1 Introduction

In public service interpreting (PSI), ethics is intricately interwoven with the role of interpreters. Role refers to a particular behaviour of individuals in a particular situation. In PSI, ethically challenging situations may be brought about by perceptions of the role of interpreters or their performance of it, along with that of the other participants. These, depending on their severity and the need to apply moral judgement, may be also called ethical dilemmas.

Interpreters’ role performance has been in the focus of PSI research since its beginnings. Studies investigate role perceptions and interpreters’ performance, including in situations when they cannot, or do not want to, behave as expected, as they are used to doing or as they are trained to do. Interpreters and primary interactants (i.e. public service providers and users) as well as scholars have divergent, often contradictory views of interpreters’ roles in institutional encounters. This is largely because individuals with diverse backgrounds serve as interpreters, and other interactants are often not aware of the complexity and the confines of the role of interpreters.

PSI often involves high-stake encounters which may possibly entail life-changing decisions for public service users’ futures. The interactants are driven by different motives, with interpreters being granted access to confidential and private information. Much responsibility is placed on the interpreters, and their performance might impact the outcome of the encounter both positively and negatively, though the primary interactants are not necessarily aware of this. Also, paradoxically, the other interactants have little control over the interpreters and have to trust in them performing “correctly,” in other words, following ethical standards or fulfilling expectations that, however, are often neither explicit nor easy to perceive, and sometimes contradictory.

PSI is also characterised by systemic structural constraints. These include lack of awareness as to the linguistic needs of non-native language service users (often marginalised minority groups with low social prestige) and ad hoc solutions to language problems, including the use of untrained interpreters in a sometimes adversarial and often under-resourced environment with predominantly monolingual language ideologies. As interpreting is not legally regulated, with court interpreting an exception in some jurisdictions, anyone feeling equal to the task may work as an interpreter, irrespective of training or experience.
What has been said so far suggests that ethics would appear to be a prominent topic. Branded as a “trendy topic” by Mikkelson (2000, 49), ethics, however, often seems to be used as a catchword or keyword, mentioned in the title or only in passing, with little reference to meta-ethical thought or a deep-going discussion of ethical challenges. This review concentrates on research that provides a more thorough discussion, though ethics is admittedly a topic encompassing the gamut of research.

We include both spoken and signed/sign language (SL) interpreting, as ethical challenges affect interpreters irrespective of the language modality used. Court interpreting is included likewise, even if this domain is sometimes labelled a distinct field from PSI.

2 Trajectory

This trajectory can only sketch a rudimentary timeline mentioning some central publications. Research on PSI can be traced back to the 1970s, with a surge after the 1990s and the consolidation of PSI as a field of research since the early 2000s. Early ethics-oriented publications mostly date back to the late 1990s (e.g. Schweda-Nicholson 1994; Hale and Luzardo 1997). With the start of the 2000s, the topic became more prominent (e.g. Rudvin 2002; Hoza 2003) and was also addressed in a review on interpreting ethics (Mikkelson 2000) and included in both the Routledge Encyclopedia of Interpreting Studies (Setton and Prunč 2015) and Handbook of Interpreting (Ozolins 2015). The second half of the 2000s also saw the publication of collective volumes or monographs in which ethics was covered more comprehensively (e.g. Inghilleri 2012; Valero-Garcés 2014; Valero–Garcés and Tipton 2017). The publication of the first monograph focusing solely on ethics in PSI in 2019 (Phelan, Rudvin, Skaaden, and Kermit 2019) and a special issue of Translation and Interpreting Studies on the ethics of non-professional translation and interpreting (eds. Monzó-Nebot and Wallace 2020) indicate that academia still deems the topic worthy of attention.

As regards research methodology, the literature in this review presents the full gamut of empirical research (besides more conceptual works). As is typical for PSI research, qualitative approaches are more common than quantitative and are often mixed-methods studies including observational studies, case studies, interview and focus group studies, ethnographic approaches or action research. Qualitative sample size varies, with many small and few large samples; experimental methods are rare.

