FORUM: QUALITATIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH
SOZIALFORSCHUNG

Volume 20, No. 3, Art. 19
September 2019

Conducting Qualitative Content Analysis Across Languages and Cultures

Sybille Reinke de Buitrago

Key words: language; culture; meaning-making; qualitative content analysis; United States; Germany; security policy; international terrorism; political science

Abstract: In this article, I discuss the challenges of conducting a qualitative content analysis in more than one language. Doing research across languages requires detailed attendance to different ways of meaning-making and to the role of distinct (political) cultures. Furthermore, additional reflection is needed in order to become aware and consider one's own role in interpretation and meaning-making. Based on a research project on threat perceptions and enemy image constructions in American and German security policy relating to international terrorism after 9/11, I illustrate the development of a coding frame fitting to the distinct languages and (political) cultural backgrounds, as well as ways of reflection.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction: Meaning-Making Across Languages and Cultures

2. Implementing QCA across Languages and Cultures

3. Conclusion and Implications

References

Author

Citation

1. Introduction: Meaning-Making Across Languages and Cultures

Conducting a qualitative content analysis (QCA) in more than one language and cultural context is a challenging endeavor. When researchers want to examine and understand a phenomenon in more than one country, they need to equally consider and be able to work in and with each involved language and (political) culture. Grasping meaning not only in one's own native language, but also in another, involves a number of difficulties. Doing so in a manner that allows for comparison is certainly a challenge, and one that also relates to subjectivity. Since researchers are all part of and thereby largely "caught" in their own language and cultural context, they may easily miss, misjudge or misinterpret meaning in another such context. In addition, some words require more than a simple translation, lest meaning is lost or unduly changed. Furthermore, some meanings must be considered in their (political) cultural contexts and with fine nuances. QCA across languages and cultures thus requires deep knowledge of and familiarity and experience with each, as well as reflection on the process. My aim here is to illustrate how these challenges were met. [1]

Previous discussions in *FQS* (e.g., JANSSEN, STAMANN, KRUG & NEGELE, 2017; MACHT, 2018; ROTH, 2013; TAROZZI, 2013) call to take the link of language and culture seriously. The aim is to avoid or reduce possible misunderstandings and to maintain semantic power, as well as to avoid processes of "domestication" and "foreignizing" (VENUTI, 1995, p.20). Some authors focus on the challenges of dealing with language and cultural issues; the

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

difficulties of translating are especially highlighted, namely, that humans, and therefore researchers, are always engaged in translating, for example when speaking (ROTH, 2013). Others focus more pragmatically on the difficulties of conducting research in more than one language, thus needing to translate, including in the coding process; they argue that translation processes involve biases and require cultural and linguistic negotiation by the researcher (TAROZZI, 2013). The difficulties of moving between languages is pointed to, here in the case of translating, in terms of how researchers interpret material, and how their own position towards the research interest shapes their interpretation. These are aspects that a researcher should reflect on (MACHT, 2018). In Section 2, I take up some of these aspects again. [2]

In the conduct of the QCA illustrated in the following, my goal was to develop a coding frame that can capture meaning in each language in a comparable manner. When moving between languages, researchers need to constantly engage in translating back and forth. Working with a multiple-language text corpus, and developing a coding frame that reflects this, requires constant comparison in order to capture the meaning and the political-cultural context, including the values that are touched on and/or expressed. Below, I proceed with some background on the case study. In Section 2, I elaborate on how I met the involved challenges, and in Section 3, I offer a brief conclusion, as well as implications for the further development of QCA. [3]

This contribution is based on my doctoral dissertation, in which I analyzed the discursive construction of United States (U.S.) and German security policy towards international terrorism after 9/11; the focus was placed on threat perception and enemy image constructions (REINKE DE BUITRAGO, 2010). My interest in and sense of comparing Germany and the U.S. are due to both countries sharing some aspects of political culture, as both are democracies, have some cultural affinity and have been engaged in close cooperation for decades. Both also exhibit differences due to distinct histories, experiences, values and capabilities, and thus also the development of partly diverging political cultures. In Germany, there has been a multilateral and consensus-oriented political socialization since 1945, whereas the U.S. is shaped by a unilateralist tendency, a superpower status and a feeling of exceptionalism, along with sufficient military power. My main question was how commonalities and differences shape threat perception and the resulting security policy on international terrorism in each country. For this, I conducted a QCA of strategy documents and speeches (from September 11, 2001 until 2009), complemented by qualitative interviews with decision makers and experts in foreign and security policy in both countries. Overall, I coded 846 pages of text (Germany: 401; U.S.: 445). A QCA was a suitable approach, since thereby I could uncover

