Ethics and codes of ethics in conference interpreting

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Introduction

The aim of the chapter will be to discuss the core ethical issues and topics linked with conference interpreting (CI) as reflected in codes of ethics. Codes are a source of knowledge of all principles that should govern professional behaviour. They help to identify a profession in order to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and experience. Codes not only assume a function of guidelines for professionals, but also play a vital role in consolidating the profession. The chapter discusses some general considerations concerning codes of ethics in interpreting, such as their function and nature. Next, it presents the main tenets of the International Association of Conference Interpreters’ (AIIC) Code of Professional Ethics, the first such code in the interpreting profession, published in 1957. Therefore, it seems safe to say that conference interpreting was the starting point for the discussion of ethical issues in the interpreting profession after the Second World War. This chapter also describes the Directorate-General for Interpretation (DG SCIC) of the European Commission’s document entitled Ethics: A Practical Guide for DG SCIC (European Commission 2019). In the second part we will try to shed light on some new areas of conference interpreting in which ethical questions are actually debated within academia and professional associations, such as ethical considerations in conference interpreting when using new technologies, in crisis and conflict situations, as well as in conference interpreters’ training.

Ethics and codes of ethics in conference interpreting

Codes of ethics are useful for several reasons. First, codes play an important role in the professionalization of an activity. As Wilensky (1964) puts it, adopting a code of ethics is the last one of the five stages of professionalization (the first four being making the occupation full-time, establishing formal training, developing professional organizations and pushing for legalized protection) (in Grbić 2015; see also Dam & Gentile, Chapter 21, in this volume). Second, codes of ethics provide interpreters with a professional identity, integrity and autonomy designed to be respected by themselves and by those they interact with during their professional assignments (partners, colleagues, clients, users, event organizers, etc.). Third, by setting the standards of professional behaviour, codes of ethics install the feeling of being responsible towards the
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profession. Fourth, codes are also a tool to guide professional behaviour when encountering
dilemmas, when “interpreters make sense of problems, and find ‘spur-of-the-moment’ strat-
egies to address them, based upon their best understanding of the spirit of the Code” (Tate &
Turner 2002: 373, emphasis in the original). In what follows, we will discuss ethical consider-
ations and the function of codes of ethics in conference interpreting, as well as describe the
main principles laid down for professional behaviour in such codes.

The contribution of conference interpreting to the clarification of the
interpreter’s role

The emergence of conference interpreting as a profession at the beginning of the twentieth century
(see Baigorri-Jalón, Fernández-Sánchez & Payás, Chapter 1, and Dam & Gentile, Chapter 21, in
this volume) had a significant impact on the definition of the roles and tasks interpreters in gen-
eral are expected to carry out, as they are now reflected in the codes of ethics drafted in different
fields of interpreting (see, for example, the codes of AUSIT (2012), Chartered Linguists (2017),
CHIA (2002), EULITA (2013), NAD-RID (2005), NAJIT (2002)). Before this development,
“interpreters often appear[ed] all-round intermediaries carrying out a number of variegated and
diffuse functions in addition to their translational task” (Pöchhacker & Shlesinger 2002: 339).
But with the establishment of conference interpreting as a profession, “there appeared sharper
boundaries for what interpreters in highly visible international settings would or would not do”
(Pöchhacker & Shlesinger 2002: 339). The fact that these professionals enjoyed a relatively
high status and that they “found themselves working in the simultaneous mode from a booth”
(Pöchhacker & Shlesinger 2002: 339), i.e. clearly separated from the other participants of the
meetings, probably contributed to the fact that “the confines of their role in the communication
process tended to become even narrower, with little chance of direct interaction with the com-
municating parties other than by their audible translational output” (Pöchhacker & Shlesinger
2002: 339). In this sense, the professionalization of conference interpreting contributed to the
definition and clarification of the interpreter’s role in general. This narrower role means that
their tasks become less wide-ranging and more focused on interpreting.

