The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Ethics

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Conference interpreter ethics

Publication details
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781003127970-16
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Published online on: 17 Dec 2020

How to cite: Wen Ren, Mingyue Yin. 17 Dec 2020, Conference interpreter ethics from: The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Ethics Routledge
Accessed on: 03 Aug 2023
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781003127970-16

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Conference interpreter ethics

Wen Ren and Mingyue Yin

1 Introduction

Although interpreter’s ethical principles had already been partially covered in interpreting-related handbooks (e.g. Herbert 1952), professional codes of conduct (AIIC, AUSIT, etc.), and occasionally in some first-hand experience-based articles since the 1950s (Yu 1951; Tang and Zhou 1958), more scholarly discussion on the ethics of interpreting started to gain momentum after the publication of Return to Ethics (Pym 2001). Researchers exploring ethical issues in interpreting usually focus on what an interpreter should (or is expected to) be or do and what an interpreter is and actually does in public service/community interpreting, where interpreters may have some room to maneuver their subjectivity/agency — that is, their capacity to act independently and to make their own free choices (Barker 2005, 448) — when their default judgment of what’s right is challenged (Angelelli 2004a, 2004b; Dean 2011; Inghilleri 2005, 2012; Ren 2010). Conference interpreters’ agency, on the other hand, is believed to be often restricted by their working environment, the interpreting modes, institutional constraints, as well as the expectations of others concerning their roles in such situations.

In this chapter, conference interpreting is defined as interpreter-facilitated communicative events that happen in formal settings, such as diplomatic, political, and military meetings between countries or regions, or between and within supranational organizations (such as the EU or UN organizations), or in formal conferences focusing on specific topics. Conference interpreting can take place in modes of either simultaneous interpreting (SI) or consecutive interpreting (CI). Unlike community interpreting, where interpreters are often present with interlocutors in close proximity with more information of their identity (names, professional experiences, institution affiliations, etc.) revealed, conference interpreters are to a certain degree “detached” from their interpreting service receivers because of their physical location and the formality of the event. Simultaneous conference interpreters (sign language interpreters excluded here) most often work in a booth at a distance away from speakers. In some rare conference settings when a separate booth is not available, they are placed normally at the back or on one side of the front of a conference venue that enables them to have a clear view of the speaker. In either circumstance interpreters’ visibility is through their voices, leaving the interpreting service receivers a limited access to their identity and physical
presence. Even in whispered SI, conference interpreters are more likely seated behind clients, which weakens their visibility due to their low voice and hardly observed extra-linguistic factors (e.g. facial expressions, gestures) and the often restricted one-direction communication mode. Consecutive conference interpreters enjoy a slightly higher degree of freedom and more visibility, because they are often seated next to the main speaker and interpret after the speaker pauses, thus making them more conspicuous to the audiences. But due to the generally formal atmosphere of conferences, institutional restrictions on interpreters’ behaviours, some participants’ expectation of conference interpreters’ role as language experts only, as well as interpreters’ own perception of their role in such situations, consecutive conference interpreters are less likely than public service interpreters to execute discourse process management strategies such as initiating, interrupting, or distributing a speaking turn. And they are usually more controlled in paralinguistic and nonverbal aspects as well when compared with community or liaison interpreters. For instance, one might assume that they do not often demonstrate rich vocal varieties or gesticulate much unless they have to. This also means that if conference interpreters are caught in an ethically debatable situation, the interpreting strategies that work in similar situations in liaison or community interpreting, such as asking for further explanation from the speaker, initiating a dialogue turn in favour of a particular participant in communication, etc., may not be as effective or cannot even be implemented in the first place. On the other hand, as there is little power differential among conference participants (in particular when compared with the opposite situation in medical or court interpreting), it is generally believed that conference interpreters seldom encounter the need for “alignment” or partisanship, i.e. siding with or leaning towards one side by offering suggestions, giving advice, gatekeeping certain information, etc. (Ren 2010), unless their institutional loyalty requires them to do so, as with EU interpreters’ alignment with EU institutions (Beaton 2007).

This being said, it doesn’t mean that in conference interpreting ethics is not an issue, or that conference interpreters always observe professional ethical principles, or that clients always judge their behaviours according to professional codes of conduct. Discussions have been heard in real-life interpreting events and, to a lesser extent, seen in literature (Kalina 2000; Diriker 2004; Donavan 2011; Duflou 2016) regarding conference interpreters’ competence, (in)fidelity, (non)neutrality, confidentiality, etc. Besides, ethical issues arising from the recent development of machine-aided interpreting, AI interpreting, and human–machine interaction also fall mostly into the sphere of conference interpreting within the interpreting genres, which will be discussed in section 4.2.