3 Core issues and topics

3.1 Theoretical approaches

In her definition of ethics, Drugan (2018) differentiates between (1) “metaethics” (defining the elements constituting ethics and morality), (2) “ethical concepts and theories” (discussing specific ethical or moral principles), with deontological (assessing the morality of an action based on a set of rules), teleological and consequentialist approaches (assessing behaviour based on its consequences or outcome) and virtue ethics (placing human virtues in the centre) as three major strands of thinking, and (3) “applied ethics” (applying “ethics” to the ethical or moral problems in a field). Much of the literature on ethics in PSI falls into the third category. This is also in line with Dean (2015, 96–101), who suggests that a normative ethical perspective and descriptive approaches seem to be prevalent in PSI research, with only a few authors adopting a meta-ethical perspective. What is salient is the lack of integration of translation studies (TS) theories. Prunč (2017, and earlier), for instance, integrates functionalist theories (Holz-Mänttäri; Nord) in his
model of translation culture (i.e. the norms and expectations that frame interactants’ behaviour in a field of translation). Toury’s concept of translational norms has found some use (e.g. Inghilleri 2003; Merlín and Favaron 2009). Llewellyn-Jones and Lee’s (2014) role-space concept appears to be one of the few concepts from Interpreting Studies (IS) proper that has been applied to ethical issues (e.g. Kent 2012; Devaux 2017).

Only a few publications relate to (meta-)ethical concepts from the field of philosophy of ethics: with her broad focus on ethics in interpreting justice in war zones, Inghilleri (2012) presents an overview of different ethical perspectives, stressing that a consequentialist approach may be more ethical than a strict deontological approach, as being impartial does not necessarily imply ethical conduct, and partiality need not necessarily be unethical. A very insightful discussion of ethical theories can also be found in Phelan et al. (2019). Also, with a focus on justice, Hebenstreit (2017), referring specifically to the German ethicist Pieper’s line of thought, applies value theory and virtue ethics to map principles guiding asylum interpreters’ conduct to specific moral values and virtues. Brander de la Iglesia (2012) outlines different approaches to ethics, centring on developmental stages of moral reasoning (Kohlberg). In a monograph on police interpreting, Mulayim and Lai (2017) review ethical theories and stress that it is necessary to outline the moral purpose of a profession (Fullinwider), that is to say, delivering a service for public good, which should be stated in a preamble to a code (see also Camayd-Freixas (2013) for a similar stance). The responsibility of the self (Niebuhr and Mandelbaum) is at the centre of Dean and Pollard’s (2011) model of context-based ethical reasoning.

Other lines of thinking on ethics that are taken up are, for instance, Aristotelian ethics (Kermit 2007), the ethics of interpersonal communication and holding ground (Kent 2012), theories of prima facie duties (Mendoza 2012) and ethical responsibility (Dean and Pollard 2011), moral judgement (Hoza 2003; Dean 2015) and ethical maturity (Mills Stewart and Witter-Merithew 2006). They all seem to depart from a deontological view and lean towards a more teleological or consequentialist perspective of ethics. In spite of the range of different theories applied, little metalevel reflection on their suitability or commensurability seems to be present.

3.2 Central strands of topics

Topics such as role perceptions and expectations, dilemmas, role metaphors or typologies linked therewith are pervasive throughout the literature. In what follows, we outline strands of themes that emerge from a closer reading, bearing in mind that the borders between different categories may be blurred and more than one theme may be present in works.

3.2.1 Codes clashing with reality

After training institutions, it is ethical codes which are the most central in imparting specific role expectations. Ethical codes for PSI, often modelled on traditional conference interpreters’ codes, are not known either to all interpreters, especially those who serve as interpreters on an ad hoc basis, or to service providers and users, and are often too generic to be of help in quandaries. Studies have proved that the mechanistic role that is often ascribed to interpreters cannot always be upheld in practice. This mismatch between codes and reality is a major strand of thought (see also Chapter 20 “Ethics codes for interpreters and translators” in this volume). Seminal works are, for instance, Tate and Turner (1997) for SL interpreting or Kaufert and Putsch (1997) for spoken language interpreting, who stressed that ethical guidelines that prioritise accuracy and neutrality fail to “take into account issues such as class, power, disparate
beliefs, lack of linguistic equivalence, or the disparate use of language” (1997, 72), a point of criticism that is still valid. Tate and Turner (1997, 28) also hold that the “hegemony” of a “machine” role has created a “conspiracy of silence” because interpreters, for fear of violating the principle of confidentiality, feel they have no space in which they can discuss “role-dynamic dilemmas.” They presented interpreters with a range of scenarios of ethical dilemmas and analysed their individual dilemma resolutions, suggesting that “in ethically complex situations, either the strictures of the Code itself or interpreters’ readings of its prescriptions were often at odds with actual practice” (1997, 27). Several scholars have also proposed ways of addressing this mismatch between codes and reality.

