue para nosso telefone gratuito**

Ligue gratuitamente no 1-800-772-1213 ou pelo nosso número TTY, 1-800-325-0778, em caso de surdez ou deficiência auditiva. Permaneça na linha e em silêncio durante a automação de voz em inglês até um representante atender.

Fornecemos serviços de interpretação gratuitos para ajudá-lo com suas negociações junto à Segurança Social. Esses serviços estão disponíveis por telefone ou no escritório da Segurança Social. Fornecemos informações pelo serviço de atendimento automatizado 24 horas por dia. O sistema de resposta automática pode também ser usado para nos informar sobre um novo endereço ou para solicitar uma segunda via do cartão Medicare. Podemos responder às questões específicas do seu processo das 7h às 19h, de segunda a sexta-feira. Geralmente, o tempo de espera será menor se ligar após as terças-feiras.

Tratamos todas as chamadas de forma confidencial e um segundo representante da Segurança Social monitora algumas ligações, pois queremos ter certeza de que o serviço esteja sendo feito de forma correta e atenciosa.

3. Use of English words that either have no linguistic or cultural connection or have a very different meaning in English than the receptive language.

One Brazilian participant noticed the use of the word “*hospício*.” In Portuguese, this means “*a madhouse*,” which is a very different meaning than the word “*hospice*” in English. There were also occasional Spanish words such as “*anticipadamente*,” found in one of the Italian translations, or “*solamente*” found in one of the Portuguese translations.

4. Creation of neologisms for the receptive language based on English.

Participants found a number of words created to mimic the construct in English, but that did not exist in the receptive language. For example, the word “*non-citizen*” does not exist in Russian; however, it is likely to be a word and a construct used in Latvia. While neologisms enrich a language, they are created within a culture and must be embraced by the culture prior to widespread use.

In several documents for all three languages, there were translations of English words transformed to fit the receptive language. Participants reported some neologisms came from English, the source language, where attempts were made to adapt it in the target text.

For example, in Form SS-5 – Application for Social Security Card, the English version uses the word “*replacement*.”

**Replacement Social Security Card**

To apply for a replacement card, you must provide one document to prove your identity. If you were born outside the U.S., you must also provide documents to prove your U.S. citizenship or current, lawful, work-authorized status. See page 2 for an explanation of acceptable documents.

In the Portuguese version, the translator uses the word “*Substituição*,” which means “*Replacement*.” However, in Brazil, when a person needs to obtain a copy of a document that was lost or stolen, he or she uses the term “*Segunda via*.”

**Substituição do cartão da Previdência Social**

Para solicitar um cartão de substituição, você deve fornecer um documento para comprovar a sua identidade. Caso tenha nascido fora dos EUA, você também precisa fornecer documentos para comprovar a sua cidadania americana ou o status de autorização de trabalho atual e legal. Veja na página 2 uma explicação dos documentos aceitáveis.

Similarly, in the Russian version of the same document, the translator uses the word “*дубликат*,” which in English translates “*duplicate*” and has a different meaning than replacement. Participants

suggested that the most culturally appropriate word would be “*копия*,” which translates as “*copy*.”

**Дубликат карточки социального обеспечения**

Для подачи заявления на получение дубликата карточки необходимо предоставить один документ, удостоверяющий личность. Если вы родились за пределами США, вам также нужно предъявить документы, удостоверяющие гражданство США или законный иммиграционный статус с правом на работу. См. стр. 2, где указаны приемлемые документы.

5. Inconsistent reformulations of proper names of U.S. institutions.

In Form SS-5 – Application for a Social Security Card, there are three different approaches to translating Department of Homeland Security from a simple acronym in the English publication.

**Original Social Security Card**

To apply for an original card, you must provide at least two documents to prove age, identity, and U.S. citizenship or current lawful, work-authorized immigration status. If you are not a U.S. citizen and do not have DHS work authorization, you must prove that you have a valid non-work reason for requesting a card. See page 2 for an explanation of acceptable documents.

