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Ethics codes for interpreters and translators

Lluís Baixauli-Olmos

1 Introduction

Ethics codes have the potential to shape the ideologies and practices in a field of professional practice, its material and institutional environment, and its parallel conceptual world as a result. The relevance of ethical documents in any profession is difficult to overstate, especially when the profession is in a process of establishing itself or in a stage of rapid change, as is the case of the translation and interpreting (henceforth T&I) profession(s). The climate of increasing global exchanges gives central prominence to communication facilitation in and across linguistically and culturally diverse societies. A sufficient understanding of the ethical underpinnings of professional T&I, as codified in written form, is therefore necessary. This chapter summarizes the state of the art of ethics codes in T&I by defining these documents, presenting a typology of existing documents and their main contents and giving a brief overview of their evolution over time and a review of main topics and research issues around them.

Ethics codes are designed to fulfil several functions, which may be situated in two fields: professional normative ethics and sociology of the professions. From a professional ethics standpoint, the main purpose of codes is to encourage the practitioner’s moral autonomy (Lozano Aguilar 2004, 181). Their secondary goals are regulative (i.e. offering guidelines, providing some kind of social contract and establishing punitive measures) and ideological (i.e. laying down basic beliefs and attitudes, expressing the will not to overstep their boundaries, committing to transparency to enable “informed autonomy” and recognizing their obligation to “distributive justice”) (Lozano Aguilar 2004, 98–100).

As far as sociology of professions is concerned, professional communities strive to increase their autonomy over their field or jurisdiction, in terms of, for example, regulating training, entry and exit into the group or establishing concepts and terms, and professional guidelines become discursive tools to materialize this goal (Baixauli-Olmos 2017). This control may be gained following different strategies like increasing legitimacy in the eyes of other professionals or society at large by presenting the values professed by the occupation, establishing basic competences to be imparted upon new members, controlling entry into the occupation based on knowledge, skills and attitudes, stipulating practice control and exit of the occupation if necessary and fostering internal cohesion in terms of group identity.
There are different approaches to professional norms; these approaches connect to the goals of those who produce the norms. Ethics codes may be written to increase productivity, to ensure compliance, to offer a clear picture or to become a branding strategy of a company or service, to become an inspiration for practitioners to excel or to champion the safeguarding of human rights. Whatever the motivation, these varied understandings and goals of professional ethical norms show political and therefore controversial statements that reflect different philosophical schools of thought around the notion of duty and obligation; this theory or field of philosophy is called “normative ethics” or “deontology.”

There exists no single definition that enjoys uncontested consensus of ethics codes because their very definition is determined by the field or approach from which it is proposed, or even by the type of document that is being defined. However, a few basic common traits are not prone to controversy: ethics codes are written documents, they formulate the core moral concepts, values or principles of a profession, they express an ideal of right behaviour and they contain information to guide practitioners in aligning with that ideal and outsiders in understanding what the profession does (or should do).

Although a more detailed discussion of type of texts is presented later, this paragraph offers a few working definitions. Codes of ethics have been defined in the field of business ethics as documents that aim to influence workers’ conduct (Stevens 1994) and contain moral standards (Schwartz 2001; Stevens 1994), or as a set of institutionalized self-imposed obligations that pursues the fundamental ethical goal of facilitating decision-making (Wittmann 1995); these obligations affirm a commitment to social values both internally and externally to the community that is affected by these rules. Reinforcing this two-fold intention, Lozano Aguilar (1997) explains that a professional code of ethics formulates an internal reflection about the shared responsibilities of an organization toward the criteria, values and ends that identify that organization. In T&I Studies (TIS), these documents have been described as “a set of objective rules or duties that decide ethical behaviour irrespective of their consequences” (Pym 2001, 134) and “provide[s] guidelines for practitioners on how to conduct themselves ethically for the benefit of the clients they serve, the profession they represent and themselves as practitioners” (Hale 2007, 103). Definitions of these documents in TIS do not deviate from how applied ethics understands them.

2 Historical trajectory of the codes

The birth, evolution and distribution of ethics codes runs in parallel with that of the professional activity these codes try to regulate and in a broader context of socioprofessional trends. We find early antecedents of professional norms in the Hippocratic Oath (2nd–3rd century BC), which contains fundamental principles still relevant for the modern-day practice of medicine. Specific reflections about how best to translate in the early historical times also exist, like St. Jerome’s letter 57 to Pammachius in AD 395 (Giambruno 2008, 27), where his method used to translate texts is justified. Another pre-historic antecedent is found in Julius Caesar’s use of friends when in doubt about the accuracy of his regular interpreters’ renditions (Mairs 2011, in Phelan 2019). In spite of these references, no ancient historical records documenting the existence of explicit written guidelines for T&I have been found.

However, early modern guidelines for interpreters have been documented. Giambruno (2008) reports on the Title 29 of Book Two of the Leyes de las Indias, a piece of legislation promulgated by the Spanish crown between 1529 and 1630, to regulate court interpreters’ professional behaviour in the Spanish colonies. The law provides detailed guidelines on expected practices and ethical principles, like impartiality (38). In any case, these normative documents indicated previously predate the existence of actual professions as we understand them today.
Ethics codes for interpreters

and therefore are not technically professional ethics codes. Professions in today’s sense started during the industrial revolution, which created the necessary conditions for the promulgation of modern ethics codes. The expansion of guilds, the division of labour, the specialization of occupations and their knowledge, and the progressive formalization of those guilds into professional bodies and training institutions are the basic socio-economic structures that gave rise to ethical documents and informed their rationale, underlying ideologies, contents and even structure. The first documented modern code of ethics, not surprisingly in the medical profession, was published in 1803 by T. Percival in the UK (Riddick 2003).

The history of ethical codes is inextricably linked to the social needs that give rise to the organization of associations, from which codes most frequently emanate. The first professionalization efforts in T&I started at the beginning of the 20th century, against a backdrop of internationalization of political relations, when a few incipient nation-wide professional associations were set up in the UK (Institute of Linguistics, 1910), Norway (Association of Government Authorized Translators in Norway, 1913) and Austria (Austrian Association of Certified Court Interpreters, 1920) (Phelan 2019). The creation of the League of Nations after the First World War, when different nations started to explore peaceful ways to resolve political disputes, brought about a need for trained T&I professionals, and as a result the first modern-day school for T&Is was established in Geneva in 1941. A couple years later, in 1943, the Swiss Association d’Interprètes et de Traducteurs (1943) was founded (Phelan 2019). This is the context where the need for clear and explicit expectations for professional T&I started to emerge.