One compelling example is Camayd-Freixas (2013), who, motivated by a personal dilemma he had experienced as an interpreter, urges professional associations to revise their codes, for example by including a preamble that outlines the “guiding virtues of the profession” (16) (also see Chesterman 2001). Camayd-Freixas bluntly criticises interpreters’ associations for seeming “unprepared to deal with a major ethical challenge” (6) when these had failed to adopt an official position after he had made public practices which human rights activists viewed as abusive “crimmigration” of migrants (2–3): in an immigration raid in Postville (Iowa), illegal immigrants were sentenced in fast-track prosecutions for “identity theft.” Interpreters such as Camayd-Freixas had been contracted for this “secretive mission” and they thus unwittingly became witnesses of massive human rights abuses: “By simply doing my job and following my code of ethics to the letter, I, like the rest of the participants, had facilitated the wrongful demise of hundreds of impoverished workers and vulnerable families” (Camayd-Freixas 2013, 3). Camayd-Freixas decided to break with the principle of confidentiality and speak out: “Denouncing the proceedings after they were over, at my own personal and professional risk, was the only ethical choice” (6). He claims that in order not to become “accomplices” and “facilitators of abuse” (2013, 10), interpreters should be allowed to be guided by their moral sentiment and empathy to confront human rights abuses.

With a focus on asylum interpreting and from a socio-political and anthropological perspective, Gibb and Good (2014) review interpreters’ codes in a comprehensive ethnographic study of UK and France asylum procedures and point to the “naivety” of expecting interpreters to be invisible. They argue that conflicting expectations and contradictory advice conveyed by codes obscure the fact that interpreters are active participants who often have to take complex decisions (396).

That interpreters are not always able or willing to live up to expectations is also shown by Pöllabauer (2004), who suggests in a discourse analytical study that interpreters in an asylum context, in contradiction to normative role prescriptions, often adopt more interventionist roles, sometimes also serving as co-interrogators who side with the caseworkers, seemingly often because they do feel obliged to do so, while at the same time also trying to maintain rapport with the applicants. Such conflicting expectations are a source of role dissonance, and they also make it more difficult for the other participants to place trust in the interpreter.

Looking into the multi-agency context of social work, Tipton (2014) suggests in a mixed-methods qualitative study that if the codes of different professional groups – here social workers’ and interpreters’ codes – do not align, the negotiation of expectations and relationship work may be hampered. Based on a survey among professionals in the same field, Drugan (2017, 127) stresses the importance of ethics training for interpreters: while social workers can rely on contractually enforced codes of ethics and are required to attend ethics training, not all interpreters, especially ad hoc interpreters, “can rely on the same sort of ethical infrastructure.”

Within the adversarial context of interpreting in prisons, a field that is strife with ethical tensions and conflictual rapport, Martínez-Gómez (2014) suggests that non-professional
interpreters in prisons both intentionally and non-intentionally “challenge relevant norms” (174) due to lack of competence or the desire to comply with user expectations.

Resera, Tribe, and Lane (2014, 204), who have conducted focus group interviews with interpreters working in mental health settings, hold that the role ascribed to interpreters may belittle their actual significance in the encounter as they are usually “fully engaged participants in the three-way relationship and contribute to it in a wide range of ways.” In mental health settings, however, where a relationship of trust between service users and the interpreter is essential, interpreters walk a very fine line in keeping professional distance and are often likely to become overinvolved. Therefore, some interpreters view clear role boundaries as a strategy for coping with the challenges of mental health interpreting and service users’ demands (Doherty, MacIntyre, and Wyne 2010). Challenges such as these and the emotional content of mental health encounters may impact interpreters’ well-being (see Chapter 27 “Ethical stress in translation and interpreting” in this volume).

3.2.2 Degrees of interpreter agency

What has been said so far indicates that interpreters’ roles can be traced on a continuum from a distinctively distanced and non-activist role to a decidedly (intentionally or unintentionally) activist and interventionist role, with a range of roles in between. Even if prescriptive demands on the role of interpreters, emphasising interpreters’ “invisibility,” are sometimes still present, research suggests that a mechanistic “conduit role,” in which interpreters are viewed as machines that passively convey information from one language into another, often cannot be or is purposefully not upheld in practice as interpreters adopt hybrid roles, especially in asymmetrical situations or exchanges of a sensitive, intimate nature.

Interpreters’ agency may include interpreters serving as helpers or advocates of the less powerful party; interpreters as institutional allies (co-interviewers, co-interrogators, co-therapists, even facilitators of abuse); interpreters as communication facilitators, who are responsible for interactional management; and interpreters as agents of change, cultural brokers or intercultural agents, who contribute to the empowerment of the less powerful party (for a review of metaphors of manifestations of interpreter agency see, for example, Roy 1993; Ozolins 2014). The term agency can be defined as “active force, action or power” (Collins Dictionary 2019a). It is specifically this plea for, or denigration of, greater action and power of interpreters that is a central theme and makes interpreters’ work ethically challenging.