In Italian, DHS was translated to “*Department for the National Security*” followed by the English acronym.

Per richiedere un tesserino originale sono necessari almeno due documenti comprovanti la Sua età, identità e cittadinanza USA o il Suo attuale stato di cittadino straniero regolarmente immigrato e con permesso di lavoro. Se Lei non è cittadino USA e non ha un permesso di lavoro rilasciato dal Dipartimento per la Sicurezza Nazionale (DHS), dovrà fornire prove attestanti che ha un valido motivo che non sia il lavoro per richiedere il tesserino. Vedere la spiegazione dei documenti accettabili a pag. 3.

In Portuguese, it was translated “*Department of Internal Security of the United States.*” However, in this translation, there is the full name of “*Department of Homeland Security, DHS,*” making it even clearer than the original.

**Cartão da Previdência Social original**

Para solicitar um cartão original, você deve apresentar no mínimo dois documentos para comprovação da idade, identidade e cidadania americana ou status de imigração com autorização para trabalhar atual e legal. Caso não seja um cidadão americano e não tenha autorização do Departamento de Segurança Interna dos Estados Unidos (Department of Homeland Security, DHS) para trabalhar, você deve provar que tem uma razão válida para solicitar o cartão que não seja para a finalidade de trabalhar. Veja na página 2 uma explicação dos documentos aceitáveis.

The Russian translation has only the acronym in the Latin alphabet, while another acronym in the same paragraph “*USA*” is written with the Cyrillic alphabet.

**Карточка социального обеспечения, получаемая впервые**

Чтобы впервые подать заявление на карточку, вы должны предоставить по крайней мере два документа, удостоверяющие возраст, личность и гражданство США или законный иммиграционный статус с правом на работу. Если у вас нет гражданства США и разрешения на работу от DHS, вы должны доказать, что номер социального обеспечения необходим вам не для трудоустройства. См. стр. 2, где указаны приемлемые документы.

ПРИМЕЧАНИЕ: Если вам 12 лет или старше, и вы никогда еще не имели номера социального обеспечения, вы должны подавать заявление лично.

Another example occurred in Form EN-05-10024 – Understanding the benefits. “*Social Security Administration*” is either fully translated as in the Portuguese version,

A administração de Seguridade Social gostaria que você entendesse o que a Seguridade Social pode significar para seu futuro financeiro e o de sua família. Esta publicação, Como compreender os benefícios, explica o fundamento dos programas de seguros de aposentadoria, incapacidade e sobrevivência da Seguridade Social.

partially translated as in the Italian version,

L'Amministrazione di Social Security desidera che lei comprenda quello che Social Security può significare per futuro finanziario suo e della sua famiglia. Questa pubblicazione, Comprendere le prestazioni, spiega le basi dei programmi di Social Security per prestazioni di vecchiaia, invalidità e superstiti.

or partially translated using two different alphabets as in the Russian version.

Служба социального обеспечения ставит перед собой задачу объяснить, какую роль программы Social Security могут играть в будущем для вас и вашей семьи. В этой брошюре «Что необходимо знать о льготах социального обеспечения» изложены основные правила предоставления пенсионного обеспечения, пособий по нетрудоспособности и пособий для семей, потерявших кормильца, предоставляемых программами социального обеспечения Social Security.

Borrowing words from another language is a well-known practice, particularly with more current global rapid modes of communication. Many languages have borrowed English words, particularly related to technology. However, “*Social Security*” has not entered the global vocabulary yet. Similar types of institutions that manage government benefits exist in other countries, but as mentioned above, none of the ones in Russia, Brazil, or Italy use the English term “*Social Security*.”

6. Lack of use of person-centered nouns and adjectives, or even use of culturally insensitive terminology when referring to individuals with a disability.

Participants pointed out the use of words referring to individuals with disabilities that were perceived as offensive. One of the Russian participants noted the use of a derogatory word for a blind person, when there was a more updated and respectful way to address them. Similarly, in Portuguese, translators used the word “*deficiência*,” instead of the more polite and appropriate “*incapacidade*.”