2 Previous research on conference interpreter ethics

Although most scholarly works on ethics in interpreting studies focus on ethical issues in community interpreting (see Chapter 15 “Ethics in public service interpreting” in this volume), and in-depth discussion of ethics-related problems in conference interpreting is scarce, interpreting communities and professional translation and interpreting (T&I) organizations have addressed these issues long ago, though mostly in prescriptive rather than descriptive or explanatory manners. The Interpreter’s Handbook: How to Become a Conference Interpreter by Jean Herbert (1952) is the earliest searchable systematic writing of what a conference interpreter should be equipped with and should do. As the chief interpreter of the United Nation’s interpretation service, Herbert summarizes the qualifications that conference interpreters need to possess and the strategies they can adopt, many of which can be seen as the prototypical guidelines of the present-day interpreter’s code of conduct of professional organizations.
Although there are now many international as well as national professional translator and interpreter associations in the world which regulate their members’ professional behaviours through their own code of ethics in various interpreting settings, the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) seems to be the only global organization dedicated to conference interpreters and prioritizing conference interpreter ethics. Founded in 1953 and with about 3,000 members in more than 100 countries up to date, AIIC requires candidates applying for membership to make a commitment to respect *AIIC’s Code of Ethics* and *Professional Standards*, because these two “are at the heart of a collective effort to promote professionalism and quality” (AIIC 2015b). *AIIC’s Code of Ethics* (2018) specifies the standards of integrity, professionalism, and confidentiality that all AIIC members shall be bound to respect when they serve as conference interpreters. *AIIC’s Professional Standards* (AIIC 2015a) attends to details like the signing of contracts, remuneration, minimum team strength, number of languages needed, etc., which intend to guarantee quality service and conditions that are beneficial to all parties participating in the conference. Through the implementation of these two rules and giving “a voice to practitioners and users alike” (AIIC 2015b), not only does AIIC hope to offer ethical guidance to, and lift professional bars for, its members, it also intends to exercise an underlying regulatory power on conference interpreting events as a whole.

In addition to AIIC, other international/national professional T&I organizations, though not dedicated exclusively to conference interpreters, such as AUSIT (Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators), ATA (American Translators Association), AVLIC (Association of Visual Language Interpreters of Canada), etc., also set out their own codes of ethics that guide the professional conduct of their members. Different in specificity and wording though they may be, five “common and near-universal ethical principles” were identified from those codes first by Bancroft (2005), and later summed up by Setton and Prunč (2016). They include competence, integrity, confidentiality, neutrality, and fidelity, which will be discussed in detail later.

*Professionalism* is a word that is often used in the codes of conduct of different T&I associations and translator/interpreter training handbooks across the world. Rarely, however, is the term clearly defined either because perhaps people often take it for granted or because it is used as synonymous with professional skills or competence, thus mitigating the need for further explanation. Only recently Setton and Dawrant (2016a, 360–362) explicitly defined professionalism as “technical competence plus a commitment to provide the best possible service while adhering to defined ethics and standards as a responsible member of a professional community.” In other words, they believe, *professionalism* in the field of conference interpreting can be understood from three interacting dimensions: craft (mastering the skills of the trade), ethics (ethical precepts and standards), and service (providing a satisfactory service to help people communicate). Based on Setton and Dawrant’s understanding, professional ethics constitutes an important component of professionalism, but the two are not one and the same, and the latter is broader in connotation.

Professional codes of ethics of T&I association aside, over the years (in-print or online) publications with both a pedagogical and prescriptive nature relating to ethics in conference interpreting have been seen from time to time, discussing the skills and “the quality of the interpreter” (Seleskovitch 1998; Seleskovitch and Lederer 1995), professional loyalty and the principle of fidelity (Gile 1995), what it means to be a competent or qualified conference interpreter (Kalina 2000; Kremer 2015a, 2015b), and professionalism and ethics (Setton and Dawrant 2016a, 2016b). They echo, elaborate, and sometimes expand codified professional ethics with examples from real-life interpreting events.
Since 2000, in particular since the “cultural turn” (Cronin 2002) and the sociological turn (Angelelli 2012; Ren 2016) took place in interpreting studies, empirical studies (Angelelli 2004a, 2004b; Inghilleri 2003, 2012) have been conducted on topics related to interpreters’ visibility, fidelity, and neutrality. Although the liveliest debate over the applicability of these principles is again mainly in the field of community interpreting, the understanding and practice of these principles by conference interpreters in real-life events started to be discussed in some empirical research, describing professional interpreters in highly restricted environments, who sometimes deliberately deviate from the principles of fidelity (Seeber and Zelger 2007) or neutrality (Zhan 2012; Wang and Feng 2018), not because of their ignorance or negligence of professional ethics, or lack of ability, but out of their conscious choices, i.e. agency, and more often than not, to the satisfaction of one or more parties. These studies, though not necessarily intended to defy prescribed ethical principles, wish to paint a more realistic picture of what is actually happening and how interpreters may interpret the notions of fidelity and neutrality differently when assuming different cultural, national, or institutional affiliations. The consistency as well as discrepancy between what is codified in professional ethics and how ethical principles are practised in real-life conferences constitutes the core issues and topics of conference interpreter ethics.

3 Core issues and topics

As competence, integrity, confidentiality, neutrality, and fidelity are identified as the five “common and near-universal ethical principles” in interpreting (Bancroft 2005; Setton and Prunč 2016), they are discussed in the following sections with emphasis on conference settings. It is worth noting that there is no clear-cut line between these concepts, and some of them may overlap in certain aspects.