3.2.2.1 Interpreter non-involvement

The controversy around interpreters as mere (verbatim) translators of content (conduit-like translation devices) as opposed to interpreters conveying meaning and “interpreting” speakers’ utterances is particularly prevalent in court interpreting and in Anglo-American common law jurisdictions. Acknowledging interpreters’ potentially intrusive power challenges the “legal fiction” that an original message can, after simple conversion into another language, “continue to function . . . as an original text” (Morris 1995, 30). A number of scholars have argued that the role of court interpreters as mechanistic language-converters cannot be upheld. Data suggest that interpreters do indeed influence legal proceedings, by changing the pragmatic effect and register of talk (Hale 2004) or adding content to convey supposed meaning (Jacobsen 2003; Hale 2008).

While empirical research seems to indicate that complete non-involvement is often not feasible, some, nonetheless, seem to nurture the idealistic belief in the practicability of a verbatim translation. Goodman-Delahunty and Martschuk (2016), for instance, in a study based on a large
A sample of semi-structured interviews with police and military officers show that some officers still expect interpreters to provide a “word-for-word translation” and adhere to professional codes. In a similar vein, Lee (2017) also views adherence to professional ethics as fundamental: based on a video-recorded murder case in South Korea and the subsequent textual representation of the interview in the interview record and court documents, Lee shows that alteration of witness statements and faulty renditions on the part of the interpreter may remain undetected. While her conclusion that training interpreters, and training police officials in how to work with interpreters, is most significant, her suggestion to “adhere to professional ethics” (195) may not be of help to interpreters in concrete dilemmas arising in spite of training.

In an experimental study in a police context, Hale, Goodman-Delahunty, and Martschuk (2018, 8) also use criteria such as “accuracy of propositional content” and “appropriate use of interpreting protocols” to assess differences in the performance of trained vs. untrained interpreters, proving that training does indeed make a difference in performance. The study counts among the few to compare the performance of trained vs. untrained interpreters.

In healthcare and mental health contexts, studies drawing on interviews with medical interpreters, healthcare providers and patients have shown that while some healthcare providers and patients prefer an idealised role of the interpreter as mechanical conduit, other healthcare providers and patients alike expect interpreters to adopt a more engaged role, including, for instance, the articulation of personal opinions, providing practical support and emotional comfort, and keeping interactants’ secrets (e.g. Hsieh 2006, 726–727; Zendel et al. 2016, 983). Negative ethical implications of such proactive roles, such as the other interactants’ feeling of disempowerment (Zendel et al. 2016, 984–985) or denying healthcare providers the opportunity to assess patients’ true health literacy (Hsieh 2013) are mentioned at times but hardly discussed thoroughly in the literature on healthcare interpreting. Based on the observation that some healthcare practitioners want interpreters to merely translate while others consider them part of the team and expect them to take active roles, Clifford (2004) describes the development of the relationship between healthcare providers and interpreters and links it to the ethical principles in TS outlined by Pym (2001): as the relationship grows and trust and familiarity are gained, interpreters progress from conduits (“ethics of representation”) to trusted active team members (“ethics of respect for norms”).

### 3.2.2.2 Interpreter involvement

As degrees of interpreter involvement vary, the following outlines the challenges related to increased involvement and agency.

#### 3.2.2.2.1 INTERPRETERS AS COMMUNICATION FACILITATORS AND CULTURAL BROKERS

As Wadensjö (1998) has comprehensively shown in her seminal monograph, interpreters as language and communication experts are active parties in triadic encounters, who may also need to facilitate communication and understanding by coordinating talk – a view that has since been recurrently confirmed in PSI research.

The “myth” of a mere mechanistic role of interpreters’ is, for instance, unveiled by Nakane (2009) who studies real-life English–Japanese interpreter-mediated police interviews and stresses the discrepancies between prescriptive tenets conveyed by codes and interpreters’ behaviour. He particularly shows that interpreters use strategies to manage discourse and maintain interactional alignment and serve as a “cultural bridge” (6). His examples also offer proof of the fact, however, that the “mismanagement” of such strategies may be problematic and sometimes also unethical.
and to the detriment of interviewees, especially if interpreters elicit responses from suspects or leave out information of their own accord.

That interpreters adopt different, sometimes also conflicting “habitus,” a concept borrowed from Bourdieu, which can roughly be described as ingrained habits and dispositions, is also addressed by Inghilleri (2003) in a publication on interpreting in an asylum context: in spite of the prevalence of the invisibility norm in a monolingual monoculture such as the British asylum system, interpreters adopt different roles and sometimes become over-involved, providing advice and attempting to serve as cultural mediators and advocates for the applicants. In a follow-up ethnographic study on interpreting in asylum interviews, Inghilleri (2005) stresses that interpreters, however, may not always be in a position to successfully act as cultural mediators as their habitus “remains vulnerable to exercises of power outside of their control” (13).

