

The General Social Survey



Translation Methodology for the Spanish Version of the 2026 General Social Survey

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this methodological report is to document the Spanish translation procedures used for the 2026 General Social Survey (GSS), describe how translation drafts generated by Large Language Models (LLMs) were integrated into the current Translation, Review, Adjudication, Pretest, and Documentation (TRAPD) framework, and explain how this updated approach builds on committee-based translation methods used in prior GSS rounds. This report also explains how the updated workflow continues to uphold the standards of functional equivalence and regional neutrality established in [GSS Methodological Report 109](#) and subsequent methodological work, while reducing time and resource requirements and maintaining consistency with long-standing GSS translation practices.

Instrument translation aims to produce instruments that maintain equivalence of measurement across languages so that translated instruments are both functionally equivalent and culturally appropriate. For languages spoken across diverse national origins, such as Spanish, an essential objective is to create a translated version that works equally well for people speaking different national varieties or dialects (for example, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central American, and South American backgrounds).

As technological integration accelerates across all sectors, survey research has similarly begun incorporating LLMs into various stages of the research lifecycle, including translation (e.g., Zavala-Rojas et al. 2024). Research Support Services Inc. (RSS), the independent organization who has provided translation services to the GSS, has adopted a cautious approach to integrating these tools to safeguard translation quality and preserve established GSS methodological standards. Relying on RSS' experience testing different tools and processes, we incorporated LLMs into the draft survey translation stage for the 2026 GSS. This memo describes the approach we followed for Spanish translations for the 2026 GSS, incorporating LLMs into best practice and maintaining consistency with previous translations.

TRAPD TRANSLATION PROCEDURES FOR THE GSS

In 2006 the GSS began fielding a Spanish translation of the survey instruments and materials, in addition to English, so that limited English-proficient Spanish-speaking sample members could be included in the study. This marked the first systematic implementation of Spanish translation procedures for the GSS, documented in GSS Methodological Report 109.

Since the early 2000s, best practices in survey translation have consisted of diverse applications of the Translation-Review-Adjudication-Pretesting-Documentation (TRAPD) Model (Harkness 2002). In 2002 and 2004 respectively, the European Social Survey translation guidelines and the U.S. Census Bureau Translation Guidelines have advocated the use of team or committee approaches under TRAPD. Although other survey translation methods claim to follow the TRAPD model, only those implementations that include a question-by-question joint review of the initial or draft translations in one or more meetings of translators with an adjudicator are considered best practice. This approach aligned with NORC's approach in 2006, which relied on a multi-translator committee review designed to ensure functional equivalence and regional neutrality in the Spanish version of the GSS instrument.

The strength of TRAPD lies in the joint discussion among language experts in the review-adjudication meeting. Regardless of how the first draft was first created, the committee-based process yields a high-quality translation and follows best practice by resolving discrepancies through team consensus and making sure that no single translator's dialect, stylistic preferences, or idiosyncrasies dominate the final product.

From the very beginning, GSS translations were conducted using the Modified Committee Approach (Schoua-Glusberg 1992), an application of Harkness' (2002) TRAPD model. In this approach, an initial draft translation is performed by three translators, each translating one third of the instrument (the Translation step in TRAPD). A joint draft is thus created combining the three parts of the translation, and the translators' team and adjudicator meet in the "reconciliation meeting" to review item by item as a group and improve the draft translation (the Review and Adjudication steps in TRAPD). Overall, this method was used consistently for GSS Spanish translations from 2006 through 2024.

The strength of committee approaches lies in the fact that consensus among bilinguals produces more accurate text than the subjective opinion of a single translator. Additionally, by striving for consensus, problems of personal idiosyncrasies, culture, and uneven skill in either language are overcome. The group process in the reconciliation meeting is functionally similar to a brainstorming session in which the team looks for alternative translations and selects by consensus the version that maximizes consistency, clarity, and dialect neutrality. In the case of the GSS, the independent translation committee has also sought feedback from the GSS team on the intention of each survey question and has aimed to align as closely as possible with the intended measurement of the constructs of interest.

This committee-based TRAPD procedure served as the foundation of every GSS Spanish translation through 2024 and provides the methodological baseline for understanding the updates introduced for the 2026 GSS based on LLMs.

TESTING LLM TRANSLATION PROCEDURES

In preparation for carrying out the Spanish translations for 2026, RSS discussed with NORC's GSS team the introduction of LLMs in the translation process, while preserving the crucial aspects of the best practice TRAPD model.

Earlier in 2025, RSS began testing different machine translation options, including Gemini, DeepL, and Copilot, utilizing Enterprise accounts that ensured a secure environment where the files that were submitted for translation were excluded from model training, maintaining strict confidentiality throughout the process. These exploratory trials allowed RSS to gain familiarity with each tool's outputs and limitations, as well as to evaluate whether any could reliably support draft translation development while maintaining confidentiality.

Through this exploratory testing, RSS found that DeepL is an excellent tool but lacks mechanisms for constraining translations based on intended dialect, educational level, or population characteristics. Thus, RSS focused on two LLM options: Gemini and Copilot.