The main principles reflected in interpreting-related codes of ethics

The discussion on ethics in interpreting ranges from universalist statements of general principles,
such as Chesterman’s ‘Hieronymic Oath’ (2001) through the recognition of possible variations
according to setting, situation, or the needs of the participants, to more open-ended and relativistic attitudes. Professional bodies and associations have elaborated and defined principles
written down in codes of ethics or conduct as well as in guidelines or standards of (best) prac-
tice. The main recognized principles shown in the codes are accuracy commitment, competence,
confidentiality, impartiality, integrity, invisibility, neutrality, transparency, and finally, working
conditions (Bancroft 2005; Setton & Prunč 2016; Valero García 2011). In different codes, some
of those principles can be referred to by various synonyms or related terms, e.g. confidentiality
can mean secrecy or discretion, impartiality may stand for neutrality, objectivity or professional
distance and accuracy may mean fidelity or completeness (Van Vaerenbergh 2020: 319).

Codes of ethics and professional awareness

In addition, codes also help to identify a profession in order to facilitate the sharing of know-
ledge and experience. Codes not only assume a function of guidelines for professionals, but
also play a vital role in consolidating the profession. This implies that they contribute to raising, maintaining and reinforcing professional awareness in already practising and would-be interpreters as well. The concept of professional awareness means that professionals know and feel that the profession is different from others, they are familiar with the main differences distinguishing their profession from similar ones, and they can explain these differences to non-members of the profession using simple metalanguage in an accessible way. In the case of conference interpreters, this means being able to explain the difference between them and translators, community interpreters or language teachers in terms of their knowledge, skills, tasks and responsibilities. In addition, professional awareness makes it possible to distinguish between what is professional behaviour and what is not. Professional behaviour is motivated by a professional attitude, and codes of ethics also play an important role in helping interpreters adopt a professional attitude by providing guidelines for how to act and go about their task.

The prescriptive nature of codes of ethics in interpreting

One of the concerns raised by interpreting scholars concerning codes of ethics is their prescriptive nature (see also Pradas Macías & Zwischenberger, Chapter 19, in this volume). The first codes of ethics for interpreters published in the second half of the twentieth century can be, in fact, considered prescriptive; they stipulate what the interpreter “shall” or “should” do when working. In general, such codes prescribe that the interpreter “should remain unobtrusive and preferably invisible, impartial and limit their function strictly to interpreting” (Fowler, Ng & Coulthard 2013: 405). These codes perpetuated the myth of the interpreter as the invisible professional, or the invisible black-box, or that of the ‘ideal’ interpreter. In Roy’s wording, interpreters historically were required to reproduce a message “faithfully, accurately, and without emotional or personal bias …, without changing the messages’ intent and to do so with uncommon accuracy, while maintaining a stance of impartiality and neutrality” (2002: 347). More precisely this means that they “may not introduce topics, ask questions of their own, interject their opinion or give advice and, most importantly, must keep the entire transaction confidential”. This role “has been compared to a machine, a window, a bridge, and a telephone … in trying to compress the complexity of the role to a simple, singular analogy” (2002: 347). This comparison implies the invisibility of the interpreter, which in turn leads to a sense of alienation, which might have been reinforced by the advent and spread of conference interpreting, where the “frame of booths clearly demarcate the social geography of the setting” and the interpreter may be perceived as “an employed mediator, an ‘automaton’ that reproduces discourse” (Apostolou 2009: 4).

Codes of ethics and the shift in the perception of the interpreter from non-person to human being

However, at the beginning of the 2000s we can see a shift in the perception of the interpreter, characterized by a new approach to studying their visibility/invisibility across various types of interpreting including community, court, conference and sign language interpreting (Angelelli 2003; Bischoff et al. 2012; Bot 2003; Diriker 2004; Gentile et al. 1996; Kalina 2015; Lee 2009; Monacelli 2009; Roy 2002; Schweda Nicholson 1994; Tate & Turner 2002; Wadensjö 1998). Nowadays the interpreter’s codified professional behaviour seems to be a myth rather than reality (Fowler et al. 2013; Katan & Straniero-Sergio 2001; Monacelli & Punzo 2001). As a result, the interpreter is increasingly seen as a human being and not purely a non-person, or a more-or-less invisible instrument.
The invisible ‘black-box’ or the conduit model, which perceives the interpreter as a mere conveyor of words, is now contested, as interpreting is considered situated communication, with interpreters working in an ever-evolving environment. Accordingly, “ethics in interpreting should not concern the abstract judgement of an interpreter’s behaviour”, which is “of a matter of knowing how to select rules and apply them in a particular situation” (Monacelli & Punzo 2001: 280).