Cooke (2009), based on interviews with interpreters, explores how trained interpreters with an Aboriginal background struggle with their professional role in court settings, trying to uphold the principles of the Australian code of ethics when Aboriginal customary law and culture requires them to serve as cultural brokers. The complex Aboriginal kinship system sets the rules for how to speak and behave with one another. Interpreters with an Aboriginal background will, in spite of a Western training background, thus often be expected to comply with group expectations, for example sharing or not sharing specific information, explaining specific terms, behaving respectfully towards elders, or rephrasing disrespectful language. As these expectations will inevitably collide with the professional codes, interpreters may often feel compelled to serve as cultural brokers. Specifically because of these conflicting expectations, some, as a consequence, refuse to work in such settings.

Based on recordings from a court trial, Defrancq and Verliefde (2017) explore how an interpreter handles a specific (“paternalistic”) participation framework that, imposed by the rules of procedure, is upheld at a Belgian criminal court, whereby the defendant is a bystander who is treated as an unaddressed recipient and referred to in the third person rather than talked to directly as the addressee. This situation prompts the interpreter to employ a series of strategies that lead her to breach major provisions of her code of ethics. The interpreter sets up a parallel participation framework by directly addressing the defendant in the second person instead of referring to her in the third person, which also facilitates brokering cultural and procedural knowledge for the defendant, both actions that “seem to be instrumental in protecting the defendant against a powerful court” (227).

Määttä (2018) also discusses an example of an interpreter who assumes an active role as a coordinator of turns in a phone interpreting encounter in which French was used as a lingua franca by the interpreter and the suspect in an investigative interview. The overall situation was shaped by severe communication problems, and he concludes that codes of ethics convey unrealistic expectations, particularly in environments with strictly monolithic language ideologies such as law enforcement, making it necessary for interpreters to serve as active agents in the “co-construction, maintenance, and erasure of indexical meanings” (1). This example of phone interpreting is also one of two examples in this chapter that fall under the broader field of remote interpreting. While remote interpreting has been prominent in IS research, interpreters’ role perceptions in such contexts are still under-researched, and apart from Devaux (2017, also see later), ethical issues seem to have been tackled mainly between the lines.

3.2.2.2.2 INTERPRETERS AS ADVOCATES
Advocacy can be defined as “active support of a cause” (Collins 2019b), or, as we would suggest, “active support of someone.” The examples provided previously already suggest that interpreters often show active and interventionist support of (at least) one party and their cause. The lines
between different forms of advocacy, however, are blurred, and support for one party or the other may shift. More extreme forms of support may also take the form of active empowerment of the weaker party, or even partisanship, which may carry negative consequences for some.

Barsky’s (1996) seminal research on interpreting in an asylum context may be counted among those which support a pronouncedly activist role of interpreters that stretches beyond the role of cultural broker. Interpreters as “intercultural agents” should, according to him, help empower applicants for asylum by intervening on their behalf and also embellishing their claims. Interpreters themselves, however, do not always seem to agree with such an activist role: survey results (Fenton 2001) suggest that interpreters themselves are sometimes hesitant to “violate” the principle of impartiality and adopt an overly activist role, also fearing pressure from asylum applicants and impact on their private lives.

For the field of healthcare interpreting, Hilfinger Messias, McDowell, and Estrada (2009) advocate a “social justice” perspective with interpreters as cross-language and transcultural advocates. Based on interviews with formal (paid) and informal (unpaid) interpreters they discuss how interpreters, witnessing the discrimination and structural and informational barriers faced by patients with limited proficiency in English in the US healthcare system, promote health and are advocates for patients’ rights by serving as patient advocates, system navigators and cultural brokers. Similarly, Hsieh (2013) uses extracts from interpreted medical encounters to illustrate how interpreters can enhance patients’ health literacy and empower them to act as “self-advocates,” for instance by making implicit information such as social norms or cultural knowledge explicit, by reminding patients about questions to discuss with healthcare providers, and by helping them navigate the healthcare system. While she acknowledges that these strategies and their consequences must be critically examined as they may, in fact, impair patient autonomy, she argues that “it is essential that medical interpreters . . . actively respond to the situational and contextual demands to ensure that a patient is informed and empowered to make autonomous decisions” (47).

While impartiality and a high level of accuracy seem to be considered a foundation of quality court interpreting in Western countries, and there is discussion about whether interpreters should explain cultural references, studies from non-Western countries seem to indicate a greater acceptance of a more active and advocative role of the interpreter. Using a mixed-methods approach, Ibrahim (2007) shows that in Malaysia, interpreters, who are employed as civil servants and are involved before the court is in session, during and after the hearing, not only interpret but act as clerks of the courts and advocates for underrepresented defendants, assisting in formulating questions and responses and providing procedural advice.