3.1 Competence

Setton and Prunč (2016, 146) define interpreter competence as follows:

Competence entails a commitment to maintaining high standards of performance, and requires the interpreter to ensure that s/he has the requisite skills and knowledge (which entails preparing assignments, and declining any assignment for which s/he is not qualified, or will not have time to prepare) and adequate working conditions, including access to relevant information and documentation.

What is not included in Setton and Prunč’s definition but specified in the professional T&I organizations is the ability “to convey meaning between people and cultures faithfully, accurately, and impartially” (ATA 2010), increasing and maintaining skills through ongoing professional development (AUSIT 2012; AIIC 2018), and accountability for professional competence, i.e. members accepting full responsibility for the quality of their own work (AVLIC 2000). As one may notice, “faithful interpretation” may overlap with fidelity, and “declining assignments for which one is unqualified,” with integrity.

That professional organizations all relate competence with ethical conduct and professional behaviours makes sense. As one might assume, interpreters’ competence and their ethical behaviours are often in a relationship of an uprising complementary spiral, i.e. the more competent they are, the more likely they will conform to the professional ethics (such as being able to interpret accurately and impartially); and the more times they comply with code of ethics, the more professional their conduct will be. This is how competence feeds into ethics.
3.2 Integrity

The notion of integrity seems to be largely agreed upon by professional organizations, practitioners, and researchers alike. As summarized by Setton and Pruné (2016, 146), interpreters’ integrity embodies:

- honesty (avoiding or declaring conflicts of interest, and deriving no personal gain from information obtained in the exercise of the profession);
- responsibility (e.g. not cancelling bookings without cause);
- solidarity (cooperating and sharing knowledge with colleagues, supporting beginners, affording colleagues moral assistance and collegiality);
- and refusing any job or situation which might detract from the dignity of the profession or bring it into disrepute.

Other integrity-related professional conduct includes presenting true credentials, making sufficient advance preparation for all assignments, adhering to appointment times, and accepting responsibility for all professional decisions and actions (AUSIT 2012; ATA 2010; AVLIC 2000). It thus can be seen that conference interpreters’ integrity is more often manifested before or after conferences rather than during. However, issues of integrity during interpreting are emerging with the incorporation of AI into conference interpreting and might also arise when collaboration between booth-mates in SI is needed, which will be further discussed in sections 4.2 and 4.3.

3.3 Confidentiality

As a cornerstone of professional ethics, confidentiality is rather self-explanatory: interpreters shall hold in confidence all information obtained in providing interpreting service, except with clients’ authorization or by order of law. AIIC (2018) clearly stipulates that its members “shall be bound by the strictest secrecy, which must be observed towards all persons and with regard to all information disclosed in the course of the practice of the profession at any gathering not open to the public.” And they “shall refrain from deriving any personal gain whatsoever from confidential information they may have acquired in the exercise of their duties as conference interpreters.” This principle is also shared by the code of ethics of AUSIT, ATI, AVLIC, etc. and is often understood as a must-observed code of conduct on a par with similar ethical requirements of other professions such as psychologists, doctors, lawyers, and business associates. Therefore, confidentiality is generally believed to be clear-cut and not subject to controversy.

However, confidentiality might become an issue when national interest conflicts with the interpreter’s need to adhere to secrecy. Recent news (Itkowitz 2019) has covered the example of Marina Gross, an interpreter with the US Department of State for the closed-door meeting of US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Helsinki. Gross adhered to the principle of confidentiality in the face of pressure of a subpoena from the American Democratic Party. She chose to keep to the oath of professional ethics for interpreters and did not make any comment in response to the accusation that President Trump might have used his position to pursue his own interest. Her decision won support from ATA. ATI spokeswoman Judy Jenner emphasized the importance of confidentiality and commented, “confidentiality is a cornerstone of all interpreter code of ethics, regardless of the setting. The parties we interpret for must be certain that we will not divulge what is being discussed and if they doubt this, they are not able to speak freely” (Itkowitz 2019).

Apparently, Gross made the ethically right decision if what needs to be protected is only the interest of the people closely involved in the interpreting event. But when doubts were
Wen Ren and Mingyue Yin raised after President Trump had seized the interpreter’s notes from the one-on-one meeting, the Democrats’ desire to hear directly from the interpreter can be explained by the fear that America’s national security may be jeopardized and people’s interests may be at stake. Gross was thus caught in an ethical dilemma of whether to observe the principle of secrecy and be loyal to her immediate “client,” or to be loyal to her country and put the interests of the people first.

3.4 Fidelity

Fidelity (also called faithfulness or accuracy) is not only one of the most significant factors in interpreting quality assessment, but also a touchstone for an interpreter’s qualification and ethics. However, unlike the generally agreed-upon ethical principles of competence and integrity, fidelity seems a shaky term and is not always understood in the same way by professional organizations, practitioners, and researchers. This is manifested by the slightly different explanations ascribed to the term by different professional organizations, interpreter trainers, and in the recent empirical studies of researchers.

