Methods note: questionnaires

How do you ask the same question in Hausa, Yorùbá, Igbo, Pidgin and English?

Translation is where comparability is easily lost and seldom documented. What Nigeria's national surveys do, where the standards disagree, and the procedure we follow.

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In short

- Ethnologue lists 520 living languages for Nigeria. The national DHS writes its questionnaires in four: English, Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. Interviews in any other language depend on the interviewer or an interpreter.
- The standards disagree: survey-methods guidelines now treat back-translation as an inadequate check and use team translation, while the DHS and Afrobarometer manuals still require it. All of them treat pretesting as an essential step before a translation is final.
- Translation is only part of the problem. A WHO-led study that tested questions in 19 countries (in Nigeria, in English) found problems with original wording and cultural fit, and very rarely with translation.

The languages, and the law

Ethnologue lists 527 languages for Nigeria, 520 of them living[1]. The Constitution provides that the business of the National Assembly 'shall be conducted in English, and in Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made therefor', and allows a State House of Assembly to use, in addition to English, 'one or more other languages spoken in the State' by resolution[2].

In November 2025 the federal government cancelled the policy of mother-tongue instruction in the first years of primary school and stated that 'English shall remain the medium of instruction from primary to tertiary education', while encouraging the teaching of at least one Nigerian language alongside English[3]. Speaking a language is not the same as reading it, so we do not assume that a respondent who speaks Hausa, Yorùbá or Igbo reads it, and we test showcards and written consent forms for that.

Nigerian Pidgin is widely spoken, but estimates of how widely range from 30 million speakers, including second-language speakers (Ethnologue, undated), to an estimated 100 million in Nigeria and the diaspora (a 2019 linguistics paper), and neither source states how its figure was obtained[4,5]. It has no officially adopted spelling[5]; a Standard Naijá Orthography has been proposed by the Naijá Langwej Akedemi[6]. A written Pidgin instrument has to say which spelling it uses.

What Nigeria's national surveys do

In the 2018 and 2024 DHS, questionnaires were finalised in English and translated into Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo[7,8]. In 2023–24 one pretest team worked in each of the four languages, and interviews were captured on tablets in those four[8]. There was no Pidgin version. The DHS questionnaire records the language of the questionnaire, the language of the interview, the respondent's native language and whether a translator was used[9], but we found no published Nigerian figure for how often a translator was used.

That figure matters. In Kenya's 1998 DHS, 23% of interviews were translated on the spot by interviewers. The effect on single statistics was 'rather moderate', but it was 'magnified' in multivariate analysis[10].

Two of Africa's largest survey programmes set different rules for when a written translation is needed. The DHS manual's 'rough rule' is that 'any language group that constitutes 10 percent or more of the sample should have its own translated questionnaire' [11]. Afrobarometer sets the threshold at 5%, prefers no more than six local-language translations, and does not allow 'ad hoc “field” translations' at all [12].

Where the standards disagree

Survey-methods guidelines have moved away from back-translation. The Cross-Cultural Survey Guidelines set out the TRAPD model (translation, review, adjudication, pretesting and documentation), with two or more translators producing parallel versions, and say that back-translation, 'although recommended in the past', does 'not comply with the latest translation research' [13]. The European Social Survey requires at least two translators per questionnaire, translating into their mother tongue [14].

The DHS manual (2012) and Afrobarometer's Round 10 manual still require independent or blind back-translation, within a wider process of review meetings and pretests [11,12]. They also differ on who should translate: Afrobarometer looks for translators who use everyday language, 'especially journalists working at local radio stations', while the DHS 'discourages the use of language institutes or local language radio program hosts' [12,11].

Every standard we reviewed treats pretesting as essential before a translation is final, and the DHS manual says that some pretest interviews 'should be conducted in every language that will be used in the main fieldwork' [11,12,13,14].

Translation is only part of the problem

A WHO study that ran 645 cognitive interviews in 19 countries, including Nigeria (where the interviews were in English), to refine questions on sexual health found problems 'including poor wording (source question error), cultural portability and very rarely translation error' [15]. Research in four African countries found that 'many survey concepts are difficult to translate into African languages', household among them [16]. Who asks also matters: across surveys in 14 African countries, respondents gave 'systematically different answers to coethnic and noncoethnic interviewers' [17].

This is why we test meaning, not only words. A cognitive interview asks respondents what they understood a question to mean, and it catches problems that no check on the translation can.

Our practice

These are the rules every Probatio Africa study follows. Read them as commitments you can hold us to.

- [x] Two translators per language work independently; a review meeting reconciles their versions; an adjudicator fluent in both languages and in the study's aims approves the version for pretesting.
- [x] We pretest in every language, including cognitive interviews on the questions most likely to be misunderstood, and finalise a translation only after its pretest.
- [x] We produce a written translation for every language likely to be spoken by at least 5% of the sample. For a Pidgin version, we state the spelling used.
- [x] Where an interview has to be held in a language without a written version, we record the language and the use of an interpreter, as the DHS questionnaire does, and report how often it happened.
- [x] We keep the translation record, including changes made after the pretest. We report the languages offered, as the AAPOR Code requires [18].

What the evidence cannot settle

- Whether back-translation adds anything to a full team process in African languages. We found no controlled comparison.
- How often Nigerian survey interviews are translated on the spot. The DHS data files record it, but we found no published figure.
- How many people speak Nigerian Pidgin.

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