

Treating “Conceptual Equivalence” as an Epistemological Issue: A Reflexive Methodological Reflection on China and Flanders (Belgium) Cross-linguistic Coding

Research Overview

Using cross-linguistic coding of policy texts from China and Flanders (Belgium) and international organisations as a case study, this paper discusses the epistemological implications of conceptual equivalence and proposes a practical checklist of reflexive questions.

Purpose of Study

In comparative education policy research, cross-linguistic conceptual equivalence is often treated as a technical step in “quality control,” yet there is little inquiry into how it alters researchers’ interpretive authority and judgements of comparability. This paper treats the researcher’s cross-cultural position (navigating between different contexts) as an integral part of the methodology, focusing on decision points regarding instances where alignment is feasible or infeasible during the coding process. The research question is: at what junctures does cross-linguistic coding simultaneously constrain and facilitate knowledge production in comparative research, and how does the researcher’s positionality intervene in these junctures?

Research Methods

This paper employs a retrospective methodological approach, drawing on working materials and procedural traces generated during the implementation of ‘conceptual equivalence’ in a cross-linguistic policy corpus. These include bilingual coding practices, the creation of a cross-language concept mapping table, back-translation checks of culture-specific expressions, and records of judgements based on institutional and cultural contexts (such as process descriptions of how terms and expressions were classified and interpreted). The original corpus covers three types of sources: China, the Flemish Region of Belgium, and international organisations, spanning the period 2012–2025; texts from the Flemish Region of Belgium were subjected to parallel coding following professional translation. In this paper, rather than reiterating the study’s empirical findings, the author focuses on the aforementioned equivalence mechanisms as objects of analysis, elucidating the epistemological logic underlying them: namely, when to pursue semantic alignment, when to shift towards functional alignment, and when to

acknowledge that alignment is unfeasible and resort to contextualised interpretation.

Results and Discussion

Methodological insight 1: In cross-linguistic alignment, expressions carrying ethical appeals or role scripts—such as ‘dedication’, ‘care’ or ‘motherly’—are often translated into more generic English terms; however, the responsibility relations and moral intensity they imply in the original context are not always adequately captured. This tension frequently becomes apparent during the terminology standardisation process and back-translation verification.

Methodological insight 2: So-called ‘failures of equivalence’ are not errors, but methodological signals—they compel researchers to clarify whether they are pursuing semantic alignment, functional alignment, or alignment of responsibility relations, and to articulate this choice within the research narrative.

Methodological insight 3: Researchers may naturalise normative expressions in familiar contexts, whilst over-culturalising differences in unfamiliar ones; Consequently, the questions of “who holds the interpretative authority and on what grounds” must be continuously made explicit throughout the coding process. Aligning with the conference theme “Bridging Cultures, Co-creating Knowledge”, this paper regards cross-linguistic coding as a site of knowledge co-production, where comparability is not a prerequisite but is gradually generated through an audit trail documenting decisions across alignment and misalignment. To enhance transparency and replicability, this paper recommends incorporating an ‘equivalence decision log’ into the coding protocols of comparative studies, and disclosing key equivalence decisions in the abstract or main text using the minimum necessary information.

Keywords: *cross-linguistic coding; reflexivity; researcher positionality; decolonial methodology; knowledge co-production*