It was only in the mid-20th century that the T&I profession starts to gain recognition and to find ways to regulate its activities at a supranational level. Six national associations (representing Denmark, France, Italy, Norway, the Federal Republic of Germany and Turkey; FIT n.d.) pioneered these efforts and in 1953 founded the International Federation of Translators (FIT), which became the first international body for T&I. That same year the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) was founded; this organization was the first one to develop a code of ethics in 1957 (Boéri 2015). The year 1963 marks an important feat in T&I professional deontology, because the Translator’s Charter (FIT 1963, 1994) was first published, making it the first international document that regulates the translation activity, translators’ obligations and rights, and their organization in professional bodies. During that same year, the US Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf Code of Ethics (1963) saw the light of day. In 1976, the Nairobi Declaration (UNESCO 1976) was passed to encourage state members to implement legal safeguards for translators, including facilitating the creation and development of those professional organizations in charge of establishing norms and obligations. During the second half of the 20th century, with the increase of globalization processes, professional associations mushroomed around the world and adopted a self-regulatory set of guidelines. By the end of the century, “[v]irtually every professional association of interpreters has a code of conduct that its members are expected to follow” (Mikkelson 2000, 50).

The first national document covering both T&I we have found was published in Australia in 1995 (AUSIT 1995, 2012, 3). A thorough search for translation-specific documents published prior to the year 2000 yielded few results; many did not give a clear date of adoption or publication of the current or earlier versions of the guidelines. It is thus highly likely that previous codes existed but remained undocumented.

The spoken language interpreting sector joined in these efforts at the national level later. The introduction of the US Court Interpreters Act laid the groundwork for the publication in 1979 of a court interpreting code of professional responsibility (Salimbene 1997, 649), the first spoken-language-interpreting-only text, followed by the UK’s public service interpreting code (NRPSI 1995) and Sweden’s guidelines for certified interpreters (Kammarkollegiet 1996).
trend then sprawled across other territories, and the first decade of the 2000s saw an interpreting deontological boom. Quite a few new documents were created (e.g. ASTM 2001; APTIJ 2010; CHIA 2002; NCIHC 2004, 2005; HIN 2007; IMIA 2007) and some were reviewed (ASTM 2007; NRPSI 2005). Although new documents keep being adopted (EULITA 2013), in the second decade of the 2000s a second revision stage started, when a few organizations renewed the existing professional guidelines (AIIC 2015, 2018; ASTM 2015; AUSIT 2012; NRPSI 2016; CIol 2017; Kammerkollegiet 2019). Parallel to the ethics codes, standardization efforts for T&I also became more prominent. It seems to have happened in the last years of the 2000s (ASTM 2001, 2007) and during the 2010s, like the ISO for community interpreting (ISO 2014), translation services (ISO 2015), interpreting services (ASTM 2015; ISO 2018), as well as legal interpreting (ISO 2019). Although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact causes of this synchronicity, one may hypothesize that the sector went from a more abstract to a more concrete ethical approach: it first focused on the moral principles (“codes of ethics”), then on ways to fulfil them (“standards of practice”) and finally on establishing clear and agreed upon industry standards (“standards”).

In summary, a few mostly European national bodies broke ground at the beginning of the 20th century in the hitherto unexplored territory of professionalization in T&I. They then joined hands, and this prepared the ground for the establishment, mid-century, of international associations. This led to the development of professional guidelines for interpreters, first internationally and then nationally, and the passing of international regulations for the protection of translators. In the last third of the 20th century many nations, mostly industrialized, developed rules, often for translators first and then for interpreters. The end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century have witnessed an increase in the number of documents, the renewal of texts and the addition of industry standards.

Although an effort has been made to include texts from non-English-speaking territories, our review of the evolution of the ethics codes for T&I is rather Anglo-centric. A broader overview of codes of ethics and standards of practice, limited to interpreting but illustrative of the situation in all the continents, is presented in Bancroft (2005). It is found that ethical documents are uncommon in Latin America; some countries like Brazil, Argentina and Colombia have developed their own rules and some nations follow other codes, like AIIC’s. A similar tendency is found in Asia, where documents are limited and in their absence practitioners fall back on international texts, although there are exceptions such as Japan (JTA n.d.). In Africa professionalization efforts are still incipient; South Africa leads the way with an active professional association with its own code of ethics (Bancroft 2005).

3 Core issues and topics

The study of codes of ethics and similar documents originates in the field of ethics (or “moral philosophy”), more specifically in normative ethics, which searches for an ideal of proper (in our case, professional) behaviour by focusing on how one ought (not) to act (Singer 2019). Three main ethical theories are frequently used to answer the question of what good behaviour is: (1) a duty-based or deontological theory, which “calls for doing certain things on principle or because they are inherently right” and appeals to “concepts of obligation, ought, duty, and right and wrong”; (2) an outcome-based or teleological approach, advocating “that certain kinds of actions are right because of the goodness of their consequences” and stressing “the good, the valuable, and the desirable” (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2016) and (3) a virtue-based ethics, which emphasizes “virtue or moral character, in contrast to . . . rules . . . or . . . consequences” (Hursthouse Rosalind and Pettigrove 2016).
These are three complementary perspectives that may be used to discern ethically acceptable from unacceptable behaviour, to inform decision-making or to develop written norms for ethical behaviour. However, deontological theories seem more relevant than the others do for the study of ethical codes in particular, since their central contents are ethical statements of professional duty. But duty towards what? There are again three foci of ethical interest: the agent’s (in this case, translators’ and interpreters’) duties, the patient’s rights (users of T&I services) and the agreement of the parties involved (T&I practitioners and users; also called “contractarian theories”). This distinction is relevant because it affects the standpoint from which moral statements are formulated, and as a result the selection of contents and the way documents are created. The most common approach to present professional rules, at least in T&I, focuses on the service provider (e.g. “Translators and interpreters shall . . .”), and not so much on whom they serve (e.g. “Users have a right to faithful translations”). This has been criticized in our field by Cokely (2000), who calls for a more rights-based approach to professional conduct (“Because users have a right to . . . translators and interpreters shall . . .”).

3.1 Typologies of ethics codes in T&I

Ethical concepts and documents in T&I are more difficult to define, describe and classify than it seems at first. In order to provide an overview of ethical documents in the T&I profession, broad typologies are proposed later according to various factors: text genre, publishing body, geographical distribution, professional jurisdiction, ethics approach and development process. Before delving into the different types of documents, a terminological clarification seems appropriate: so far, we have used the term “ethics codes” or “documents” to refer to a varied group of texts (codes of ethics, codes of conduct, standards of practice or professional canons, among others) intended to guide practitioners in understanding and applying their professional duties. Even though these kinds of texts are often understood similarly, sometimes even interchangeably, there are nuances worth exploring.