> "the manifest and latent content of the material in their social context and meaning [with a view to] the perspective of the actors [… and] an interpretation that is intersubjectively traceable and in terms of content as complete as possible" (BORTZ & DÖRING, 2005, p.329, my translation). [4]

It is then possible to abstract semantic elements and extract communication aspects and values; in this, the researcher's previous knowledge also contributes to sense-making (FRÜH, 2001). I applied MAYRING's (2000, 2003) summarizing technique. [5]

2. Implementing QCA across Languages and Cultures

The coding frame included deductive and inductive categories. To minimize and reflect on the researcher's impact on sense-making and the position towards the research, thus to also manage subjectivity in the development of categories, I explored and critically reflected upon my pre-existing ideas. I also documented decisions made in the research process, and implemented memo-writing, triangulation, and a test phase as suggested in the literature (MAYRING, 2003; ULBERT, 2005). Of further and essential help was my living and working experience in both countries. Aside from being a native German, I have for ten years lived, studied and worked in the U.S. Such long-term experience tends to have a strong impact on a person. It comes with a daily, intensive and in-depth dealing, engaging and at times quarreling with language issues, meaning-making, and (political) cultural contexts and nuances. My concurrent academic study of intercultural communication was useful for my understanding of the dynamics of negotiation of different perspectives, perception patterns and norms. This then was an important part of the biographical positioning and interaction with research material. [6]

In the development of codes, I paid attention to their clear differentiation. MAYRING (2003) calls for reliability and exact application of codes, so that the resulting coding frame may also be broader. I developed categories in English and German in consideration of the respective language context, political cultural frame, and communication style. A mere translation of terms did not work at times, because the political cultural context or the language itself adds meaning. In some cases, due to fine but important differences or nuances, a category in German did not completely mirror the one in English. My aim was to develop codes that reflected the same meaning in both languages. This took into account the warnings stated above, namely, that researchers should work to translate words, terms or phrases correctly without "domesticating" or "foreignizing," and fully grasp the nuances of the political cultural context. Here, my living and working experience in both countries proved highly helpful in being aware of my own position towards the research interest, and to work with and in each language and cultural context. Furthermore, exchange with other researchers served to check my understanding and interpretation. Thus, during a research stay I discussed with U.S. researchers the precise wording of codes. I discussed German terms with German peers. The challenge here was the fine nuance of categories for correct and appropriate meaning. A few examples follow as illustration. [7]

One good example is the term "war" as in "war on terror" for the U.S., and the weaker terms *Kampf* and *Bekämpfung* as in *Terrorbekämpfung* for Germany. Each term reflects national context, historical experience, political socialization,

and norms for appropriate political behavior. These aspects and the wording are also part of the public and political discourse reflected in media and society. Thus, the term "war" and the linked notions of aggression and violence come with different connotations in the U.S. and in Germany, both states having had different experiences with war as such, leading to different socialization of political decision makers. While the U.S. had substantial positive experience with aggression and war, having gained its independence through aggression and won many of its own wars, as argued by PALLY (2007), Germany is shaped by a long history of wars on its own soil that led to great destruction and human toll. Of particular weight were World War I and World War II, in which Germany was defeated, whereas the U.S. came out as a victor and hero. Germany was thereafter shaped by tight Western integration and constraint in the European/EU multilateral setting. Decision-makers of both countries thus learned different lessons for which policy is appropriate and should be followed. In the qualitative content analysis, I thus had to attend to small differences in wording that described ways of fighting, combating, battling, struggling against, opposing, defending, engaging, countering a threat or risk, etc., as well as differences in wording that described actions more or less indirectly, and more or less strongly. Specifically, whereas in U.S. documents and statements I could easily identify the clear, direct and frequent references of "the war on terror," or of "battling" and "fighting," on the German side I had to search for similar references. Instead, I identified and had to settle for softer terms like "countering" a "threat" or even only a "risk," and had to carefully pick out the terms that circumvented the issue, that were more indirect and weaker in intensity. [8]

