A comparative analysis of measures of language proficiency in EB and national surveys

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1. Introduction

Measures of Language Proficiency (LP) index cultural capital and/or ethnic affiliation. While many national and multi-national surveys include an LP measure, there is no internationally accepted standard. In practice, researchers use their own ad hoc measures (…) (Heath & Martin 1997).

Although a large corpus of empirical data is available, to date the differences in LP survey measures have not been evaluated. This study compares the effects of differences in LP question design on survey findings in selected EB and national surveys. The analysis highlights defects in EB measures of LP, and proposes some changes.

2. Data sources

Ethn was chosen as the target language because relevant data is available across a range of international, national and census surveys. These include:

- ISSP (National Identity modules) 2003-4 (Ireland sample)

3. The Eurobarometer Surveys

(a) The Question

The question concerning just one language skill – speaking.

(b) The Results

The structure of the question implies that composite results form a scale.

4. The Problem with Filter Questions in EB Surveys

(a) LP in Mother Tongue

The term ‘mother tongue’ is ambiguous (Davies & Bentahila 1989).

(b) LP in Other Languages

This filter question is dichotomous. The EB series, and other surveys/censuses offer a variety of dichotomous questions.

5. The Problem of Levels and Labels

The question concludes with a 3-level ordinal scale.

6. Conclusions

This analysis was limited to data relating to Irish and conclusions are thus provisional.

With that proviso, the evidence indicates that the EB measure of LP is neither reliable nor valid.

7. Acknowledgments

The financial support of Foras na Gaeilge, Dublin for this study is acknowledged. The data used in the research was accessed from GESIS, the Irish Data archive (IDSSA) and Foras na Gaeilge.

Further information

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References