In terms of text genre, although “there is no clear demarcation line between codes of ethics, codes of conduct and ‘standards of practice’” (Ozolins 2014, 350, paraphrasing Bancroft 2005), some trends may be identified to classify the documents. It is common that a professional organization decides to establish some shared values that bind the occupation together, and these are reflected on a document; this document is often called “code of ethics” or “of professional responsibility”; it is general, relatively short and contains basic values and principles of the profession. In some cases, this organization later decides to make the text more specific and proposes another text, usually more detailed and longer and sometimes called “standards of practice,” “of conduct,” “guidelines” or similar (Boéri 2015; Mikkelson 2016, 75; Bancroft 2005; Baixauli-Olmos 2012). There is therefore a chronological and an applied normative relationship between these genres: codes come out first and focus on what should be done, and standards (sometimes) follow and explain how to do it by offering down-to-earth practical advice (Bancroft 2005, 16). There are many more codes of ethics than standards of practice in the T&I profession as a whole, and standards are almost exclusive of interpreting and of the USA (Bancroft 2005, 15).

A third mixed-type category of documents does not technically fall within the scope of ethics codes stricto sensu, although they may contain professional guidelines or inform the professional normative ethics body of texts. These include texts emanating from international bodies – like the FIT Translator Charter (FIT 1963) or the UNESCO Political Recommendation (UNESCO 1976) statutes regulating the behaviour of interpreters, more common in sworn T&I and in court interpreting (Orden 1999) – professional oaths for T&Is and industry standards (ISO 2014,
This last group of documents is more concerned with technical requirements and specifications, but sometimes also includes a section on ethical obligations (ASTM 2015).

In terms of the entity that proposes the text, three types are identified: professional organizations, standardization agencies and public or private businesses. Professional associations are the publishing entity by default, where an association usually decides to draft an ethical code and then approves it. These organizations operate at various jurisdictional levels: some are international professional associations (International Association of Conference Interpreters, International Medical Interpreters Association) or federations of associations (International Federation of Translators); others are supranational (European Association for Legal Interpreters and Translators), national (Indian Translators Association, South African Translators’ Institute, Asociación Argentina de Traductores e Intérpretes), and subnational associations (California Healthcare Interpreting Association).

In some jurisdictions, other public or private organizations that are not designated as “associations” devise their own set of guidelines and protocols to guide practitioners in domains of practice were few or no rules exist (Minnesota Department of Education) or service providers who wish to set clear expectations for professionals and the public in terms of quality and excellence (Multilanguages Corporation 2017). Another instance in this subcategory is a government agency that approves an ethical document for professionals to strictly abide by; this is the case, for example, of court interpreting codes in the US, which are passed, often as legislation, by district, state or federal judicial authorities. These documents, if legally binding, will automatically have more power than non-government-approved rules.

Another distinction that may be drawn among ethics documents relates to the profession or professions it tries to regulate: there are ethical documents only for translators, only for interpreters or for translators and interpreters. Nations with T&I ethics codes have at least one general code of ethics only for translators (like JTA), where references to interpreting are implicit or non-existent; other texts mention interpreting but focus mostly on translation (URTI), while others clearly integrate T&I by including both the “T” and the “I” (NAJIT, AUSIT) in their titles. There exist documents for specialized domains of practice, like literary translation (CEATL), audiovisual translation (ATRAE), judiciary T&I (NAJIT, APTIJ, EULITA) or medical interpreting (HIN, IMIA).

The translation professional domain seems to be more unitary in the sense that typically one nation has one document for all translators (ATA). It seems like translation often conceptualizes itself as one profession in spite of the many branches and specializations, and it therefore reflects its own moral and ethical vision in one single document. A trend is identified, though, whereby more specific guidelines are published by individual organizations or are specific to a domain or specialization within translation. But in terms of codes of ethics there tends to be one document.

The case of ethics codes in interpreting is rather more diverse and even fragmented. There seems to be one document per territory per setting, that is conference interpreting or medical interpreting, or one document per professional organization. To illustrate this reflection about fragmentation, the case of T&I ethics codes in the United States of America will be used. The American Translators Association is the professional body for translators, and it publishes one code of ethics that applies to the whole of the translation activity. However, in interpreting there is one document for court interpreting at the federal level and then many court interpreting ethics codes at the state level. At the same time, there is one ethics code for medical interpreters (NCIHC 2014) and several standards of practice, one national (NCIHC 2015), one international (IMIA) and several state-level (CHIA).

There are a few instances of a joint document for both translators and interpreters (AUSIT; NAJIT; ITI), and some others include other professionals like proofreaders (ASETRED) or...
linguists in general (CIoL; URTI). AUSIT has a general section for T&Is and then an appendix to include specific expectations for translators and interpreters separately (in line with NRPSI 2016 too), whereas SFT has a general code and then a small appendix for interpreters.

These differences may be due to historical factors and demographics, the different time and also the pace at which the two (sub-)professions have fought to organize themselves, the way the market and the industry have been regulated, and possibly the political climate in which the profession evolves.

In terms of approach to ethics, T&I ethics codes follow most frequently a deontological approach to normative ethics in professional contexts (Ozolins 2014, 349), as indicated earlier, i.e. they set forth some ethical principles that reflect professional obligations of T&Is (see later); this is the case of documents like NCIHC, CHIA or NAJIT. Other documents, like the Translator’s Charter, contain a rather balanced view in terms of ethics approach, with a section on obligations and another section on rights.

The last typology of documents relates to how they were created or developed. Ethics codes may be developed following different processes: an individual top-down approach, a group top-down approach, a bottom-up approach (Cortina-Orts 2003, 36 calls these methods respectively “monarchical,” “aristocratical” or “democratic”), or a combination of those methods. We find examples of individual top-down authored professional guidelines in Chesterman’s oath (2001), Corsellis and Fernández (1999) and Baixauli-Olmos (2012). These proposals, although they may be used as the basis for an actual code of ethics or standards of practice, are not valid because they have not been endorsed by a collective body.

The most common procedure to develop a code of ethics is for a professional association committee (either a set-up ad hoc committee or task force, or an existing committee that is tasked with this mission) to come up with a proposal that is then approved by the main leadership (the board, the council or the directors), thus coming into force. This seems to be the case of the ATA (2010), CIoL, NRPSI and many others.

Another approach aims to build an ethical conduct proposal from the grassroots up. The IMIA Standards (IMIA 2007) explains that the text was produced by an organization that designs educational programs following a process using focus group methods to figure out the main duties and tasks of an occupation.