7. Some documents read as if they were translated by either individuals with a working proficiency in writing the receptive language, but not with native proficiency and mastery, or from another country other than that of the participants.

Brazilian participants immediately reported that form *EN-05-10029 – Disability Benefits*, was translated by a native of Portugal. Use of words such as “*facto*” instead of “*fato*,” use of adverbs, and use of verbs in a different tense in Portugal than in Brazil, was observed. Additionally, participants noticed words, that although were not difficult to understand, did not make sense in context.

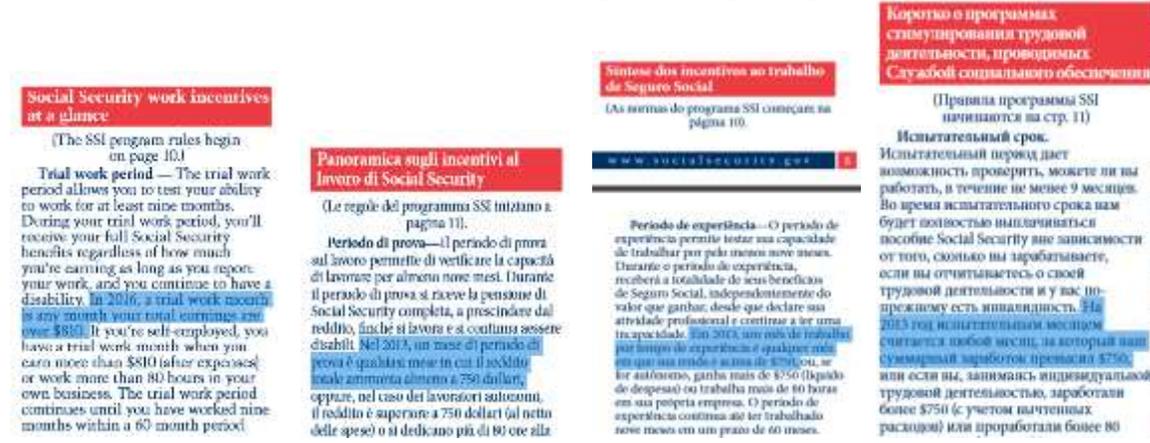
- Laboratório and test results;
- Resultados laboratoriais e de exames;

While translation of the words was correct, it reminded participants of labs and exams done in school, rather than lab work done in a medical facility.

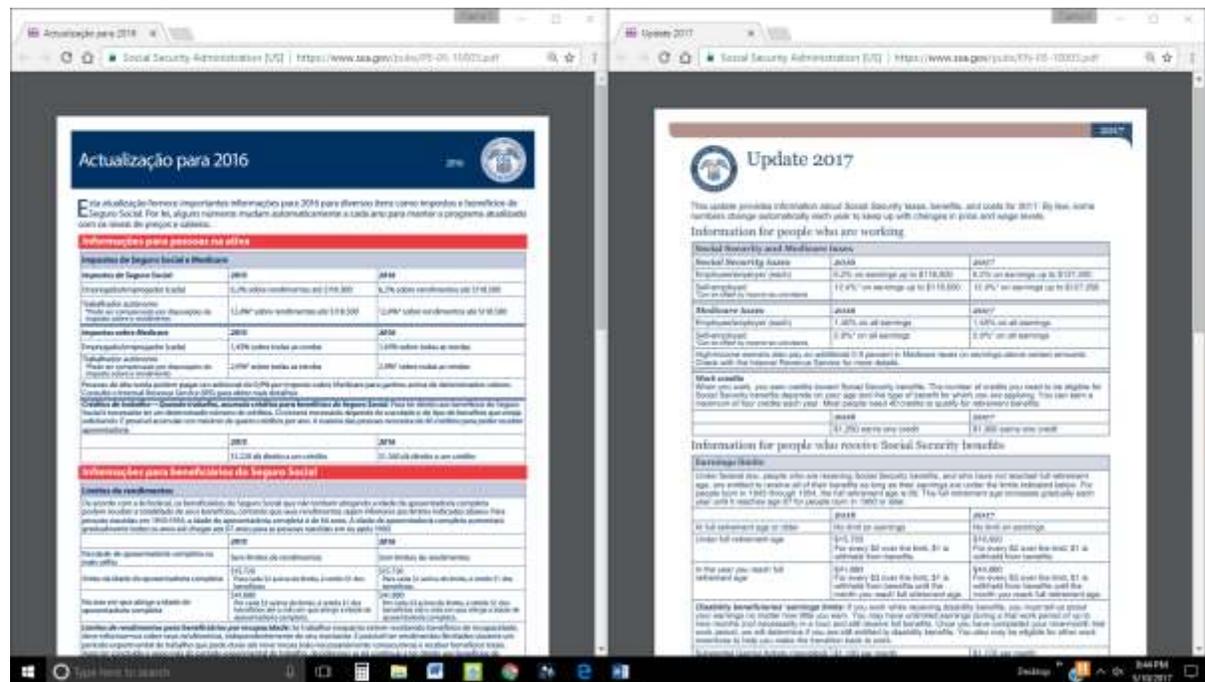
8. Updated information only in the English version