Unlike AIIC, who doesn’t spell out explicitly the term fidelity, most of the T&I professional organizations offer their own definition of what it means to be faithful or accurate. AUSIT’s (2012) definition is probably the strictest. It defines accuracy as “optimal and complete message transfer into the target language preserving the content and intent of the source message or text without omission or distortion” ATA (2010), while stressing the need for faithful interpretation, clarifies that faithful, accurate, and impartial interpretation should not be equal to word-for-word translation. In a similar vein, AVLIC (2000) explains, “faithful interpretation should not be confused with a literal interpretation. The fidelity of an interpretation includes an adaptation to make the form, the tone, and the deeper meaning of the source text felt in the target language and culture.” Setton and Dawrant (2016a), as professional interpreters and interpreter trainers themselves, are even more lenient when interpreting fidelity, giving consideration to the communicative effect of the renditions, the limit of the ability of interpreters at work, the differing user expectations, and the complicated situation in each case, thus justifying interpreters’ choice to sometimes “optimize the form (or even content) of utterances in the interests of better communication” (384–385). They also provide a menu of options for interpreters to choose when they encounter obstacles, for instance, when the speaker is unclear or elliptical, or when something seems untranslatable (346–348).

If Setton and Dawrant’s intention is to bridge the gap between what is prescribed in codified ethics and what can be achieved in reality, some studies serve to prove that fidelity in conference interpreting can be a complex issue. Seeber and Zelger (2007, 292) probe into accuracy in SI from an ethical perspective and argue that betrayal of the speakers sometimes can be seen as a virtue rather than a vice. They point out that in real-life situations, conference interpreters sometimes deliberately alter the original message even when such change is not imposed by constraints such as time or mental resources. Thus, they differentiate the meaning of “accuracy” from “truth,” and further problematize the notion of accuracy in interpreting as the exact rendition of the verbal, semantic, and intentional components of the original message. They present the case of an international conference featuring several European and African heads of state and government where all of the interpreters on site chose not to interpret the conference host’s words of calling an African head of state a “traffic cop” because the latter used hand gestures during the speech like a police directing traffic. The interpreters on site sensed that the speaker (i.e. the conference host whose everyday job is talk-show hosting) was not ill-intended, and the accurate rendition of the “traffic cop” may have caused misunderstanding. Their research generates no prescriptive results but concludes, “what on the surface looks like a betrayal of
the speaker may actually be an ethically justified interpretation of the original” (296). In other words, it is not necessarily against professional ethics if the interpreters alter, truncate, or omit parts of the original message for better communication effect.

The infidelity of the conference interpreters detailed in Seeber and Zelger’s research is not an isolated case. In an empirical study on the interpreter’s role in political settings, Zhan (2012) provides evidence that government staff interpreters sometimes mediate the talk and may even have a “voice” when doing on-site CI. Though not intended to focus on ethical issues, Zhan, through quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data from the political meetings between provincial government leaders in China and their foreign guests, finds that formal and content shifts exist considerably in the interpretations of the provincial government’s interpreters. He concludes that rather than always faithfully rendering the original utterances by the government officials, staff interpreters sometimes opt for meaning shifts for discourse mediation. He attributes the shifts to the interpreters’ “identity construction,” meaning they feel the need to “speak for their government and political institution, even sometimes at the expense of violating certain professional codes of conduct” (2012, 205–206). In this sense, (in)fidelity is inextricably associated with the issue of (un)neutrality, and this is especially true when the interpreter has an institutional affiliation.

3.5 Neutrality

Like fidelity, neutrality/impartiality is also a principle required in nearly all handbooks of interpreters’ code of conduct. It means that interpreters remain impartial and objective throughout the communication event, do not allow their personal opinion, attitude, or faith to influence their performance. Interpreters’ neutrality is often reflected specifically through their acts of offering equal services to all participants, not giving advice, providing faithful interpretations, and not softening, strengthening, altering, adding, or omitting the message conveyed by the speaker for whatever purposes. Thus fidelity and neutrality often work side by side, and the more faithful an interpreter is, the more neutral s/he appears to be.

The scholarly debates over whether there is absolute impartiality are often based on cases of community interpreting (Wadensjö 1998; Angelelli 2004a, 2004b; Ren 2010), and it is generally believed that conference interpreters do not have a problem with neutrality as there is no need for them to align with a particular side. However, some recent studies argue that neutrality may not be the default choice of all conference interpreters since in some settings, diplomatic, business, in-house, or military, “interpreters are typically employed by one side, to which they are expected to provide preferential service in some respects” (Setton and Dawrant 2016a, 377). Conference interpreters may be “shared” (377) and thus tend to be more impartial when they work as freelancers or are employed by an intergovernmental, international, or supranational organization as they do not represent a particular government or country; or they can be “attached/affiliated” to a diplomatic, business, or military institution, and in such a situation, they are more likely to work on behalf of their employer and their role or identity is usually understood by all parties (377).