A combination of bottom-up and top-down approaches is found in the medical interpreting CHIA Standards of Practice (2002), where a committee had been working on a draft and using feedback from experts in the field to revise it, and then the draft was shared with experienced practicing interpreters for them to share their perceptions. Another type of document, standardization documents (ISO 2019; ASTM 2007, among others), tends to follow a structured process that is well documented; in the case of all the ISO standards, T&I specific or of other domains, the organization first identifies market needs, gathers expert opinion, builds multistakeholder consensus and writes up the standards (ISO n.d.).

Although a clear effort to make the development process inclusive has been made, it is noteworthy that only a few of the documents (e.g. RID 2005 and AUSIT 2012) explained how the texts were approved or adopted by the membership. It is possible that logistic and financial constraints might make this process unviable for many professional associations, but the legitimacy of the document itself would be enhanced by offering this information.

Texts and organizations influence each other in the professional normative ethics domain. The intertextual dynamics that takes place among documents happens across different dimensions and in different directions. These moves might take place across geographic or institutional jurisdictions, both upwardly (where a national document informs an international one; e.g. the ISO standard 20228 on legal interpreting [ISO 2019], which was
originally proposed by the supranational association European Legal Interpreters and Translators Association, EULITA; or the ISO guidelines on community interpreting [ISO 2014], clearly influenced by the Canadian standards for community interpreters [HIN 2007]) and downwardly, where an international text (like the FIT Charter) influences national ones. This dynamics take place horizontally too, where one domain's text impacts another domain's document. These trends may also be traced historically (with Canada's HIN 2007 questioning previous standards instituting “cultural interpreting”).

3.2 Contents of T&I ethics codes

Contents of ethics codes for translators and interpreters are moderately varied. Some texts are one-pagers with just a short statement of ethical professional behaviour, whereas others go into quite some detail and present a glossary of terms, explain the necessary skills or outline the responsibilities of each stakeholder toward the others. In spite of the considerable differences, ethics codes are similarly structured into two main sections. One of them is a preamble and/or an appendix, which tends to include information about the body publishing the code and offers some context about the profession and why the document is needed; this section offers the context in which the text is produced and therefore contains much socio-professional information. The other one is the normative section, which is the central and perhaps most ethically relevant part of the document.

Translation- and interpreting-specific guidelines are most often presented under sections that correspond either to ethical principles (“accuracy,” “impartiality”: AUSIT; HIN) or to a theme relating to a rather general ethical professional principle (Article 3, Cancellation of Contract, AIIC; Solidarity and Fair Conduct, EULITA). In the first group, information is sometimes presented with an ethical principle, accompanied by a brief explanation of the principle and specific illustrative behaviours (AUSIT; NCIHC), or else the purpose of that principle (HIN); this is relevant because it shows that different ethical approaches (duty-, value- or goal-based) do indeed coexist in professional guidelines. In the second group, documents tend to follow a statutory text structure (preamble-article-guideline, AIIC; preamble, definitions, general framework, NRPSI; ASETRAD; AATI), with a focus on the relationship with clients and with other professionals (JTA, URTI), deciding when one is competent to do the job, protecting the dignity and honour of the profession (AIIC) and integrity (ITI), rates, or the need to belong to the association (ATIA). In a nutshell, there seems to be a trend whereby documents intended for non-conference interpreting (including sometimes translation) are relatively consistent in presenting their guidelines under ethical principles like “accuracy” or “impartiality” (APTIJ; IMIA; NAJIT; NCIHC; HIN; NRPSI), whereas the others seem to focus on a variety of topics often related to the status of the profession and not so much the actual fulfilment of the task.

In terms of ethical content, there is some consensus that the most common tenets in T&I ethics codes are “accuracy,” “impartiality” and “confidentiality” (Baixauli-Olmos 2012, 2017; Bancroft 2005; Hale 2007; McDonough Dolmaya 2011; Schweda-Nicholson 1994; Stern 2011). The following paragraphs contain a brief definition of these three principles, a discussion of how they are presented in ethics codes and a reflection on the academic debate surrounding them.

3.2.1 Accuracy

The ethical principle of “accuracy” refers to the duty of translators and interpreters to render messages equivalent in one way or another to the source text, and the corresponding right of users to expect a certain level of equivalence. Even though the term “accuracy” is often used interchangeably with “faithfulness” (or “fidelity”), the former focuses on the target language and
culture to determine whether a translation or interpreting decision is accurate, while the latter bases that judgement on the correspondence to source. In any case, this distinction is not a focal point in ethics codes or academic contributions.

Accuracy is of supreme importance in the professional practice of T&I, because it is in a way the *raison d’être* of the profession (Rudvin 2015) and in the ethical domain, as a lot of energy has been spent on setting out guidelines in ethics codes and on explaining its meaning and significance in academic publications. This has been considered the central value this occupation professes (Stern 2011, 6), its “internal Good” (Baixauli-Olmos 2012, 301). It is arguable that the social need for accurate communication is the reason why the T&I profession exists. In terms of its presence in deontological professional documents, “accuracy” is understood as the conveyance of meaning (ATA) without distortions, and the preservation of all the source message contents, including register, tone and style (EULITA). Most of the surveyed documents in the literature steer away from static formal equivalence-based understandings of accuracy (Hale 2007; Schweda-Nicholson 1994; Baixauli-Olmos 2012, 2017). Many texts stress the need to avoid literalness (Hale 2007, 113) and strive for naturalness, and to include whatever modifications are necessary to strike an equivalence of impact (pragmatic equivalence; ATIA) in the context of a specific communicative encounter as defined in a translation brief (AATI; functional equivalence).

From the point of view of the normative nature of “accuracy,” it has been described as an individual and collective moral and legal obligation toward the meaning of the speaker’s message (Mikkelson 2016; Rudvin 2015). Normative conceptualizations of accuracy are shaped by both medium and institutional constraints. Translation-oriented documents tend to refer to the duty to provide accurate and complete renditions but do not provide much detail on how to ensure accuracy, and in some cases, this principle is taken for granted and remains implicit (URTI 2014). However, guidelines referring to interpreting pay considerable attention to auxiliary strategies interpreters should use to overcome obstacles that may prevent the interpreter from providing faithful rendering of the source text; this includes, for example, correcting one’s own mistakes or requesting repetitions and clarifications when a message is not understood. In court interpreting accuracy is relatively restrictive, in the sense that practitioners are supposed to reproduce the speakers’ style with utmost precision, including hesitations and pauses (NAJIT; APTI). In conference interpreting, some recommended techniques (like omissions or improving source text style) would squarely contravene court interpreting (Stern 2011). In medical interpreting, then, an interpreter is expected to facilitate communication and improve comprehension, and therefore a practitioner should point out when they feel the patient may not have understood a message (IMIA), which is not a reasonable demand of court or conference interpreters.