De Pedro Ricoy, Howard, and Andrade (2018) explore in a qualitative study, based on interviews with interpreters and other interlocutors and a case study, how Peruvian state-trained indigenous interpreters, who serve as interpreters in the Peruvian “Prior Consultation Process,” struggle with upholding traditional principles such as neutrality and impartiality that are instilled in them through state training. The consultation process allows indigenous communities to be heard before the realisation of projects that are often linked to the industrialisation of natural resources. The context of these talks is ruled by commercial motives and a clash of cultural interests where indigenous interpreters as emic participants, in other words, members of the communities themselves, are potentially likewise affected by the outcome of these consultations and may thus be more inclined to adopt a partisan role. Community members often particularly want interpreters to adopt a dual role forcing interpreters to “walk the tightrope” (206) between conflicting demands.

Another field, where in-group interpreters are required to adopt a more involved role, is the field of religious interpreting. Interpreters as fellow believers from within the community are
expected to be deeply involved as has been shown by Hokkanen (2017) in an autoethnographic study of interpreting in the Finnish Pentecostal church. In such a context, it might, in fact, be viewed as unethical not to serve as a “spiritual conduit” (Kotzé 2018). Based on the findings of an ethnographic study of church interpreters in a Swiss Pentecostal community, Hild (2017) also suggests that interpreters serve as “co-constructors” of meaning in a partnership where neutrality is untenable (191).

Contexts where interpreters are part of a team and employed on a permanent basis also seem to grant greater leeway to interpreters. Hauser, Finch, and Hauser (2008), for instance, present a number of contributions which address ethical challenges for so-called designated interpreters, that is to say, SL interpreters who work for Deaf professionals in various workplace settings on a permanent basis. In such environments, interpreters need to develop a close and often very personal rapport with “their” clients and are involved in both micro (interpreter and professional) and macro (other staff) teamwork. Cook (2004) refers to similar demands on interpreters, though she calls this form of interpreting “diplomatic.” If interpreters work with Deaf professionals on a permanent basis, typical power structures may be reversed. Due to the “covenantal” (not “contractual”) ties between professional and interpreter, neutrality may no longer be tenable (Cook 2004, 64) and interpreters may even be required to be biased, as relations in such a context need to be built on trust; “favouring” the Deaf professional may be the appropriate ethical choice (66).

### 3.2.3 Social justice and fairness

One strand of thought that is linked with an interventionist role of interpreters, or the lack thereof, are systemic constraints which may either help to induce or hinder social justice and fairness. Studies that fall under this category are of high ethical relevance, though issues of ethics are not always spelt out comprehensively. Findings suggest that interpreters are often aware of the fact that their decisions are basically ethical ones in that the format and quality of their interpreting may help to promote social justice. Sometimes, however, they seem to lack such a gut feeling and basic moral understanding, and through their actions, they may even contribute to exacerbating structural asymmetries.

Based on interviews with interpreters, Howes (2018), for instance, holds that the presence of interpreters may influence the fairness of investigative (police) interviews negatively due to systemic constraints “arising from the structure of the interpreting profession and situational aspects of the police interview” (1). Also focusing on police investigative interviews, Gallai (2017, 177) suggests that interpreting may, in fact, “disempower the interviewee”: “. . . utterances by primary participants are subject to distortion, omission or amplification. This can be so subtle that neither the officer nor the interviewee notices resulting miscommunication” (190).

Monolingual institutional language ideologies that are in conflict with applicants’ “territorialized” language practices are also taken up by Jacquemet (2011), who emphasises that the choices made by interpreters (e.g. lexis, phonetics) may also contribute to a communicative breakdown in the “institutional roulette” (482) of asylum interviews. “Distortions” that may come along with translation or interpretation “from a multilingual setting to the monolingual adjudicative process of asylum” (Craig and Gramling 2017, 96) are also critically discussed from a law perspective by Craig and Gramling. In their view, acknowledging a “right to untranslatability” would mean acknowledging the fact that within the asylum adjudication system certain concepts are “untranslatable,” and that officials would need to bear this in mind and make greater efforts to communicate with asylum applicants, instead of “solely [trusting] in the ability of the interpreter to communicate” (97).
3.2.4 Frameworks for ethical reasoning and decision-making

The specifics of decision-making in ethically challenging situations are another recurrent theme, addressed in models of decision-making, on a theoretical level and the basis of empirical data.