In general, the difficulty in complying with any code of ethics in all circumstances is due to the fact that interpreting does not occur in a non-contextual void: it is a situated act of communication defined by its evolving context and participants with their own agendas and points of view, where interpreters have to take linguistic and non-linguistic decisions in order to fulfil their most basic role of facilitating the communication process.

Codes are useful tools for defining professional behaviour or the *modus operandi* of interpreters but for their correct implementation professional interpreters need to adopt a professional attitude and know the ins and outs of the profession in order to make the best possible choices when facing ethical dilemmas on the ground. As Kermit puts it “when it comes to doing the right thing, *wisdom* transcends what can be explicated as *rules or codes*” (2007: 249).

**Codes of ethics in Interpreting Studies**

At the same time, codes of ethics for interpreters have been amply criticized in Interpreting Studies. Since professional interpreting may occur in an infinite number of places, situations and contexts on countless subject matters, often involving participants speaking various languages and belonging to different cultures, no code of ethics can anticipate all the professional situations interpreters may encounter and thus claim to be universal and as such ensure that an interpreter’s behaviour can be considered ethical at all times by everyone. This is probably the reason why there is no “unified code of ethics for all interpreters across all sectors” (Setton & Prunč 2016: 146). Nevertheless, good codes of ethics should provide a framework or a set of parameters to guide appropriate decision making by professionals. They are not designed to specify ‘correct’ responses to every possible issue, but to operate at a higher level of abstraction—and, when set at that level, they should be designed to govern/direct all professional actions. At the same time, Albl-Mikasa, taking a cognitive constructivist view of both dialogue and conference interpreting, emphasizes that interpreters’ prior knowledge of codes and norms is necessary for their application, because “interpreters can consider and put into practice in the situation (*performance*) only what they know (*competence*)” (2020: 95). Moreover, she notes that guidelines of good practice “can only serve as idealized and decontextualized prototypical role models for the setting they were drawn up for” and that their implementation varies “according to individual and situational factors in the actual interpreting event” (Albl-Mikasa 2020: 109).

As mentioned above, interpreting is not a homogeneous field of activity (legal and healthcare, community and conference, crisis and conflict, etc.), but it is a professional community with its basic requirements for a professional interpreter in terms of ethics reflected in the various codes elaborated by the professional organizations and associations. Interestingly, there is an overlap between the different types of interpreting, indicating a consensus on the most important principles since the various codes of ethics do reflect recurring themes. Every interpreting assignment has its specific aspects, but at the same time shares certain basic characteristics, deriving from the basic nature of interpreting being a language service provided for a client or clients whose satisfaction needs to be taken into account.

The fact that codes of ethics are a recurrent topic in Interpreting Studies demonstrates not only the complex nature of ethics but also highlights that “the constant pursuit of ethics,
the continuous examination of the positions we occupy as mediators between languages and cultures is, in itself, an ethical endeavour” (Van Wyke 2013: 557). In what follows, we will analyse the code of ethics of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), one of the most often cited authoritative texts in the field of conference interpreting.

The Code of Ethics of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC)

AIIC is the only international organization specifically created for conference interpreters (see Dam & Gentile, Chapter 21, in this volume). Currently it has 3,109 members in 104 countries covering 64 languages. It was founded in 1953 and its code of ethics was published in 1957 updated in 2018 (AIIC 2018). The AIIC’s Code is the earliest and the only international code of ethics in the field of conference interpreting. Although written norms or standards of conduct for interpreters date back at least to the Spanish colonial laws in the sixteenth century (Giambruno 2008; Pöchhacker 2016), the AIIC’s Code of ethics is the first which was not imposed from outside by authorities but was adopted by a professional organization.