Scholarly reflections about accurate cross-linguistic and -cultural message transfer are so complex and go so far back that in a way condense the history of TIS as an academic field of study. Early discussions about accuracy focused mostly on linguistic and semantic equivalence, later expanding to explore meaning in the social context where it is communicated (pragmatic equivalence; Hale 1996) or in the professional situation where translation or interpreting services are produced (functional equivalence; Nord 2001) (Pöchhacker 2004). Other authors have concentrated on achieving some level of correspondence to the source message via either similarity (Chesterman 2000) or alterity (Pym 2001).

### 3.2.2 Impartiality

The second ethical tenet we are focusing on is “impartiality.” It may be defined as “not to cheat, manipulate or wilfully misrepresent, but also not to hide your influence on the process and the product, opting rather to acknowledge your strategy overtly” (Turner 2007, 185, emphasis original), and “to
ensure that personal feeling opinions, beliefs or interests do not interfere with the main aim of producing accurate renditions” (Hale 2007, 119–120). As is apparent in this last definition, the duty to be impartial is seen as a means to the end of ensuring accurate renditions. However, the duty to remain impartial is more multifaceted than “accuracy,” as it connects the professional not just to the source rendition, the translation brief or the target culture, but also to the relationship of the professional with the other stakeholders. Especially if there are potential legal ramifications, professional translators and interpreters are expected to disclose if they have any vested interests or have had previous professional contact with the parties, and they should even withdraw from the assignment if they consider their ability to remain, or be perceived as, impartial is significantly hampered by these or any other factors.

The T&I profession performs its task in an in-between space, across languages and cultures, and often requires satisfying requirements of different parties. This therefore makes the principle of impartiality especially significant.

Impartiality is a nearly universal principle in T&I ethics codes. It is presented somewhat similarly, although with varying degrees of detail. Most codes simply state the duty to remain impartial, while others make explicit a list of requirements, like not giving advice, not expressing one’s own opinion and disclosing any actual or apparent personal conflict of interest (MICT; AUSIT). Although it has been found that no actual definition of the principle is offered in the codes, because it is presented as a “a set of ‘don’ts’” rather than do’s, codes “expect them [practitioners] to be aware of and to control their subjectivity so that they do not interfere with their ability to render the utterance faithfully” (Hale 2007). Although there are few disagreements among codes, one that is worth noting is situated in public service interpreting and refers to the duty to offer explanations of not readily understandable cultural references. Whereas in medical interpreting one is expected to check for understanding, and some documents do include this expectation (CHIA; NCIHC), one text (HIN) that is applicable to all institutional settings explicitly excludes this function, adding a justification that experience has shown that it leads to more problems than solutions.

Research on impartiality questions at times the value of such a principle, on the grounds that it is presented as a universal tenet (Rudvin 2007, 58) that disregards disparate language use or cultural expression and power imbalances in the interaction (Kaufert and Putsch 1997, 72). These criticisms are based on the premise that if professionals are to avoid misunderstandings or develop strategies to bridge cultural differences, as is often the case in public service interpreting, it is difficult for them to remain impartial (Angelelli 2006, 183). Extending this line of thought, professionals with more agency (i.e. who are willing to intervene more) are prone to be less partial and vice versa. It has also been proposed that neutral performance is illusory and that codes emphasizing this principle only intend to increase service demand (Lambert 2018). On the other hand, other authors recognize that total impartiality is impossible and that “what constitutes unethical behaviour, according to the code, is the deliberate alteration of an utterance to reflect the interpreter’s own beliefs, goals and purposes” (Hale 2007, 123–124). Another line of argument underlines the importance of impartial performance, arguing that it allows practitioners to put some emotional distance between them and the messages they have to render, their senders or their goals (Hale 2007, 122). Both the positive and negative views on this principle point establish some kind of connection between impartiality and professional role.

3.2.3 Confidentiality

The ethical principle of confidentiality refers to the translator’s and interpreters’ professional duty of keeping all information acquired in the course of one’s employment confidential. This obligation is common to other professions with access to secret information. The power professionals yield
when privy to such information requires restraint of practitioners. Such restraint ensures that the rights of service users are not infringed upon because of malpractice by the T&I professional community. This duty is legally binding in contexts where details shared in a communicative encounter are protected by law (political negotiations, intellectual property, police interviews, closed door court hearings, depositions by protected witnesses, or health care). There may be exceptions to this requirement, after receiving explicit authorization from the parties involved or when mandated by law; for example when required by court of law or when someone’s health may be at stake. An illustrative example of such exception is found in medical interpreting; it would be acceptable for an interpreter who is aware of a patient’s allergy to a drug that is going to be administered to the patient to alert medical professionals if the patient cannot, or chooses not to, do it.

Confidentiality is the most recurrent principle in T&I codes of ethics (Hale 2007, 108; Bancroft 2005, 16; Baixauli-Olmos 2012, 226). Moreover, contents do not diverge significantly and in general “there is consensus on . . . confidentiality” (Bancroft 2005, 27). Codes for public service interpreters only cover the topic in more detail than do texts regulating translation or both T&I; ATA (2010) or AIIC (2010) simply state that professionals ought to refrain from sharing confidential information, whereas CHIA (2002), IMIA (2007) and HIN (2007) address, among other topics, the possibility of explaining what “confidentiality” means. Nevertheless, there are different approaches and emphases in the presentation of the confidentiality principles. As indicated earlier, setting-specific expectations of compliance with this rule may be different for patent translators than for diplomatic or medical interpreters.

Although confidentiality has not been a major focus of interest in the specialized literature, a debate that remains unresolved has to do with the limits of confidentiality in situations outside the established exceptions outlined previously. Camayd-Freixas (2009, 2013) shares his personal account as a court interpreter in a proceeding that he thought was conducted in the most unfair way; he decided to publicly denounce this miscarriage of justice “to act [his] conscience as a citizen” but he was also criticized by some who argued he should have withdrawn due to a conflict of interest, thus referring to a lack of impartiality on his behalf. In his 2013 paper, he discusses the topic at length from various ethical perspectives and points to limitations, both of ethics codes and of professional associations’ leadership roles, and recommends normative modifications to empower interpreters to speak up when rights violations take place.

The issue of T&I confidentiality has also received attention from mainstream media. In January 2019, the Washington Post reported that after a June 2018 meeting between Russia’s President Vladimir Putin and US President Donald J. Trump, the latter had taken possession of “the notes of his own interpreter and instructing the linguist not to discuss what had transpired with other administration officials” (Miller 2019). This was followed by a request from US politicians that the interpreter be subpoenaed to testify on the contents of the discussion, at which point AIIC released a statement (AIIC 2018) reminding the public of the ethical duty of T&I professionals to keep information confidential.

