

Translations

Cheatsheet

At a glance

Translation and localization of surveys are essential to ensure accurate understanding and respondent engagement. The two main rules to remember are:

- **Not everybody in a multi-cultural country speaks every language** – Translations are a must-have to ensure all parts of a country's population can participate in a study, therefore ensuring representativity.
- **The same language ≠ the same language** – Words can have different meanings in different parts of the world, even when they're from the same language. Localization of questionnaires ensures accurate understanding and respondent engagement.

Offering a survey in the appropriate language ensures samples are representative of a country's population by including every possible respondent, regardless of the language they speak.

Translating surveys accurately is also essential to ensure accurate understanding and interpretation of a survey's questions and answer options. This isn't only important when translating from one language to another, but also when adapting surveys regionally – even if they use the same language.

Not everybody in a multicultural country speaks every language

There are several markets globally that have multiple official languages, however we cannot assume that everybody in these countries automatically speaks every language. To represent a country's full population, it is essential to provide the questionnaire in all official languages, otherwise parts of the population who do not speak the questionnaire's language would be left out.

Examples for such markets are:

- Canada: English and French
- Switzerland: German, French, Italian

- South Africa: Afrikaans, English, Xhosa, Zulu, etc...

Importantly, there are also markets with a small number of official languages, but a range of unofficial languages spoken locally. For example, India's official languages are English and Hindi, however neither are spoken in some regions. It is critical to extensively research the languages spoken by the survey's target group to ensure inclusivity and representativity.

The same language ≠ the same language

Several countries may be speaking the same language globally, however local differences in the meaning of words and wording of sentences will make a difference to the understanding of and engagement with a survey. If a respondent feels like the survey's language is difficult to comprehend and feels unnatural, it will take them more energy to follow the survey and they're more likely to lose engagement. On the other hand, inaccurate use of words and phrases can completely change what a question is asking and therefore, respondents may misinterpret what they're being asked about. Naturally, this means data quality may be at risk.

Some examples:

- The word buzo means 'diver' in Spain, however in Argentina this word refers to a 'sweatshirt'.
- The word pants refers to 'trousers' in the US, whereas in England this word refers to 'underwear'.

Cultural pitfalls

It's not just words that need localisation – formatting and cultural context matter too.

- **Dates & numbers:**
 - 12/03/2025 = March 12 in the US, 12 March in most of Europe
 - Decimal separator: 1.5 (US/UK) vs. 1,5 (Europe)

- **Scales:**
 - Some countries use 1–10, others 1– 5 or 0 –100
- **Sensitive topics:**
 - Income, religion, ethnicity, health → need culturally adapted wording and sometimes additional answer options

Small cultural missteps = respondent dropouts or unreliable answers.

Quick Checklist

- Translate into all official languages in your market.
- Research unofficial/local languages spoken by your target group.
- Localise terminology → adapt for regional differences, not just direct translation.
- Refine survey wording for clarity, natural flow, and cultural relevance.
- Remember: Translation ≠ Localisation – both are needed for high-quality data.