The AIIC’s Code of professional ethics first defines very briefly its purpose, consisting of laying down the standards of integrity, professionalism and confidentiality. The second part is entitled Code of Honour, “an almost antique appellation, reflecting the organization’s view of its own place in its international environment” (Ozolins 2015: 321). The Code of Honour consists of five articles stipulating the ‘absolute secrecy’ principle and prohibiting “deriving any personal gain whatsoever from confidential information”. Other principles laid down are the need for continuing professional development, protecting the dignity of the profession, only accepting assignments for which the members are qualified, accepting only one assignment for the same period, collegiality and safeguarding the interests of the profession. Ozolins states that, of these, only the principle of ‘absolute secrecy’ can be recognized as an ethical principle (2015: 321).

Interestingly enough, there is no mention of accuracy, a recurrent theme (see Pradas Macías & Zwischenberger, Chapter 19, in this volume) in codes of ethics in the field of other types of interpreting. The fact that AIIC does not include accuracy, completeness or faithfulness in its ethical code seems to indicate that it does not consider accuracy an ethical issue but rather a cognitive one. Another well-established ethical principle in the professional interpreting community, that of neutrality or impartiality, is yet another item missing from the AIIC Code. A possible explanation may be found in the fact that conference interpreters mostly work in booths, thus separated from the rest of the participants. Having less direct contact with their users, clients or consumers during the act of interpreting may involve fewer ethical dilemmas in this sense. Furthermore, there is no indication as to the role of conference interpreters in the communication situation so much so that “from this code, it would be impossible to say what a conference interpreter does or does not do” (Ozolins 2015: 321). This might be due to the fact that according to AIIC, “conferences interpreters translate a spoken message from one language to another in a formal setting” (2020d). This definition of conference interpreters’ task and the ‘formal settings’ criteria can either suggest that they are simple conveyors of languages reflecting the conduit model challenged at the beginning of the 2000s, or that the perception of their job is rooted in the approach developed by the French interpretative theory of translation (Seleskovitch 1975; Seleskovitch & Lederer, 1984; see also Gile & Barranco-Droge, Chapter 25, in this volume), according to which, the task of an interpreter is to grasp the meaning expressed in one language and convey it in another.

The third part of the AIIC Code describes the working conditions necessary for offering the best quality interpretation possible, such as sound quality, visibility and comfort criteria set out
in the various technical standards it has approved (e.g. ISO 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2017, 2019). The working conditions item also mentions never working alone in the booth, the avoidance of using relay, the reception of texts to be read out before the event, briefing sessions if possible. Not performing any other duties other than conference interpreting at an event also falls under working conditions in the AIIC Code. The last item is the prohibition to accept working conditions contrary to those laid down in the AIIC Code. The AIIC’s Professional standards (AIIC 2016) complement this part of the Code and provide more detailed provisions concerning the exercise of the profession (professional address, contracts, remuneration, non-remunerated work, teams of interpreters, working days, non-working days, travel, rest days, accommodation and subsistence, etc.).

The AIIC Code is very concise, comprising only nine paragraphs on four pages. It is also prescriptive as it enumerates items the conference interpreter shall/should or will always/never do. As Ozolins states, “[it] serves as an enunciation of presumed excellence, a guarantee of discretion, and an affirmation of professional solidarity and indeed privilege” (2015: 321). It is indeed more a ‘Code of Honour’ than a code of practice or ethics.

The AIIC Code has had a significant impact internationally. In terms of ethics, “AIIC international standards dominate the field” (Bancroft 2005: 31). This impact is so important that “[i]n some developing nations, these are virtually the only ethics and standards adopted by interpreters; they also influence training programs around the world” (Bancroft 2005: 17). Furthermore, in Europe, various codes of ethics “reflect the AIIC approach, giving virtually no details on the role or practice, and confining ethical principles to confidentiality and maintaining the dignity of the profession” (Ozolins 2015: 321). Ozolins (2015) adds that there are codes which follow a different plan in Europe and in the Americas as well. Furthermore, they offer more detailed practice in terms of ethics if they refer to community settings.