RSS gave identical prompts to Gemini and Copilot and compared their output. The simple prompts said:

Please translate into Spanish the following survey questions for administration with US immigrants from Latin America of varied national origins. The tone should be formal but the register lower, to accommodate for low-education members of the study population. Please follow exactly the format of the original and don't add new formatting where the English does not have it. Do not translate anything that is all in upper case or between square brackets.

RSS observed that Gemini and Copilot produced broadly similar Spanish translations for the 2024 GSS questions, and that both were adequate as an initial draft of the translation. However, Gemini more consistently adhered to formatting instruction and more reliably preserved the structure of the English items. Gemini also produced more complete translation, as Copilot occasionally left the response choices in English, untranslated. Based on these observations, Gemini was selected as the draft translation tool for the 2026 GSS workflow.

TRANSLATION PROCEDURES FOR THE 2026 GSS

For each new round of data collection, the GSS fields many questions from previous rounds. Changes to wording are avoided whenever possible, to allow for item comparability across rounds. The same is true for translated items; only new items or revised items are translated anew each round. For 2026, there were about 65 new variables to translate, as well as minor revisions to approximately two dozen existing variables.

To start the 2026 GSS translation process, a single file was prepared that contained only the survey questions received from the GSS team that would need translation. This file was translated into Spanish using Gemini's LLM. The AI-translated file served as the draft translation, in the TRAPD framework, which is usually prepared in advance of the reconciliation meeting, replacing the traditional step in which three independent translators produced separate drafts. This draft was then brought into the TRAPD review process, functioning as the starting point for the translators and adjudicator to evaluate collectively during the reconciliation meetings.

The RSS translation team consisted of three experienced survey translators representing Mexican, Central American, and South American regional varieties of Spanish. The Adjudicator, a survey methodologist from Argentina with nearly 40 years of survey translation experience, oversaw the process. This regional diversity is consistent with historical GSS efforts to ensure dialect neutrality across the major Spanish-speaking subgroups in the United States.

In the review/adjudication process, the team looked for several aspects of the translation as the review and discussion of each draft translation item proceeded:

- Accuracy in conveying the meaning of the English item
- Unnecessary deviations in sentence structure
- Use of response scales that are equivalent to the original
- Use of response scales that are consistent with other GSS items
- For items with revised translations, consistency with the previously translated item
- Translation differences needed between the Web and the CAPI versions
- Fluency of the translation in Spanish (avoiding sounding like a translation)
- Avoidance of high register Spanish terms, when possible, to accommodate lower education immigrants
- Removal of any expressions that could sound forced or non-idiomatic to Spanish speakers
- Consensus on terminology acceptable to most Latin American immigrants

The team met virtually on a video conference platform in three reconciliation sessions in December 2025 to conduct the full committee review of the LLM-based initial draft. In each meeting, one translator read each LLM-based question aloud in Spanish while the other two reviewed the corresponding English item. The team then discussed and evaluated the draft line by line, identified issues of meaning, structure or dialect suitability and jointly revised the translation. As in earlier GSS cycles consensus was required for every final wording choice, aligning with the TRAPD model. Throughout this process, the adjudicator raised, as needed, issues of regional dialects not represented in the meeting drawing on prior translation experience and past cognitive testing conducted for the GSS.

No controlled experiment was conducted that would yield an exact comparison of resources needed for the 2026 approach as compared to the Modified Committee Approach without use of an LLM. However, we estimate that the 4.5 hours of reconciliation meetings were comparable with the previous methodology. The duration and structure of the reconciliation meetings themselves were consistent with previous GSS rounds. The use of an LLM draft primarily affected the preparatory steps rather than the group review sessions. Within the TRAPD approach, a practical read on quality is the number and difficulty of translator or reviewer differences; because item-level counts are impractical to maintain, adjudication speed serves as the proxy. The comparable review time suggests that the quality of the LLM translations was at least as good as the human translators, as it did not result in an extended reconciliation and adjudication review. The primary cost and time savings resulted from eliminating the initial step in which three separate human translators produced independent draft translations. Because the LLM generated the initial draft, the human team's work focused entirely on the reconciliation and adjudication stages, reducing both calendar time and labor costs while maintaining the quality controls of the TRAPD framework, making the effort approximately twenty-five percent more cost efficient.

SUMMARY

In previous rounds of the GSS since 2006, the Spanish translations were produced using the Modified Committee Approach. Under this approach, three translators produced independent partial drafts that were combined into a single translation and then reviewed item-by-item in a joint reconciliation meeting with an adjudicator. For the 2026 round, the initial draft translation was produced using Gemini rather than by three independent translators. This is the only procedural deviation from the traditional method. Once the LLM based draft was prepared, the translators and adjudicator reviewed it using the same TRAPD aligned process as in previous GSS cycles, evaluating each item for meaning, structure, register, and appropriateness across Spanish dialects.

By reducing the amount of work translators invested in the first draft translation, the updated workflow reduced both the time and labor required for initial drafting. The reconciliation and adjudication steps remained unchanged, ensuring that translation quality and methodological consistency were preserved while still achieving cost and time efficiencies.

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