One of the most commonly seen scenarios of conference interpreters’ “partiality” is in diplomatic settings, where interpreters do not play the role of a language expert only; they are often also government workers whose institutional loyalty requires them to align with parties of interests (as is the situation in countries like China and Russia where diplomatic interpreters are often diplomatic officers or civil servants). In such cases, interpreters’ partiality is not just perceived but also understood. Wang and Feng (2018) examine the diplomatic interpreters’ stance-taking (i.e. alignment with the Foreign Ministry) in press conferences based on a parallel bilingual corpus.
of interpreted political discourse from Chinese to English. The data reveals that the interpreters’ lexical choices reflect their conscious decision-making to align with the government’s attitude and stance on various political and social issues. For instance, 问题 wenti is a frequently used content word and has various lexical options in translation such as “question,” “problem,” “issue,” and “matter,” which display different attitudes and stances. The research discovers that interpreters tend to choose “issue” when wenti in Chinese is used in concordance with words about international matters open for debate or discussion. They tend to adopt “problem” when wenti is associated with domestic affairs which are difficult but can be overcome and solved. Interpreters tend to select “question” with the implication that the matter is beyond debate or negotiation and the words in concordance are usually related to sensitive issues in China’s politics (2018, 255). They further probe into the possible reason for the different lexical choices and find out that this can be attributed mainly to their compliance with the institutional norm of interpreting, i.e. to align themselves with the stance of ideology of the Chinese government. “As in-house interpreters of the Chinese government, they act like the government’s ‘spokespersons’” (2018, 258).

Wang and Feng’s research doesn’t stand alone in looking into conference interpreters’ non-neutrality. Beaton’s research in 2007 presents a similar case of SI interpreters in EU plenary sessions. It explores the struggle of competing ideologies (EU institutional hegemony vs. interpreters’ axiology) in the political speech context and the impossibility of absolute neutrality on the part of the interpreter. Through a quantitative analysis of lexical repetition of the concept European Union, it concludes that interpreters’ lexical repetition of the superordinate concept European Union in the target text can be seen as strengthening the salience of EU institutional hegemony, and interpreters’ contraction of European Union as EU has the function of semantic stabilization of EU institutional hegemony.

Thus, for “attached” in-house interpreters, neutrality is a relative term and subject to the checks-and-balances of the influence from their affiliated institution. But for “shared” conference interpreters, impartiality still remains a pillar of their professional ethics, not only because this is what they are expected to observe, but also because this position “protects them from awkward and even threatening criticism and deflects potential pressure from powerful clients” (Donavan 2011, 113).

3.6 Codification vs. real life

It seems unquestionable that professional interpreters should do their utmost to abide by professional codes of conduct and perform their duty accordingly. However, in real-life interpreting, they sometimes are found to deviate from professional ethics, as described earlier. The puzzling question often asked is which factors interpreters should prioritize to ethically justify their choices. The difficulty (and sometimes impossibility) in setting a standard for all interpreters’ ethical decision-making mainly lies with two reasons: (1) two different sets of ethical models – deontology and teleology – may guide interpreters to take different and, most likely, opposite actions under the same circumstances; (2) interpreters’ dual/multiple identity results in split loyalties.

First, deontology and teleology represent two distinctive models of ethical reasoning. The former, based on Kantian (Kant and Gregor [1785] 1998, 25) ethics of the “categorical imperative,” defines what is ethical or unethical by the rightness or wrongness of actions themselves independent of the rightness or wrongness of the consequences of the actions. The actions to be taken are usually guided by such principles as duty, loyalty, and respect for human dignity.
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which are believed to be intrinsically good. By contrast, teleology, based on Bentham’s (Bentham and Hart 1977, 393) utilitarianism emphasizing the largest benefits for the largest number of people, determines what is ethical precisely by the value or desirable outcome an action may bring. The action that produces the best result can justify the undesirable means. In the case of Marina Gross, if she chooses to be true to her duty as a professional interpreter and loyal to her immediate “client” President Trump, which she did, her decision to keep secrecy would be judged as ethical from the point of view of deontology and the professional code of ethics (often in line with the deontological model). But if she decides to put the interests of the majority first and makes known to the public what was discussed between the two heads of state, her behaviour would be appraised as ethical by the teleologists, but would be denounced as unethical by deontologists.

Second, interpreters’ dual/multi identities require institutional/national loyalty and call for different ethical preferences. As described previously, sometimes conference interpreters, in-house in particular, may assume more than one social identity in interpreter-mediated conferences. Runcieman (2018, 35–38) defines a person’s social identity as dynamically (re) creating and negotiating alignments with the social world in their situated discourses, and an individual’s sense of self as appearing to be expressing themselves in relation to others in an instance of situated talk. A conference interpreter with more than one social identity, for instance, simultaneously a professional interpreter, a government worker, and a member of an ethnic group or a citizen of a country, needs to balance all the duties attached to each and every identity, especially when those duties are not in harmony with one another. Different duties require the interpreter to act accordingly and determine the most suitable interpreting strategy at conferences. How interpreters act depends on how they perceive themselves in a specific context, and the action chosen may vary from person to person. Thus, when interpreters’ professional ethics goes against their institutional interests or/and national loyalty, their prioritized decision-making is influenced by the dynamic balance of external factors of power and their internalized ethical views. In other words, the key lies in how interpreters balance their dual/multi social identities and to which institution they stay loyal and assume their accountabilities.

In the Marina Gross case, her role as a professional interpreter urged her to keep information obtained from the interpreting service confidential. On the other hand, people who called for a public testimony from her placed her duty as a government worker over her duty as a diplomatic interpreter. The different views on what’s ethical in Gross’s story suggests that an assessment of conference interpreters’ performance and evaluation of their ethical decisions demands an integration of more than one set of standards, which requires consideration of all of the interpreters’ identities and senses of self in situated contexts. When interests of one identity antedate or defy the interests of another, or when different “selves” perceive their positions and functions in a contextualized interpreting event differently, behaviours of different ethical concern may ensue.