**The European Commission’s practical guide to ethics for DG SCIC**

The European Commission is the largest employer of conference interpreters and has published a document entitled *Ethics: A Practical Guide for DG SCIC* (European Commission 2019). It is not a code of ethics but a document offering practical guidelines for ethical behaviour for persons working for DG SCIC at the European Commission, regardless of status, who are obliged to respect the Staff Regulations. This document aims to be a practical guide to ethical behaviour for all those working for DG SCIC, including interpreters, helping both staff and freelance interpreters to solve ethical dilemmas arising in situations typical of their working environment.

This practical guide consists of seven chapters. The first chapter is a general introduction, and the second enumerates the general ethical principles. Individual obligations include avoidance of conflict of interest, legal proceedings and immunity, freedom of expression, outside activity in active service, outside activity after leaving service, outside activity during a leave on personal grounds, personal use of ICT tools. General rules concerning relations with the public include interest groups (lobbies), confidentiality, protection of personal data, serving the citizen, press and media relations, rights of interested parties. It also provides complementary information on administrative inquiries and disciplinary procedures, whistleblowing and professional incompetence. The next section entitled ‘Social Media’ refers to the personal use of social media and stipulates that sharing and commenting on EU-related topics are “part of the principle of the right to freedom of expression” (European Commission 2019: 9). It summarizes the core principles of appropriate and safe communications on EU matters in terms of freedom of expression, circumspection, confidentiality, objectivity, impartiality and
loyalty to the Institution. Chapter four provides information on meeting room management and conference organization. Chapter five is entitled ‘The interpreters’ specific deontology’ and underlines the fact that “interpreters spend most of their time in particular working environments and have special working patterns”. Thus, the chapter aims “to address these specificities from an ethical point of view” and captures “specific risks only interpreters are exposed to” (European Commission 2019: 13). The general principles are the protection of the Commission’s reputation, quality of interpretation and confidentiality. The rest of the ethical principles pertaining to the interpreter’s work are professional conduct, teamwork, meeting preparation, following the instructions of the line manager, punctuality, booth manners, providing listening comfort to customers and respectful use of computers and mobile phones in the booth, and finally the dress code. Chapter six provides practical examples reflecting the applicable rules and guidelines for all DG SCIC staff. These examples are organized around the following topics: loyalty to the Commission, respecting confidentiality, contacts with the media and the use of social media, reporting wrong-doing, conflict of interests, external activities, financial integrity and harassment. Chapter seven provides the general references and forms.

This document provides insight into not only the ethical dilemmas but also the professional life of interpreters working for a large international organization. At the heart of each ethical consideration is the provision of the highest possible quality of interpretation in all circumstances. This, and the notions of loyalty, dignity and confidentiality are principles that can also be found in the AIIC Code of ethics. An important difference between the two documents is that DG SCIC’s practical guide focuses on the interpreter in situated action, thus reflecting the change in the conception of the interpreter from an invisible service provider of linguistic mediation to a professional carrying out a complex task.

Interpreting in crises and conflict situations

As mentioned before, AIIC developed a code of ethics and standards of practice that have been recognized and carried forward by conference interpreters throughout the world. Many of these standards are also followed by other branches of the profession, such as court, community or sign language interpreters (see Tiselius, Chapter 4, and Turner, Grbić, Stone, Tester & de Wit, Chapter 38, in this volume). In contrast, language mediators, civilians or military personnel working as interpreters in conflict or post-conflict areas, recruited locally or internationally to assist local population or render a service on the frontlines, lack basic information about ethical principles of the profession, their rights and obligations and best practices.

