

Language and Issues – Influences on the Response Rate in Telephone Surveys in Switzerland

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Introduction

The question of immigration is an all-present issue on Switzerland's political and social agenda – especially the pronounced stream of German workers to the German-speaking part of Switzerland (Wahl 2009). According to Helbling (2011) there are certain resentments towards this distinct group of migrants. By conducting a **randomized field-experiment**, I measure the effect of the German language, which can be seen as a cue for nationality, compared to the Swiss dialect on the response rate in a telephone survey. Furthermore, I capture the effect of the survey topic on the response rate.

Only very few studies which strive towards linking the literature on survey non-response and immigration have been conducted – and doing this by employing a randomized field experiment is an approach that has, to my knowledge, not been used before.

Research Design

- 1500 subjects from three regions in Switzerland are randomly selected from Twixtel (phonebook-software) and are asked to participate in a telephone survey
- Calls are either in Swiss German or High German
- Topic is either migration (sensitive) or sport (non-sensitive)
- Blocked random assignment produces equally big treatment groups (Gerber & Green 2012)

Table 8: Blocks and Treatments

Treatment	Block			Total
	Zurich	Regensdorf	Appenzell	
German/sensitive	125	125	125	375
Dialect/sensitive	125	125	125	375
German/non-sensitive	125	125	125	375
Dialect/non-sensitive	125	125	125	375
Total	500	500	500	1500

- The outcome variable is response or non-response

Results

Intent-to-treat (ITT) Effect and Complier Average Causal Effect (CACE)

The survey topic and the interviewer's language have a statistically significant impact on the response rate!

- The effect of the survey topic is more pronounced than the one of language
- The German-speaking interviewer's response rate is 2.1 percentage points lower than the one of the dialect-speaking caller
- When asking about a sensitive issue (migration) the response rate was 3.2 percentage points lower than when asking about a non-sensitive topic (sport)

Hierarchy of Treatment Combinations

Dialect/Sport yields the highest response rate, German/Migration the lowest!

The response rate for the first treatment group, the reference category German/Migration, which is not displayed in the graph, is 2.9%. This rate includes compliers as well as non-compliers. This means that people who were not exposed to the treatment (because they did not pick up the phone) are still included in this analysis. The estimates of the other treatment groups have to be read in relation to German/Migration.

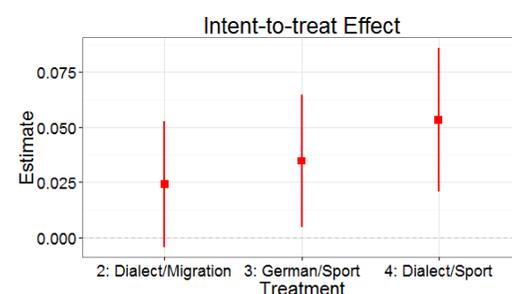


Figure 1: Intent-to-treat Effect

In the graph below you can see the Complier Average Causal Effect, which is the treatment effect on compliers only (Gerber & Green 2012). Compliers are those subjects who actually received the treatment – meaning that they picked up the phone. Again, the reference category is German/Migration with an estimate of 10.8%. The other treatment groups' estimates, which are displayed in the graph, have to be understood in relation to the reference category.

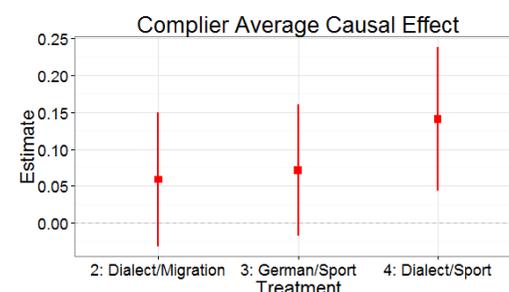


Figure 2: Complier Average Causal Effect

Effect in different Regions

No negative effect of High German in Zurich, statistically significant effect in Regensdorf!

- In Zurich, a caller speaking High German does not seem to experience a lower response rate because of the language
- The data suggests that there are statistically significant negative effects of High German in Regensdorf and Appenzell

Differences in Phone Call Duration

There are statistically significant differences in phone call duration between the four treatment groups!

I compare the arithmetic means of the phone call duration (only those, who rejected to take part in the survey)

- When talking Swiss dialect, the phone calls last longer on average
- The survey topic does not influence the average phone call duration

Conclusion

I show that the caller's language – as well as the survey topic – affects the response rate and that the use of a randomized field experiment is an effective way to identify the effect size. Unfortunately, I am not able to name the reason why that is the case. Is there an aversion towards German-speaking callers because of their perceived nationality (Helbling 2011) or are some people simply lazy because they feel obliged to respond in High German?

Moreover, the generalizability of the results is very limited because the sample lacks representativity. Furthermore, the calls should ideally be conducted by someone, who speaks accent-free High German as well as the Swiss dialect.

Literature

- Gerber, A. S., Green, D. P. (2012). Field experiment: Design, analysis, and interpretation (A. Shin, Ed.). W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- Helbling, M. (2011). Why Swiss-Germans dislike Germans: Opposition to culturally similar and highly skilled immigrants. *European Societies*, 13(1), 5-27.
- Wahl, S. (2009). Migration in internationaler Perspektive. In T. Fischer & D. Gossel (Eds.), 370-384. Allitera-Verlag.

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