However, interpreters should also realize that their decisions are not made on a whim because they are often held accountable for the consequences of their decisions and behaviours. Therefore they “have to reflect carefully about how their decisions, both textual and non-textual, impact the lives of others” (Baker and Maier 2011, 3). It may be useful to know that the discrepancy between what is stated in the handbook and what is happening in reality does not negate the legitimacy of codified ethics. Sticking to the principle of fidelity and neutrality on the part of the interpreter not only ensures the audience’s right to know the “truth,” but also serves to protect the interpreter from taking undue responsibility for what is said by the speaker.
4 Emerging issues

In addition to the scholarly debates over codification and reality in different conference settings, recent years have seen some emerging issues concerning conference interpreter ethics, including the teaching of ethics in conference interpreter training, ethics in AI interpreting, collaboration and partnership in SI, and conference interpreters’ location on site.

4.1 Ethics education in conference interpreter training

Baker and Maier (2011, 1–14) suggest that classroom activities to stimulate student translators’ and interpreters’ ethical reflection should be incorporated into the curriculum, and they have noticed an increased attention to ethics in the context of translator and interpreter education. While it’s true that since 2000 elements of ethics have been found in translator and interpreter training programs and accreditation systems in some countries or regions, ethics education for conference interpreters appears to have regional disparity and features.

Firstly, training programs with education of professional ethics for interpreters are not evenly distributed. In countries and regions that enjoy a higher degree of professionalization of interpreting and relatively longer history of interpreter education such as Australia and Europe, professional ethics is generally incorporated into the training curricula but not always explicitly as a separate course. A survey of the 18 EMCI (European Masters in Conference Interpreting) member programmes in 2010 revealed that all but three had included ethics teaching explicitly into their curricula in the form of separate teaching units (Donavan 2011, 124). In contrast, in countries and areas where professionalization of interpreting service had a later start, the teaching of interpreters’ professional ethics is often neglected. In emerging markets with increasing demand for conference interpreters such as China, education of interpreter ethics is yet to be seen in most translation and interpreting programmes at both undergraduate and graduate levels. An investigation of the curricula of 253 universities with MTI (master of translation and interpreting) programs in China indicates that only six programs have a separate professional ethics-related course (Zhao, forthcoming). America is an interesting example. In the US where interpreters’ ethical practice is required in various codes of conduct by different interpreters’ associations for different domains (medical, legal, etc.), formal ethics education is scarcely seen in the form of a separate course in degree conference interpreting programmes based on a website search. For instance, the master of arts programme in conference interpretation at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey (MIIS) cultivates conference interpreters at the cutting edge, but its curriculum of 60 credits is mainly skill-based, and ethics education is absent from it. (MIIS n.d.) By contrast, some non-degree interpreter-training programs have separate courses focusing on different aspects of professional ethics (e.g. APEX n.d.).

Secondly, regional disparity is also seen in professional accreditation examinations. NAATI (National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters) is Australia’s national standards and certifying authority for translators and interpreters and the only organization to issue certification to practitioners who wish to work in this profession in the country. It tests applicants’ ethical competency based on Descriptors for Interpreting: [A certified conference interpreter] has full and detailed knowledge and understanding of the relevant code of ethics, and is able to apply this to situations in interpreting practice, client interactions, and other professional activities (NAATI n.d.). In China’s two most popular interpreting accreditation tests, CATTI (China Accreditation Test for Translators and Interpreters) and SIA (Shanghai Interpreting Accreditation), no questions on ethical issues are asked or tested.
Thirdly, the modules and ways of cultivating interpreting trainees’ awareness of professional ethics vary with programmes and decontextualized training is not uncommon in universities. Baker and Maier (2011, 2) notice that university-level translator and interpreter trainers have long instructed their students to follow professional codes of ethics unquestioningly. This way of teaching professional ethics out of context may lead to confusion and hesitation for novice interpreters in ethically debatable situations. Dean and Pollard (2011, 155) argue that interpreting students receive a mixed message when educators assert a non-contextual, rule-based approach to teaching ethics while simultaneously responding to both ethical and translation questions with the answer that “it depends” – an obvious reference to the centrality of context in decision-making. Baker and Maier (2011, 4–6) thus propose three suggestions on how to conduct training in ethics in contextualized discourse: first, provide students with theoretical tools (e.g. deontological and teleological ethics) so that they learn to reason critically about the implication of the decision made by themselves or others; second, enable students to identify a range of potential strategies that they may employ in ethically complex situations; third, develop a set of pedagogical tools, such as classroom debate, writing critical essays, and role play, so as to create an environment in which students can learn to make situated ethical decisions.

The learning tasks and pedagogical tools suggested by Baker and Maier find their resonance in Donavan’s observation. She (2011, 124) finds that in EMCI member programmes interpreter ethics is dealt with in a three-pronged way: (a) examples commented on in class, (b) professional deontology (frequently with leading members of the profession invited to give talks), and (c) a more substantial debate about ethics initiated in specific modules.