Interpreters contracted to work in conflict or crisis zones are rarely trained conference interpreters. Although they lack professional training, they provide a vital service to the armed forces, NGOs, humanitarian international organizations, journalists, etc. During armed conflicts or crisis situations, their life and health may be put in danger. Many interpreters die or are injured while helping the armed forces, be they those of the enemy or their national forces. The issue of direct protection of interpreters is closely linked to ethical dilemmas they face while working during and after an armed conflict or in a crisis situation. The responsibility and autonomy of an interpreter in decision-making while interpreting are of a genuine ethical nature as they may be asked or forced to bypass the ethical principles of impartiality, neutrality or confidentiality during their work. For this reason, an urgent need for the elaboration of guidelines to help and support interpreters, whether they are part of the military or civilians has been stressed by numerous scholars and by AIIC itself (Fitchett 2010, 2012). In 2012, as a result of endeavours undertaken by this association together with The Red T, an
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American non-profit organization advocating the protection of translators and interpreters in high-risk settings, and the International Federation of Translators (FIT), a *Conflict Zone Field Guide for Civilian Translators/Interpreters and Users of Their Services* (AIIC, FIT, RED T 2012) was drafted. This guide outlines the basic rights and responsibilities as well as best practices recommended by the three above-mentioned organizations. It applies to translators and interpreters working as field linguists for the armed forces, journalists, NGOs and other organizations in conflict zones or high-risk settings. It contains recommendations for translators, interpreters as well as the users of their services concerning ethical issues such as impartiality, confidentiality and accuracy while translating or interpreting. Also, it provides guidelines for working conditions of an interpreter in conflict or crisis zones. The guide stresses the rights and the obligations of language mediators, their roles and the limitations of their job. Finally, it contains recommendations on how to respect, protect and support translators and interpreters in war zones, assuming that at least the vast majority of interpreters and translators working in conflict or crisis zones have not committed any crimes, and therefore deserve the solidarity of their colleagues—regardless of the party they are working for.

The issues of ethical demands faced by interpreters in humanitarian crisis zones as observed by conference interpreting scholars (e.g. Moser-Mercer & Bali 2008) resulted in the launching of training courses for field interpreters which cover training in basic interpreting skills and professional ethics (e.g. the project InZone at the University of Geneva (InZone 2020)).

The ethical principles of solidarity and collegiality are also expressed in numerous actions undertaken at the national or international level with the aim to protect those fellow interpreters who suffer from danger, threat or discrimination. For example, a coalition of international and national, inter- or non-governmental associations and organizations of translators, interpreters or linguists comprising, among others, AIIC, FIT, CIUTI (Conférence internationale permanente d’instits universitaires des traducteurs et interprètes) as well as non-governmental organizations, such as Red-T and Critical Link International, addresses open letters to political authorities in various countries with the aim of protecting interpreters and translators worldwide and calling their attention to the situation of interpreters and translators in conflict and crisis zones. For example, an open letter was sent to the Prime Minister of Australia on behalf of Iraqi interpreters left behind after working for the Australian Defence Force (AIIC 2020e).

**Ethics and new modes of conference interpreting in the digital age**

Information and communication technologies (ICT) have radically changed the way we live and work. Interpreting as a practice and profession is no exception. Recent developments in ICTs have led to new tools for interpreters, trainers and students. All of these groups have gained access to more resources and technological developments, bringing new teaching and learning methods and modes of conference interpreting (see Fantinuoli, Chapter 36, in this volume). Undeniably, the changes in the practice and perception of the interpreting profession bring new reflections of an ethical nature highlighting that the recent developments in ICTs have tended to reshape interpreting practices so that the need for an interpreter’s physical presence is reduced or even eliminated (Kalina & Ziegler 2016: 410; see also Seeber & Fox, Chapter 35, in this volume). All these issues may have ethical repercussions.

The use of technology in conference interpreting concerns three different domains: (1) the mode of interpreting; (2) the practice of interpreting; and (3) the training of future conference interpreters. First, the mode of interpreting is undergoing profound changes as new modalities, such as transterpreting (live translating of written chat messages), respeaking, speech-to-text simultaneous interpreting or machine interpreting (Pöchhacker 2019) have appeared.
Second, in the practice of the profession, remote interpreting, digital booths, computer-assisted interpreting tools (CAIT) or terminology management software for interpreters have recently become an aid in the conference interpreter’s everyday work (Fantinuoli 2016, 2018) and simultaneous interpreting delivery platforms (SIDPs) have appeared on the market. Third, the use of technology has changed conference interpreter training with respect to self-study or in-class work. Students need to acquire new competences and be prepared for this new professional reality as ICTs are increasingly being incorporated into the interpreter training classroom, with devices such as transcription and annotation software as well as distant teaching platforms, online teaching and learning resources, online speech repositories, websites and new learning environments (Rodríguez Melchor et al. 2020).