Form EN-05-10095 – Working While Disabled How We Can Help?

The English version of this document was updated to include pertinent information about income in 2016. None of the translated versions was updated, regarding this information, since 2013.



In the process of writing this paper, investigators noticed that at least one document in English, EN-05-10003 was updated to include pertinent information regarding income changes in 2017. However, the same document in other languages had not been updated as the date of this screenshot indicates below.



9. Rigid sentence structure was felt to be more appropriate for English than any of the receptive languages.

Participants stated that there were several passages in the documents they had either to read twice or read the English version. While they understood the meaning, the sentence structure and order of parts of a sentence was rigid. Magda, a 29-year-old Russian participant, stated *“The Russian language is so beautiful, so flexible and so melodic even in official documents. But what I read here was lifeless and I kept thinking on smoothing the edges.”*

#### 10. Spelling and grammatical errors.

As Gabriel, a 41-year-old Brazilian man stated, *“If I was in school taking Portuguese class and turned out something like this, I would have failed the class.”* In form PE- 05-10043 the verb *“registrar”* must be corrected to *“registrarse”*. Similarly *“deveriam”* must be changed to *“deveras”*. In the same form Brazilian participants suggested that the verb *“solicitou”* does not need to be followed by *“para”*, but only by the noun to which it is related. Other participants expressed similar concerns. Beyond translation inconsistencies, there were misspelled words, verbs conjugated inappropriately, incorrect use of articles, run-on sentences, pronoun errors, and punctuation mistakes.

#### 11. Consistent and updated glossary.

The current glossary posted on the Multilanguage Gateway website for each language had misspelling errors at least in Italian, Portuguese, and Russian. There are words included in a glossary in one language, but not another. Some words have been translated verbatim from English to another language, but the meaning is different. For example, *“skilled nurse”* has been translated as *“enfermeira habilitada.”* This Portuguese phrase can be translated back to English as *“skillful nurse.”*

## **Discussion and Recommendations**

### **The Use of Native translators**

Participants suggested that professionals hired to translate official government documents be native language speakers of the country that uses the receptive language. Additionally, translators must remain in touch with their native country and keep current with local language development. Prior to initiating translations, it would be appropriate for translators to either be acquainted or reacquainted with local institutions that provide services similar to institutions in the U.S.

### **Glossary Development and Update**

Prior to updating any of the documents posted on the SSA *Multilanguage Gateway* website, it would be beneficial for the editors to engage in a periodic glossary development and update. That does not mean using the same explanation for all languages. It will defeat the purpose and not take into account cultural differences. However, a compromise can be reached in determining the translation of specific items, such as the specific names of U.S. departments and institutions or how to refer to Social Security benefits. This will ensure not only consistency among languages, but will improve the quality of target texts within the same language and facilitate updating documents as the originals in English are updated. Additionally, it would be beneficial to the public that the same words be included in all the glossaries across languages.