Although the importance of conference interpreters’ ethics education has been given more attention to and improvement has been seen in recent years, training in ethics should not end at the graduation from universities. Yin conducted a survey at the 57th ATA annual conference in 2016, probing into respondent interpreters’ education of moral philosophy, general professional ethics education, interpreters’ professional ethics training, and familiarity with interpreters’ code of conduct. The survey results demonstrate that interpreters’ ethics education does not guarantee a long-standing memory of it (Yin 2018, 155–158). Hence, cultivation of the ethical awareness of interpreters should be continual and included in on-job training.

4.2 Ethical issues of machine/AI translation/interpreting

With the development of deep learning and the application of artificial intelligence (AI) in T&I, we see more conferences utilizing machine translation/interpreting technology to produce “simultaneously interpreted” texts either on the screens in the conference venues or in artificially produced voices broadcasted to the conference audiences or both. The general workflow consists of the following steps: AI interpreters decode speakers’ messages through speech recognition technologies, translate the messages into target languages with the help of deep learning technologies and corpora, and present the target texts either on the screen for conference attendants to read or through voice-over technologies for them to listen. Currently there are three major ethical concerns in machine/AI translation/interpreting: confidentiality and intellectual property rights (IPR) issues in data collection and software design, accountability of inaccuracy of machine/AI produced interpretations, and ethical issues arising from human machine/AI interaction.

First, ethical issues concerning confidentiality and IPR. Drugan and Babych (2010, 4) state that sharing translation resources requires consideration of a much wider range of ethical and legal issues, which include but are not limited to confidentiality of data, industrial and state secrets, and IPR of translators, authors, and data owners. Most of the present machine
translation/interpreting applied to conference interpreting is neural machine translation, which requires more complicated algorithms and larger data sets compared to earlier technologies. Thus, new ethical issues may arise. In some cases, collection and use of parallel corpora does not incur serious ethical issues when the used resources are of the nature of legitimately published texts and intended for public use; but in other cases, some information may be either confidential or is not owned by the technology developer. When translation memories are shared, ethical issues related to confidentiality and IPR may appear.

Second, (in)accuracy of renditions and accountability can be problematic in the application of machine/AI interpreters to conference interpreting. While it is still unclear whether and to what degree AI will replace human interpreters, there is discussion on how accurate machine translation (displayed on screen) can be in real-life conferences, who should be responsible for the inaccurate or even wrong renditions produced by machine translation, and in what way the accuracy of interpretations produced by AI and human interpreters should be compared. As Kenny (2010) points out, the accountability of interpretations produced by AI interpreters constitutes a big ethical issue. AI interpreters are machines, thus cannot take legal liabilities and bear consequences. The accountabilities are debated among programme and software developers, on-site monitoring technicians, and the translators and interpreters whose target texts are included in the translation corpora which are used to serve and teach the machines.

The third ethical issue is the interaction between AI and human interpreters, due to the immaturity of AI and deep learning technology at the moment. It seems to be the general view that AI interpreters and human interpreters should not be competing with each other but assisting in each other’s mutual improvement. However, a recent event presents a somewhat complex scenario. A simultaneous interpreter (Bell Wang 2018) posted an account of his personal experience at Zhihu, a well-known online community in China on September 20, 2018. While interpreting for a conference, he discovered that the interpreted versions of his and his colleague’s were analyzed by an on-site software development company’s voice recognition technology, converted into an artificial voice, and then broadcasted to the audience as the output of interpreting. The interpreter complained that the company did not make it clear to the audience that the interpretations were actually from the human interpreters in the booth, misleading the public to believe that the company’s technology had replaced the human conference interpreters. This event has been interpreted by many as AI technology industry’s unethical violation of interpreters’ IPR.

As AI T&I technology further advances, more and new ethical issues may emerge among conference interpreting stakeholders: technology developers, providers and users, conference interpreting trainers and trainees, conference organizers, interpreter employers, interpreters, and so on. How conference interpreters coexist and develop ethically desirable relations with them is yet to be explored.

4.3 Collaboration and partnership in SI

Collaboration and partnership in SI may induce ethical concerns for interpreters. Simultaneous interpreters collaborate by taking turns to interpret and rest in the same booth or by relaying in different language pairs from booth to booth. A number of critical elements, which remain invisible in transcripts or audio/visual records of on-mic performance, should be probed into as research subjects of conference interpreters’ ethics, such as off-mic or non-verbal assistance and intervention (Duflou 2016, 317), and joint text production in relay interpreting. Behaviours of the off-mic interpreters that aim at providing assistance to interpreters on-mic and form part of solidarity in interpreters’ ethical code include jotting down numbers to relieve on-mic interpreters’ memory load, checking the newly emerged terminology in dictionaries or online, signalling
the partner in fatigue to go off mic and take turns, and asking the technicians or conference organizers for help when the equipment is malfunctioning or something else goes wrong. Such behaviours remain somewhat unexplored and need further study from the perspective of ethical concerns. Research should also address questions of poor cooperation or non-cooperation, such as leaving the booth unnecessarily, making sounds in the booth, neglecting an on-mic interpreter’s emergency, and so on. In addition, accountability of (in)accuracy of jointly produced texts in relay interpreting also ensues ethical issues of “who shall be liable for what.”