All these changes result in the need to reconsider the practice of conference interpreting linked to new phenomena, new modalities and new clients (Pöchhacker 2019). Furthermore, it seems to be vital to reshape professional ethics to respond to the novel needs of interpreting both in practice and in training driven by Artificial Intelligence (AI), and with even some degree of machine interpreting replacing the human interpreter. As the use of technology advances, new ethical issues emerge among conference interpreting providers and users, trainers and trainees, scholars and professional associations. Therefore, a thorough discussion needs to be undertaken in the following ethical domains:

- the necessity for continuing professional development involving the broad use of ICTs which include conference interpreters’ new competences and digital literacy;
- the principle of confidentiality which needs to be reshaped in the case of machine interpreting or the use of artificial intelligence-based CAIT, parallel to the current emergence of the principles of ethical use of big data;
- the surge of SIDPs in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis in 2020 which entails such considerations as online confidentiality and the responsibility for technical errors when working from home (see AIIC 2020c);
- the changing standards concerning accuracy in machine interpreting as for the moment in interpreting a post-editing system similar to the one used in machine translation is not foreseeable.

However, little has been published on ethics and ICTs in conference interpreting and machine interpreting in particular (Downie 2019). In the field of translation, there have been various attempts to tackle the issue of translation and post-editing in terms of ethics (Bowker 2020; Kenny 2011). In the context of interpreting, it is still uncertain how machine interpreting will develop but it is clear that sooner or later we will need some kind of ethical basis to be offered as a standard. Currently, when online distance interpreting has grown significantly, confidentiality and personal data protection are issues debated in the conference interpreting community. AIIC’s Guidelines for Distance Interpreting (AIIC 2020b) emphasize the fact that the hub or the platform provider is responsible for safeguarding the confidentiality of documents, and that an agreement signed by the organizers and interpreters should stipulate who will be liable for ensuring that the infrastructure used for the event complies with confidentiality and data protection measures. This principle is reiterated in AIIC’s recommendations issued for the Covid-19 crisis (AIIC 2020a). Ethics are mentioned in terms of quality and confidentiality, and it is explained that services providers or employers are responsible for ensuring the working conditions for providing high quality interpretation even if the interpreters have to work in extremis from home.
Conference interpreting training

Professional ethics is almost universally present in all university-level conference interpreter training programmes, either as distinct modules or incorporated into other courses. As Donovan puts it, “Training programmes are a significant channel for establishing professional identity and values. This is why modules should be devoted to the ethical dimension of the profession in the curricula” (2011: 109). Furthermore, the knowledge of the profession, professional identity, rights and obligations of a conference interpreter on the public or private market should accompany the student’s acquisition of interpreting skills and knowledge-based components (Sawyer 2004: 39). Thus, in training programmes, ethical issues are being addressed more or less explicitly and in a more or less formal format. One of the reference documents for training conference interpreters is the Core Curriculum of the European Masters in Conference Interpreting (EMCI) Consortium (EMCI 2020). It states that in order to prepare the students for their future professional careers, the EMCI programmes include professional ethics in their curriculum. Such practice-oriented training programmes familiarize students with the most relevant codes of ethics and allow a wide range of activities, feedback and discussion on ethics in conference interpreting in and outside the classroom. The principles the students need to be acquainted with during the training are the rules of confidentiality, impartiality, neutrality, and accuracy. According to Setton and Dawrant (2016: 371), professional conference interpreter training should focus also on the most widely acknowledged professional values of competence and integrity which are based on solidarity, collegiality and professionalism.