3.2.4.1 Models of ethical decision-making

Some very basic theoretical models of decision-making, mostly with a step-by-step approach to problem identification and solution, can be found in practical resource books, often from the field of SL interpreting (for a review see Hoza 2003). The value of such models is their applicability for training as they can easily be used to discuss and reflect practical examples. More profound models have also been developed within the context of SL interpreting. With a focus on SL and Deaf interpreters (individuals who are Deaf and interpret for Deaf clients and SL interpreters), Witter-Merithew and Mills Stewart (1998) present a theoretical framework for developing “ethical fitness” as early as 1998, aiming at breaking up right vs. wrong ethical decision-making. Based on the assumption that ethical maturity requires cultivation through training, they use Perry’s scheme of ethical development to discuss practical examples that can be used for ethical training (also see Mills Stewart and Witter-Merithew 2006 for a more comprehensive resource book).

Hoza (2003) presents a five-step Comprehensive Model of Ethical Decision Making, which is also rooted in SL interpreting and based on Lombardi’s levels of moral analysis and can be applied to “right vs. right” decisions that need to be taken in dilemma situations. “Interpreter sensibility,” which is defined as a “deep bicultural/multicultural awareness” (1), is central to Hoza’s model.

One of the most well-known schemas for “context-based ethical reasoning” that has been applied widely in US SL interpreter training is Dean and Pollard’s (2001, 2011) Demand Control Schema (DC-S). This is based on Karasek’s Demand Control Theory that addresses occupational health (stress) and work effectiveness. The DC-S presents a teleological framework for reasoning ethical decisions that hinges on the dialogical analysis of the situational context of interpreted situations and assumes that “practice decisions are ethical decisions” (159).

3.2.4.2 Ethical reasoning from a theoretical perspective

Prunč’s (1997) concept of “translation culture” (first described in 1997; for details see Chapter 5 “Functional translation theories and ethics” in this volume) is a construct that has also been applied to ethical decision-making in PSI. Translation culture can be defined as the diachronically and diaculturally variable set of norms, conventions and expectations framing interactants’ actions. Central aspects are loyalty, transparency and ecologicity. Prunč outlines different relations between source texts and target texts stressing that trialogical situations (Prunč 2011, 138), in which translators serve as active third parties, require translators to take ethically challenging decisions which may also include the “declination” or “refusal” of translation. Permeating most of Prunč’s work is his plea for more agency for translators: any form of translation is seen as a decision-making process requiring self-responsible, ethically and morally grounded conduct on the part of the translator. With a focus on PSI, he criticises the naïve and defeatist (2011, 135) upholding of impartiality in codes that are modelled on conference interpreting ethics, and, in one of his last publications (2017, 34), calls for a more “democratic translation culture” in which translators, as human beings who should strive for a higher good, are entitled and even obliged to intervene on behalf of the less powerful party. Prunč’s approach has not been used as widely in IS as one might expect in the face of such a broad approach. Among its applications is Martinsen
3.2.4.3 Research on interpreters’ decision-making

One strand of research focuses on how to integrate ethical training into PSI training. Based on interviews with court interpreters, Devaux (2017) suggests that interpreters prefer deontology-based decisions and may not be well enough trained to rationalise decisions in dilemma situations in terms of consequentialism or virtue ethics.

Results of a qualitative interview study lead Kaczmarek (2012) to suggest specific training activities (e.g. learning diaries, role-play exercises, and observations of professional interpreters’ live performance) to address ethical dilemmas in the classroom, stressing that interpreter training that is based solely on the criteria of ethical codes “will leave little if any room for dealing with the ethical dilemmas that a community interpreter faces in real-life assignments” (2012, 230).

Differences between expert and novice interpreter decision-making routines are taken up by Mendoza (2012). Based on a mixed-methods approach (surveys, interviews), Mendoza finds that while both groups prioritise “fidelity,” “do good” and “reparation,” novice interpreters tend to apply a “black and white” perspective and low-context, individualistic discourse patterns in ethical decision-making, while experts apply a multi-layered, high-context perspective.

Mendoza’s typology of interpreters’ discourse narratives is used by Sheneman (2016), who seems to have been the first to investigate Deaf interpreters’ ethical decision-making. Her exploratory interview study suggests that most Deaf interpreters’ decision-making is guided by intuition, which is shaped by experience and training.