### **Translation as a Process**

Translation of any material, particularly of governmental documentation is a systematic process that has many steps. Many translations today undergo forward and back translation. First, the source text is translated into target text by one translator. Second, another independent translator receives only the translated target text and reverses it in the source text, English in this case. This translator will be able to observe and identify appropriate cultural and conceptual issues. Third, one or more additional translators review both documents, paying attention to those constructs in the target text that do not convey the concepts presented in the source text.

Prior to the final publication, it could be beneficial to pilot a translated document with a focus group of native speakers.

### **Editing**

Participants unanimously recommended review of the final target text by a copy editor. The initial mechanical editing must check spelling, quotations, capitalization, abbreviations, phone numbers, abbreviations, and acronyms. Investigators of this study suggest for professional editors of these documents to identify publications that can help with adaptation and readability. For example in the U.S., to adhere to grammar rules many publishing houses use *The Chicago Manual of Style* that provides detailed guidelines from layout of a published work to use of tables, quotations, and punctuations. For shorter, more concise publications, *The Associated Press Stylebook* provides guidelines for publications that provide informational news. The emphasis on proper presentation of factual information, as well as appropriate use of words, with synonyms, antonyms, and acronyms clearly spelled out in this manual. Similarly, “Manuale di Ortografia e Pronunzia della lingua italiana”, by Mennella (2014) provides general information on spelling and punctuation in Italian.

Hiring of native speaking editors is likely to improve the quality of translations. One participant suggested that while a translator could be living in the U.S., it might be beneficial for the editor to live in the country of the receptive language. Similarly, another participant pointed out that U.S. embassies and consulates hire local employees who translate diplomatic documentation. They are likely to provide accurate translations that includes current lexicon. Additionally, editors should be in charge of recognizing inconsistencies in the translated document and restructured sentences or paragraphs.

### **Translation for the Reader**

Many participants noted poor readability of translated documents. Their concern was that the average reader would not be able to understand the content presented. Social Security Administration has clear readability guidelines. In the Program Operations Manual System (POMS), NL 00610.20 Notice Readability Guidelines, the first two sentences state: “*Know your audience. Write to your average reader.*” While this document provides guidelines on how to write notices, it would be appropriate that translated documents followed the same rules. Of particular benefit would be to keep in mind the following points listed on this document:

- *Write at the sixth to eighth-grade reading level.*
- *Use an average sentence length of no more than 15–20 words.*
- *Use no more than seven lines per paragraph.*
- *Use short, common words whenever possible.*

### **Formatting and proofreading the final draft**

It is of outmost importance that the final draft is proofread to determine whether:

- It matches the source text.
- The layout of the target text is consistent with the layout of the source text.
- Spelling, grammar, and punctuation are correct.
- References in the target text (e.g., to another document), match the source text.

### **Use of Equivalent Names of Institutions**

Although there was no consensus, some participants suggested that it could be beneficial to include names of institutions from the native countries. For example, a couple of Brazilian participants suggested the use of *Previdência Social* as is used in form Form SS-5 – Application for Social Security Card. Another recommendation was to use both the name of the institution in the native country, followed by the name of the institution in the U.S.

### **Limitations**

This study was conducted using qualitative methods that presented some limitations in sample selection and generalizations. First, it is important to recognize gatekeeper bias, or the role of the student investigator in selection of participants. Second, the number of subjects is small, which makes it more difficult to generalize and make predictions that apply to larger populations, particularly because participants come from the same geographic area. Additionally, it was not possible to generalize findings because this project only looked at a limited number of publications in three languages.

### **Recommendations for Future Research Studies**

This study provided a review of some SSA documentation posted on the *Multilingual Gateway* website. Participants, native speakers of Italian, Portuguese, and Russian, provided feedback on these documents. It would be interesting to see if an in-depth review of all documentation could provide new findings. A final recommendation would be for future research to focus on the efforts that the SSA had already put in place to provide updated information for other languages, including the quality and quantity of information included in American Sign Language videos.

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