The preparation for adhering to the professional ethics and standards ideally starts from the very first moment during training. Students must be prepared for a variety of situations and be given a viable set of techniques and strategies for dealing with them, through lectures, case studies, observations, discussions and debates and finally during practical classes in order to familiarize them with their future work environment and implementations of ethics and standards of conduct (Setton & Dawrant 2016: 372). The ethical principles are also achieved through relations with the client, who should ensure optimal working conditions for the interpreter; and generate mutual trust and respect. Therefore, during the training, the students should also be acquainted with their clients’ norms of professional practice in order to draw the line at requests for unethical or unprofessional practices, or to establish good practice when clients are unsure about how interpreting works best (Ozolins 2007). Their status, credibility and trustworthiness as professionals will depend on such internalized norms being ethical, coherent, functional and compatible with market realities.

However, despite a consensus on ethical behaviour, trainers should warn students of ethical dilemmas which may occur in a professional context. Real-life cases occurring in conference settings and concerning the ethical issues of confidentiality, impartiality or neutrality of interpreters are thoroughly discussed by Phelan et al. (2020: 122–137) and Setton and Dawrant (2016: 341–372). Therefore, it is important that the education of ethics in conference interpreters training provides trainees with conceptual or practical tools so they can deal with situations when professional standards and ethical principles are undermined, when conference interpreters are asked to interpret profanities, insults or unintelligible discourse, when they are requested to provide information, opinions or advice, when they accept situations which will not allow them to interpret accurately or when they are asked to interpret during criminal cases when the witness or victim’s life is endangered. It is also important to train students to deal with situations when they face political pressures to bypass the cornerstone of professional ethics, that is the principle of confidentiality. The issue of professional secrecy has been thoroughly discussed by interpreters and professional associations, after Magda Fitas-Dukaczewska,
a Polish conference interpreter, refused to reveal information to the National Prosecution Authority about a conversation held between the Polish and Russian Prime Ministers from her interpreting assignment and when Marina Gross, a US State Department interpreter, was summoned to testify so she could disclose what had transpired during the USA–Russia summit in 2018 (Bușila 2019; Weiser 2018). These examples show that conference interpreters’ ethics education should also prepare students to face potential risks in ethically complex situations and teach them to make situated ethical decisions in their future profession.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have presented some ethical queries which are currently debated within the professional community of conference interpreters. Ethics are an intrinsic element of the quality of the profession and the code of ethics constitutes the final stage of the professionalization of conference interpreting. Our analysis showed that conference interpreters are bound by codes of ethics to uphold the main requirements of the profession (i.e. ethical principles of confidentiality, integrity, impartiality, neutrality, accuracy, professionalism, professional development and working conditions), thus proving their commitment to best practice. The ethical behaviour of an interpreter is also linked with the concept of professional development, solidarity and collegiality. Those principles are enumerated in the Code of Professional Ethics of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) and in the Practical Guide for DG SCIC. National codes of ethics for conference interpreters often follow the example of those two documents.

Furthermore, specific training in the domain of ethical issues needs to be and in fact is being offered in the majority of conference interpreting programmes. Outside the area of training, the idea of ethical rules and conditions in the practice of conference interpreting should be more widely spread among clients and users of interpreter’s services on the public market.

Nonetheless, in various cases observed on the private market, interpreters must follow their clients’ norms of professional practices which can cause unethical or unprofessional behaviour in the interpreters (unprofessional working conditions, violation of the principle of confidentiality, etc.). Additionally, the rules and standards of professional service are not always acknowledged and embraced by the growing number of interpreters without adequate training and by the local agencies which recruit them. As a consequence, this may undermine the prestige of the conference interpreting profession in the long run.

Finally, applying ICT and AI to conference interpreting settings and training of conference interpreters calls for an increased discussion concerning the major ethical concerns of competence, confidentiality and accuracy in the profession.

In conclusion, we consider that professional associations of interpreters should reinforce their efforts to disseminate information about the ethical behaviour, best practices and high quality standards of the profession, not only among young interpreters but also among all stakeholders in interpreting services. The emphasis put on professionalization and the appropriate training will enable professionals to increase the motivation to perform well and in an ethical manner.

Note

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Further reading


References


Kalina, Sylvia 2015. Ethical challenges in different interpreting settings. Special Issue of MonTI 2, 63–86.