Kent (2002) analyses the dynamics at interpreted staff meetings (interpreting for Deaf staff in a group of hearing staff) where interpreters as group members have to make “informed decisions” so as not to perpetuate group inequalities and argues that strict adherence to professional standards may even reinforce Deaf individuals’ minority status as “victims” who need to be “rescued” by interpreters. Power dynamics are also discussed by Russell and Shaw (2016), who study decision-making in interpreter teams comprising Deaf and hearing interpreters in a legal context with a qualitative research design. Their findings suggest that the power dynamics in interpreter teams may sometimes have a negative influence on the interaction. Participants’ conceptualisation of interpreting (as self, team partner, consumer) has also been shown to impact interpreters’ decision-making, suggesting that “the interpreter’s own awareness of power and privilege is a crucial prerequisite to support active decision-making that facilitates effective interpretation” (1).

4 Emerging issues and conclusions

What is evident from a closer reading of the PSI literature on ethics is that certain topics or perspectives are underrepresented. It might thus be worthwhile for research to leave the well-trodden path and explore new avenues. For the remainder of these concluding remarks, we will, therefore, outline some issues that seem to merit greater attention.

It has to be noted that, probably for reasons of accessibility, the literature in this review predominantly focuses on WEIRD (Western Educated Industrialised Rich and Democratic) spheres of populations (see Drugan 2018). Besides, a distinct gender perspective seems long overdue. Our review does not include any empirical research with a distinct focus on gender-related ethical issues. Gender awareness, let alone feminist theory, seems to be grossly neglected in PSI ethics. Norma and Garcia-Caro (2016), in a conceptual contribution, criticise the interpreting
profession’s “superficial” understanding of impartiality and advocate alternative interpreter ethics and greater feminist engagement, where victim safety should rank above neutrality.

As regards emerging topics, ethical decision-making by Deaf interpreters currently seems to be gaining more attention. Even though the ethics of training and working with Deaf interpreters have been discussed in a US context for some time, to date, this topic seems to have attracted less attention in European countries. Another topic that would merit more comprehensive ethical guidance even though it has been present for some time, mostly in mental health research, is trauma-informed interpreting and related issues (coping strategies, supervision).

Public service users’ vulnerability is a field rife with ethical challenges but under-researched; see, for example, Salaets and Balogh (2015) for the only larger project on interpreting for minors in police hearings, Keselman, Cederborg, and Linell (2010) on the ethics of interpreting for children as a specifically vulnerable group of clients, and Crump and Glickman (2011) on ethical decision-making in interpreting for language-dysfluent Deaf clients. Interpreting for other individuals with a high degree of vulnerability (e.g. LGBTI, elderly people, or individuals with language dysfluencies) might entail different ethical dilemmas and would thus also seem worthy of more research.

Remote interpreting has also been prominent in IS research but lacks a comprehensive ethics-based framework. And even though language shifts (Hlavac 2010) and the use of a lingua franca (Määttä 2018) have been discussed with a focus on ethics, it might also be worthwhile to take a closer look at the ethical implications of choice of language, and choice of interpreters, in court or extra-court legal settings. It is also surprising that there is little in-depth discussion of ethical issues related to the use of untrained ad hoc interpreters and the underuse of professional interpreters, particularly in healthcare settings, from an IS perspective.

This glimpse into different emerging issues and potential strands of debate suggests that PSI research on ethics still has a busy schedule ahead and needs not fear a lack of interesting research topics that spoken and SL interpreting scholars may delve into.

To conclude, it seems fair to say that research on ethics in PSI has become less normative; descriptive approaches within applied ethics seem to outweigh prescriptive approaches to ethical challenges and decision-making. Our review of different domains of PSI suggests that issues of role are still often prevailing and that in many cases, a discussion of ethics ultimately boils down to the well-known controversy around the interpreter’s (in)visibility and degree of agency. What is also obvious is that meta-ethics is still a side issue. Scholarship might benefit from an infusion with different meta-ethical perspectives and current lines of ethical thought and meta-ethical theory-building, which would perhaps allow for a fresh perspective on interpreter ethics that can be applied to both interpreting practice and training.

Related topics in this volume

Ethics of volunteering in translation and interpreting; ethics of activist translation and interpreting; ethics codes for interpreters and translators; ethics in translator and interpreter training; ethics in child language brokering; translating and interpreting in conflict and crisis; ethical stress in translation and interpreting.

Note

1 Deaf (with a capital D) is often used by or to refer to individuals who view themselves as being culturally Deaf and as members of the Deaf community, while deaf (with a small d) is used to refer to the medical condition of hearing loss.
References


Sonja Pöllabauer and Iris Topolovec


Further reading


The author presents a comprehensive review of meta-ethical thought and, based on personal experience, adopts a critical stance on interpreter ethics.


This contribution discusses ethical approaches based on Chesteman’s (2001) ethics of translation and relates them to ethical challenges in healthcare interpreting.


The authors present a model for context-based ethical reasoning that is applicable to different domains of interpreting.


This article explores ethics in the field of SL interpreting and outlines a model of ethical decision-making.