Another clear difference I found was the use of the term "enemy" [*Feind*], each having a distinct weight in Germany and the U.S. It was as common to use the term "war" in the U.S. as it was to speak of "enemies." In Germany, however, the experience with Nazism has shown to which horrors a certain language use and discourse can lead, thus, a taboo was formed around some terms, including the term "enemy." A mere counting of these terms in each country's security policy documents revealed that it was common on the American side, but notably infrequent or completely absent on the German side. Thus, I could hardly find the term *Feind* in German documents, and therefore had to pay close attention to terms describing it in a similar or related manner. I thus identified the term *Gegner*, which means "opponent(s)" and has much less intensity. Overall, I found that German documents were largely refrained from labeling other opposing entities in a very harsh manner, whereas U.S. documents showed a significant frequency of such labels. This again illustrates the different political culture, including a different level of threat perception and of othering processes: German decision makers seemed to refrain from negative othering, that is, from labeling another actor as the negative other, whereas U.S. decision makers commonly engaged in such processes. [9]

Linked to this is the difference in self-understanding as state, and in the seen-as-appropriate means for each state to act. Regarding these points, in the analysis I had to search for expressions of self-view, self-definition, self-understanding as state and as actor in the world, and of how the state should approach and deal

with rising challenges, risks and threats. I also had to place these expressions in comparison to one another, although they were at times different or of different quality and intensity. Key values in U.S. political behavior related to standing tall for freedom, defending liberty, fighting against evil, and the belief in their own (military) power. These were then also part of the key codes regarding motivations for behavior related to security and international terrorism. On the German side, I found an expressed special responsibility due to history, as well as the often stated and highlighted consensus and multilateralism that should guide Germany in the national and international arena, and as "non plus ultra." As a further key aspect in the coding of German texts and statements, I identified the still existing self-restraint in the application of power. In some instances, I had to extract references to the use of power from indirect expressions, as in Germany not being able to stand by passively, or as in some risks requiring more than civil means. In other instances, I could identify references to the use of power from elaborations of a shared responsibility for regional and global peace—a responsibility that leaders of Germany also had to fulfill, even if they preferred not to apply hard means. In some cases, I could find references to the use of power within the context of international or regional crises, and the stated need of a backing by international law, such as via UN resolutions. This would provide, from a German perspective, the legitimization that Germany needed due to its history. Via such backing, German leaders could then also apply military power. Of further interest was that U.S. and German documents differed in the degree of ambivalence of expressions. Whereas on the U.S. side I could find much more straightforwardness in expressions, on the German side there was much more ambivalence, with many statements being rather general and even vague. It seemed as if the authors on the German side wanted to avoid being called upon to actually take responsibility and act whenever crises did unfold and risks materialized. This would fit the self-restraint and the aversion to fully use military force. Thus, whereas on the U.S. side, there was a logic of coming forward to fight evil and defend freedom with military means, the German logic was one contributing to multilateral action with preferably civil means and, arguably, the hope to benefit from diffusion of responsibility within a larger multilateral setting. [10]

3. Conclusion and Implications

In this contribution, I have discussed some of the challenges of conducting a QCA in more than one language (English and German), and the challenges faced in consideration of the distinct language and (political) cultural contexts. These challenges included the development of a coding frame in which one can grasp and then compare meaning in both languages and (political) cultural contexts, and attend to nuances in wording and expressions in terms of political socialization, self-understanding and values. [11]

For the further development of QCA when involving analyses in different languages, it seems essential to closely attend to the language and (political) cultural context. Clearly of value are deeper experiences and familiarity with the languages and cultures being analyzed. Codes, as well as interpretations, should be cross-checked with relevant peers—at least to gain further contextual

information. While gaining the in-depth knowledge of another culture before conducting research is not feasible for every project, it is highly important to make earnest efforts in this direction. If such experience is lacking, coding frame development and even coding (or parts thereof) should be discussed with those that have the experience (be it via a research stay, which would be recommended, or by some other in-depth exchange). [12]