The two events explained in the previous paragraphs go to show how critical confidentiality can be in some settings, and also how great the tensions may become when opposing sources of pressure put differing expectations on T&I professionals. This reflection also highlights the fundamental role that ethics codes and professional bodies play in such situations.

4 Emerging issues

Even though professional ethics in TIS is an important focus of attention (Lambert 2018), especially in Interpreting Studies, reflection around normative written codes has not been a central topic of research. Tangential references come up frequently, but monographic publications are

As a first observation, it is noteworthy that public service interpreting has paid more attention to codes of ethics than has translation or conference interpreting, which it could be argued speaks to the history and nature of each field. The written vs. spoken/signed and the monologic vs. dialogic nature of rendered interactions fundamentally changes the ethical considerations of each profession. PSI was the last occupation to start to develop, it is more evidently institution-driven and with clear power imbalances, more interpersonal, with immediate response from the audience, and where the target rendition accuracy frequently has life changing impacts on users. This might explain the different degrees of attention, breadth of topics and emphases. It has also been proposed that the existence or absence of socialization structures may have an impact on the degree of detail and explicitness of documents (Ozolins 2014, 354).

In the following paragraphs an attempt is made to group the work on ethics codes done to date into several themes and fields of study. But before discussing in more detail the content of the expert literature on the topic, it must be noted that our compilation relies again mostly on publications available in English.

Let us now discuss the methodologies used in the studies on ethics codes carried out to date in TIS. All of the works we reviewed follow a predominantly qualitative research design. The method of choice is a compilation of ethics codes and its subsequent analysis. The collected data is made up of different kinds of ethics codes, with a sample size ranging from 145 documents (Bancroft 2005) to just four documents (Baixauli-Olmos 2014b). Analysis is carried out through content or thematic analysis, mostly centring on the ethical principles and strategies, sometimes using quantitative criteria to explain the prevalence of tenets (Hale 2007) or prioritizing strategies that help realize those ideals (Baixauli-Olmos 2012). Although none of the sources used traditional corpus linguistics analytical tools, some do explore the terminological variation of terms like “accuracy” or “impartiality” (Baixauli-Olmos 2012; Lobato Patricio 2007) via more micro-linguistic analyses. Some contributions describe perceptions about professional guidelines using focus groups (Angelelli 2006), surveys (Asiri 2016), reports of working group discussions (Ozolins 2014) or interviews (Valero-Garcés 2017). Case studies, which focus usually on one document, are also common. Some of them discuss the contents and the process of development or rewriting the document (Ozolins 2014; Angelelli, Agger-Gupta, Green, and Okahara 2007; Lank 2000), while others make a call for the re-examination of existing documents (Cokely 2000; Drugan 2013).

Theoretical contributions focus on reviewing literature (Rudvin 2015; Lambert 2018; Mikkelson 2016; Hebenstreit et al. 2017), commenting on the illusory nature of their precepts (Arrojo 2012; Cokely 2000) or proposing a theoretical framework to describe them (Chesterman 2001; Baixauli-Olmos 2017).

The range of themes touched upon and theoretical approaches is broad. Three main issues emerge: critical assessment of the documents, debates around moral and professional autonomy, and arguments on the of the validity of descriptivist vs. prescriptivist approaches. They are evaluated in the next paragraphs following a dialectical argumentation.

### 4.1 Critical assessment of ethics codes in T&I

The tension between the strengths and weaknesses of ethical guidelines for T&I has received considerable attention, as is the case of other professions (Center for the Study of Ethics in the
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Professions n.d.). In our review of existing work on the topic, several topics emerge: applicability, universality, realism, consistency and attitude towards oppression.

A fundamental criticism of ethics codes has to do with their applicability to real life and the disparity of the guidelines and real-life practice (Angelelli 2006, 178). Some authors consider the documents do not provide support for the practice of the profession (Lambert 2018, 271) because they fail to address actual professional concerns, like rates or decisions about technological tools (McDonough Dolmaya 2011, 45).

Although this is a fair concern about some documents being approved without consulting practitioners on the field and therefore about their relevance, such content depth expectations seem unrealistic and are based on misconceptions about ethics codes, as “a code of ethics is not designed to provide an answer to every specific problem” (Mikkelsen 2016, 84). Additionally, both existing ethical guidelines and research point to strategies to bridge the theory–practice gap, for example by identifying topics of interest among practitioners (Asiri 2016; Ozolins 2014) and by offering guidance on the meaning and applicability of ethical principles (via standards of practice or resolution of ethical dilemmas, as in CHIA 2002).

Another concern raised has to do with the fact that the tenets are not universal, that is, that they are not applicable across all settings and cultures (Ko 2006). A related line argues that, because some T&I work is carried out by non-professionals, codes that fail to include or consider this reality lose some of their value and relevance (Drugan 2013).

Ethical codes are seen as unrealistic and used as a self-serving face-saving move. It has been argued in the academic debate that codes of ethics and standards of practice often contain unrealistic ideals of detachment and objectivity when they “repress any possible sign of . . . interference in the process of translation” (Arrojo 2012) in order to “sell translations” (Lambert 2018).

Another limitation that has been pointed out about ethics codes revolves around clarity and coherence. Professional guidelines are sometimes incomplete or ambiguous, for example when they fail to define accuracy (McDonough Dolmaya 2011) or professional role (Hale 2007).

Although professional guidelines have been found to reduce arbitrariness and incoherence (Neumann Solow 1981), inconsistencies are unavoidable. There may be internal discrepancies, for example when an interpreter is expected not to add anything but then ought to point to a missed cultural assumption or a culturally based misunderstanding. As well as in-document, there also exist external inconsistencies across documents, domains, jurisdictions and normative frameworks. Different texts in the same occupation may propose opposed strategies (McDonough Dolmaya 2011, 45); these differences may happen as well across nations (Ozolins 2014, 353–356) or across domains (translation vs. interpreting, healthcare vs. legal interpreting) or due to normative discrepancies between professional standards and competing institutional policies or expectations (Angelelli 2006, 189; Ozolins 2014, 361). The presence of inconsistencies is not necessarily a problem because codes are not supposed to be understood as recipes to make decisions but rather as a framework of thought (Harris, Rabins, and Pritchard 1995).