4.4 Conference interpreters’ location on site

Whether an interpreter’s presence, location, and standing/seating positions will influence communication process is a topic that has been discussed in community interpreting quite often; however, it remains a largely underexplored area in studying conference interpreters’ professional conduct. Researchers in psychology and criminology did an experiment to test if interpreters’ physical presence, their location on the communicative venue, and their postures have influence on the interlocutors, and their findings proved negative (Ewens et al. 2017). However, this experiment was conducted in a controlled setting where interpreters displayed what they described as “a neutral demeanour.” In real-life conference interpreting events, it’s still unclear whether interpreters’ seating arrangements and postures impact the effectiveness of communication. Interpreters sometimes can have a final say in where they are located in the room, but typically they do not, especially in formal high-level meetings or when they work in the simultaneous mode. As interpreters’ sitting and standing positions or booth location may impact the quality of interpreting service, many codes of conduct require interpreters to object to unfavourable location or other poor working conditions, and not to accept the assignment if they think necessary conditions cannot be met. On the other hand, the relative subordinate position of diplomatic, military, or other in-house interpreters and institutional rules may place obedience as a professional priority. Situations like this may pose ethical challenges to interpreters and thus need more in-depth investigation.

5 Conclusion

As facilitators in bilingual/multilingual communicative events, conference interpreters’ moral judgments, ethical stances, as well as their understanding and compliance with professional ethics, be it in written form, such as laws, code of ethics, standards of practice, or in convention, are of crucial significance. Due to the constrained nature of their task and their limited agency, conference interpreters’ ethical conduct has been the subject of much less extensive research than that of public service interpreters. But in diplomatic or military settings, and in conferences on sensitive topics, issues of ethical concern do exist. As in community interpreting, competence, confidentiality, integrity, fidelity, and neutrality constitute the major ethical principles in conference interpreting. Also as in community interpreting, there are discrepancies between what is prescribed in codes of ethics and what is practiced in reality. Apart from mere accounts of each individual cases of conference interpreters’ decisions and behaviours “derailing” from codified standards of practice, we need to look into the reasons behind these phenomena.

Different ethical models that overlay the level of professional ethics, such as deontological or teleological ethics, may guide interpreters to make different and even opposite decisions in ethically challenging situations. Dual/multiple identities as well as the sense of self of conference interpreters may sometimes problematize the longstanding dichotomies of accurate vs. inaccurate; neutral vs. partial; confidential vs. betraying. The awareness of conference interpreters’ multiple identities provides a new angle to evaluate their performance. It further steers
interpreting studies towards a holistic view of interpreters’ subjectivity and inter-subjectivity in interpreter-mediated communication.

Education of ethics in conference interpreter training is much needed and should embrace more modules and be set in a contextualized situation instead of being reduced to the mere introduction to the existing code of conduct. Besides, it should provide trainees with conceptual tools of ethics so that they can learn to judge what is ethically right in a more critical manner. Reinforcement of ethics education should also be incorporated into continual or on-the-job training programmes to ensure interpreters’ sustained familiarity of professional ethics and to avoid a mere experience-dependent ethical decision-making.

Ethical issues deriving from collegiality, such as off-mic and non-verbal assistance, joint text production in relay interpreting, as well as the conference interpreters’ physical position in conference settings, need further probing. Ethical issues of applying machine/AI translation/interpreting to conference settings emerge for the increasing prevalence of AI technology. Confidentiality, accountability of texts interpreted, and competitive relationship between AI interpreters and human interpreters are among the major ethical concerns.

Related topics in this volume

Virtue ethics; the ethics of public service interpreting; ethics codes for interpreters and translators.

References

Conference interpreter ethics


Further reading


This chapter is particularly suitable for the undergraduate/graduate students of interpreting programs who start to look into the ethical issues in translation and interpreting activities. In this chapter, Baker first makes an effort to differentiate the two terms — ethics and morality — which are often used interchangeably or indiscriminately by practitioners and academics alike. She then explains a few dichotomous terms — deontology vs. teleology, relativism vs. universalism, etc. — in moral philosophy, which may be used as conceptual tools to help readers better understand, evaluate, and decide what is ethical in ethically challenging situations. She also manages to analyze the relationships as well as the differences between professionalism, code of ethics, and the law.


This article provides guidance for interpreter trainers to conduct professional ethical education. It points out the shift of research interest in interpreting studies to interpreters’ roles in complex communicative situations, states the reasons of such shift, and analyzes the consequences of professional self-perception and socialization for the place of ethics in conference interpreter training. Donovan specifies how professional ethics education is designed into the curricula in interpreting programs in EU countries, and what is lacking and what needs improvement. Her vision on education of interpreters’ ethics sheds light on interpreter training design for both professionalized and less professionalized interpreting markets.


The authors explore the notion of accuracy (or “truthful rendition” as they prefer to use) in SI from an ethical perspective rather than a merely linguistic one. It justifies that certain inaccurate renditions, which appear to be a betrayal of the speaker at first sight, may be considered “truthful renditions” from both a deontological and a teleological perspective. They then further propose the VSI (verbal, semantic, and intentional) model to help interpreters produce truthful renditions.