What applies to the conduct of QCA across languages also applies to QCA in any one language. Discussions and exchanges may be conducted in a structured and reflective manner. For example, researchers may already decide beforehand which particular documents and which categories need further discussion, and strategically plan to do so. Those categories that rise to key importance during the analysis should be discussed. Even when only in exchange with peers from one's own culture, researchers can develop a coding frame in a group; that group can discuss categories and meanings in-depth. The coding itself (or parts of it) can also be done in a group. Such group discussion is helpful, as the important articulation of pre-held ideas and assumptions, the reasons for a particular code, and the process of reflection are facilitated. With such efforts, a researcher can also make subjectivity more transparent, and strengthen traceability and reliability. Regarding the process of reflection, such an exchange among peers can be structured. Questions that may guide reflection include the following: How can I explain the weight and frequency of codes? Is there agreement among peers regarding the explanations, and why or why not? To what extent have co-constructions of researchers entered interpretations? What are the differences between codes in each language, and what can explain these differences? Researchers can and should formulate further questions depending on their research interest and the particular issues involved. [13]

QCA is an interesting, valuable, but also a time-intensive and complex method. By attending to the challenges of analyzing text in multiple languages and cultural contexts in a structured manner, the benefits of this method can be extended. Not only can researchers analyze questions, topics and developments across countries and cultures, they also gain a more diverse text corpus, all of which offer additional important insights. [14]

References

Bortz, Jürgen & Döring, Nicola (2005). *Forschungsmethoden und Evaluation* (3rd ed.). Heidelberg: Springer Medizin.

Früh, Werner (2001). *Inhaltsanalyse: Theorie und Praxis* (5th ed.). Konstanz: UVK.

Janssen, Markus; Stamann, Christoph; Krug, Yvonne & Negele, Christina (2017). Tagungsbericht: Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse – and beyond?. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *18*(2), Art. 7, http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-18.2.2812 [Accessed: June 4, 2019].

Macht, Alexandra (2018). From Romanian "soul" to English "heart": Dilemmas of cultural and gender representation in translating qualitative data. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *19*(2), Art. 18, http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-19.2.3002 [Accessed: December 19, 2018].

Mayring, Philipp (2000). Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *1*(2), Art. 20, http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-1.2.1089 [Accessed: December 4, 2018].

Mayring, Philipp (2003). *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Grundlagen und Techniken* (8th ed.). Weinheim: Beltz.

Pally, Marcia (2007). Warnung vor dem Freunde. *Internationale Politik*, *62*(1), 62-71, https://zeitschrift-ip.dgap.org/de/article/getFullPDF/13441 [Accessed: December 19, 2018].

Reinke de Buitrago, Sybille (2010). *Threat images in international relations: American and German security policy on international terrorism*. Marburg: Tectum.

Roth, Wolff-Michael (2013). Translation in qualitative social research: The possible impossible. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *14*(2), Art. 13, http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-14.2.1986 [Accessed: December 4, 2018].

Tarozzi, Massimiliano (2013). Translating and doing grounded theory methodology. Intercultural mediation as an analytic resource. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *14*(2), Art. 6, http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-14.2.1429 [Accessed: December 4, 2018].

Ulbert, Cornelia (2005). Konstruktivistische Analysen der internationalen Politik: Theoretische Ansätze und methodische Herangehensweisen. In Cornelia Ulbert & Christopf Weller (Eds.), *Konstruktivistische Analysen der internationalen Politik* (pp.9-34). Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Venuti, Lawrence (1995). *The translator's invisibility*. London: Routledge.

Author

Dr. Sybille REINKE DE BUITRAGO is a researcher at the Police Academy of the Federal State of Niedersachsen (Polizeiakademie Niedersachsen), where she manages the externally funded research project VIDEOSTAR (Video-Based Strategies Against Radicalization). She is also a fellow at the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg, Germany. In her research, she focuses on international relations, foreign policy, and security policy, in particular on identity, perception, emotions, and discourse. She has published, among others, in *Global Affairs*, *Asian Politics & Policy*, *Journal of Terrorism Research*, *Journal of Strategic Security*, *Journal of International Political Theory*, and *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*.

Contact:

Dr. Sybille Reinke de Buitrago

PolAk Nds & Institut für Friedensforschung und Sicherheitspolitik
Universität Hamburg IFSH
Beim Schlump 83, 20144 Hamburg
Germany

Tel.: +49 40 866077-0

E-mail: sybille.rdeb@gmail.com

Citation

Reinke de Buitrago, Sybille (2019). Conducting Qualitative Content Analysis Across Languages and Cultures [14 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *20*(3), Art. 19, http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-20.3.3384.