One vivid debate on the codes of professional practice is concerned with oppression and resistance to oppressive forces. Published ethical guidelines have the potential to reduce diversity and reinforce supremacies (Suárez Villegas 2001, 13), both in terms of cultural homogenization, political or ideological oppression, or cross-institutional impositions. For example when some kind of intercultural moral clash takes place in situations of contact between individualist and collectivist ethics (Rudvin 2007), the interpreter is often expected to comply with what the code says, thus prioritizing the satisfaction of one duty. As regards professional ideology, when a code recommends one specific strategy, it is giving privileged status to one type of ethics. As an illustrative example, some PSI documents posit a detached professional role by expecting interpreters to focus on message transfer rather than cultural nuance (HIN 2007), whereas...
others (CHIA 2002) recommend a more involved strategy whereby interpreters carry out cultural clarifications when needed. Therefore professional codes may also be used to underpin “professional ideologies” (Angelelli 2006, 191), which, if misguided, may pursue oppressive or irresponsible practices and beliefs. At the same time, it is possible that certain kinds of moralities can be noncritically applied to all sub-settings, thus enforcing undue or unjustified impositions on contexts where those rules may be inapplicable or may impact performance or satisfaction negatively. Again, in interpreting, this may happen when conference or court (where professionals tend to be expected to show a more detached professional conduct than in social or educational settings) are taken as the archetypic settings; some ethical guidelines that may seem unfit may be considered the norm against which all professionals are measured.

Conversely, ethical documents have been understood to have the power to protect the interests of translators and interpreters (Neumann Solow 1981; Turner and Best 2017; Davis 2010) and also of those who speak through them (Hale 2007, 104; Camayd-Freixas 2009; Davis 2010) as well as the professional community and the institution (Rudvin 2015). Some documents are clear on the rule that members are not allowed to engage in work when the content that is being conveyed is illicit or the activity that is taking place is illegal (McDonough Dolmaya 2011), although it has been pointed out that not all documents protect interpreters and users in this way (Camayd-Freixas 2009).

4.2 Moral and professional autonomy

A notion that connects with oppression is that of autonomy. Do ethics codes for T&I reduce or increase the decision-making capacity of professionals when faced with oppressive circumstances? This key concept may be explored from a moral (“does the code inspire or constrain practitioners?”) and from a socioprofessional (“do codes empower or hamper the professional community’s ability to set its own agenda?”) perspective.

Some critics in applied ethics question the use of codes of ethics on the grounds that they limit moral autonomy because they aspire to provide close-ended answers rather than to formulate open-ended questions (Luegenbiehl 1983; Ladd 1991). In TIS, the same type of moral question comes up in statements like “ethics in translation has been inextricably linked to the neutral repetition of the same” (Arrojo 2012, 5946). Although practitioners relying too much on guidelines is a real danger, it has been found that ethical codes did not recommend this unquestioning approach to decision-making: “There seems to be no evidence to support the Codes’ prescription of a robotic or mechanical role for interpreters either” (Hale 2007, 114).

On the other hand, professional ethics documents have also been said to boost moral autonomy, as they assist translation or interpretation practitioners in considering the ethical dilemmas arising from the translation or interpretation process and addressing such dilemmas appropriately (Asiri 2016, 14–15; Drugan 2013, 111–112). This is consistent with what normative ethics understands the function of ethics codes to be: to help practitioners reflect on their task (Suárez Villegas 2001, 108). In our own review of existing documents, some texts clearly express that documents are to be judiciously applied; for example, one code states, “members . . . will apply the provisions of the Code to the judgements they make concerning their competence to carry out work they are offered and the compatibility of that work with the General Principles of Professional Conduct” (CIoL 2017). In other documents, this is an implicit assumption, and in none of the texts we reviewed was there an explicit reference to a rigid application of the tenets.

Moral autonomy is also achieved by deepening the understanding of the constellation of strategies, principles and duties practitioners are expected to engage in. A meta-ethical reflection on how moral norms may be prioritized has found that ethics codes often seem to organize
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moral norms rather similarly. Ethics codes structures the system of norms hierarchically: the top priority across mediums and modalities of practice is facilitating communication, which represents the internal Good of the profession, i.e., its exclusive contribution to social needs; a second level is inhabited by the occupation’s external Goods, i.e. institutionally determined goals shared with other practitioners (e.g. patient’s well-being in health care, equal access to proceedings in judiciary contexts). At a third level we find three components: duties or principles (like “accuracy” or “impartiality”), actions or strategies to materialize those duties (“preserve meaning,” “avoid taking sides”) and the goals or objectives (“to enable users to communicate accurately,” “to enable users’ autonomy”) (Baixauli-Olmos 2012, 300–303).

But after all, the documents guiding T&I professional practice are only texts and need to be autonomously applied by individual practitioners; they are to be applied with professional judgment, which is based on knowledge gained through formal training, professional experience or in socialization with colleagues. “Much more than the mere existence of a code of ethics is needed in order to ensure quality of interpreting services” (Hale 2007) because “codes speak but we decide” (Baixauli-Olmos 2014b).

4.3 Socio-professional autonomy

In the different sociological conceptualizations about professionalization processes, proclaiming a set of ethical principles is invariably seen as a mostly positive fundamental component (Tseng 1992). Ethical codes may help the professional community increase their control over different areas or dimensions of their jurisdiction: social, symbolic, cultural (Baixauli-Olmos 2017) and economic (Lambert 2018).

In the social dimension, ethical guidelines are seen as an internally cohesive force that generates a sense of collective belonging and identity around a set of ethical principles and social values. The document may also regulate the relationship among the different stakeholders, for example by stipulating rights and duties. Still in the sense of socio-professional control, codes of ethics and standards of practice may establish mechanisms for entry into the professional group, periodic assessment of performance and exit from the group.

In terms of the cultural dimension, standards may also outline the basic competences and qualifications. And knowledge about the ethical standards may even become, in turn, one more component of the knowledge requirements for entry; in fact, access to some organizations like AIIC requires that practitioners are assessed not only on their general language skills and language transfer skills but also on their knowledge of the ethics codes of the professional association.

Ethics codes are also powerful tools externally as a symbol, because they “testify to the claim that the group recognizes an obligation to society that transcends mere economic self-interest” (Luegenbiehl 1983). Therefore it is useful to earn legitimacy (Arrojo 2012) and public trust (Mikkelson 2000), thus elevating the status of the profession (Hale 2007, 104).

But in reality, the strength of the document is, at least partially, determined by the organization that proclaims it and the professionals who apply it. In a way, an ethics code and the institution that proposes it are interdependent (Tseng 1992, 49; Hortal Alonso 2007, 202). What makes an ethics code relevant is the context that makes an organization propose it and the purposes of that institution when undertaking this task. In some cases, the establishment of standards of practice and codes of ethics is considered a chief accomplishment of the professional body (Boéri 2015, 30). If a professional organization is recognized and supported by governmental institutions (Angelelli 2006, 190), the ability of the document to inform effective change increases significantly. In this connection, professional associations express their vision and their identity via codes of conduct. This is also shown in institutional struggles. Codes of ethics have
also reflected internal control struggles between bodies within the same professional jurisdictions; an illustrative example may be found in the USA in the 1980s, when the Registry for the Deaf and the National Association of the Deaf, after years of disagreements, led to the existence of different codes of ethics for the two organizations (Boéri 2015, 36).

4.4 Descriptivism vs. prescriptivism in the study of T&I ethics codes

Descriptivist approaches to the study of translator and interpreter behaviour (i.e. observing what they do) have shaped the field of TIS in significant ways. Description and prescription exist in a relation of ideological or even moral tension; description is considered a useful mission of academic work, whereas prescription (i.e. stating what someone ought to do) is often considered an attitude researchers should keep away from. However, the field of TIS has come to embrace a more deontic or deontologic (i.e. relating to moral obligations) approach to professional behaviour, because “No longer can we shun the deontic as if it were mere prescriptive” (Pym 2001, 137).

As mentioned earlier, some contributions disapprove of professional guidelines because they portray an illusion, or because they are ambiguous, or incomplete, irrelevant or rigid. We propose these positions stem from an ideological rejection of prescription in line with post-modern thought (Arrojo 2012) that is based on the assumption that the guidelines should reflect more closely what happens in real life. But this approach may be put into question because it applies a descriptivist frame of thought onto purely normative texts, which are, by definition, prescriptive.

At the same time, codes of ethics and standards are intended mainly for practitioners, especially those who may not have a deep understanding of ethical obligations, as they are just a general introduction into basic rights, duties and ways of materializing them (Ozolins 2014, 359). This means that the more trained and experienced a T&I is, the more nuanced their ethical decision-making skills and the less central the guidelines become (Baixauli-Olmos 2014b).

In addition to this, it has been argued that professional norms should not be developed following “professional ideologies” that are based on prescription but rather “in accordance with research and scientific evidence” (Angelelli 2006, 191), i.e. using scientific findings, around ethics or role for instance, and compiled after collecting and analyzing data. This seems to propose a dichotomy between research-based and ideology-based codes. This call for more research-based codes is relevant, as many do not seem to be based on research, at least not judging by the preambles and other meta-texts that typically remain silent, for example, about their development process. However, these documents are situated in institutional and market struggles and as a result they necessarily reflect ideologies, like any other document, especially if of a prescriptive nature. Sanctioning a text like a code of conduct is a meta-ethical action that happens against a backdrop of institutional situatedness; who dictates the text, what the intended readership is, and when, where and for what reason it is published, are basic and critical factors that will allow the observer to pinpoint specific socio-professional political or ideological stances. Choices are made by the body that sanctions the text all along the way from deciding to undertake the task of drafting a professional document, to deciding how that process happens and funding it, to the decision to have the text translated or not, to the final approval or modifications. At a more discursive level, professional ideologies are reflected in the choice of principle names (accuracy vs. fidelity), the guidelines format (principle-guideline vs. principle-purpose-guideline-example), the specific language used (shall do vs. shall endeavour to do vs. does vs. intends to), and of course the role a practitioner plays in the exchange (more vs. less agency and power; with attributes like power relations leveller vs. communication facilitator).
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T&I ethics codes reflect the socio-professional context in which they are developed and therefore they reflect professional ideologies. It is arguable that a more transparent approach regarding the prescriptive nature of ethics codes would enrich the discussion around these documents.

5 Conclusion

Ethics codes in T&I have had a great impact on the profession, as they crystallize professionalizing efforts across time and space. They adopt different shapes and forms and intend to fulfil various goals by including specific contents. A common thread that connects all of them is that they are inserted in a communicative, social and institutional context that determines their nature and real implications.

A large part of the academic discussion has focused on stressing the right or wrong attributes of ethical codes. As a critical assessment of the work done and their stance about the good or the bad of codes of ethics, contributions focusing on the topic contain a rather balanced descriptive view of these texts, whereas papers touching on the topic in passing offer a starkly positive or negative perspective of them. It seems the debate would be greatly enriched by paying attention first to the who, the when or the how; and then, even more crucially, to the why and the what for.

As a meta reflection about the role of ethics codes in T&I as a professional and academic field, these documents are the subject of critical discussion. In turn this makes the research and practitioner communities reflect upon professional rights, duties and the collective perception of what good conduct is and its reflection on ethics codes, and how this perception changes over time as a result of institutional, social, political or personal factors. Questioning the ethical status of these codes is an important step to take for the profession (Lambert 2018, 283), because this kind of critical evaluation of normative texts takes the discussion to a meta-ethical level and also encourages moral autonomy.

Further avenues of research will open up as this subfield evolves. A natural expansion of the knowledge developed in this area may come from broadening the methodological approaches to the study of professional guidelines for translators and interpreters. Corpus-based studies would focus on quantitatively exploring language (interpreter vs. interpreters; impartiality vs. conflict of interest; shall, must, do, strive to do) and meta-language choices (canons, tenets, principles) and their philosophical and ideological underpinnings. Studies of market impact (job descriptions, working conditions, impact on quality of service) before and after the sanctioning of an ethics code would help to deepen the understanding of economic factors derived from and motivating the adoption of professional codes of ethics and standards of practice for T&Is. The potential of ethics codes in the teaching of translators and interpreters is also under-researched and worth exploring further.

Although we have tried to demonstrate the breadth of topics scholars have touched upon when discussing ethics codes, there are numerous areas of interest that have not received considerable attention. This would include, for example, exploring how the professional role of translators and interpreters, which has been a central point of scholarly attention in TIS, is depicted in ethics codes; or whether professional norms address the use of technology, and how it modifies behaviour and whether there are limits to its use; and building on previous efforts, mapping settings and domains that pose particular moral challenges, like the military (Lipkin 2008) or prisons (Valero-Garcés 2017), or where existing guidelines seem inapplicable or pose unresolved dilemmas. In this vein, a reflection that is still relevant, although covered at length, has to do with the recognition that interpreters’ and translators’ personal morals sometimes conflict with
professional obligations (Camayd-Freixas 2009; Morris 2010). Some calls for more guidance to resolve dilemmas have been made, for example via exemplified applications of the codes (in an appendix, for example) or trainings to develop professional judgement and decision-making skills (Mikkelson 2016, 83).

Related topics in this volume

Virtue ethics in translation; functional translation theories and ethics; ethics of volunteering in translation and interpreting; ethics of activist translation and interpreting; translation and post-humanism; linguistic first aid.

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Further reading


This chapter covers codes of ethics in public service interpreting, including codes published by associations and companies, their contents and how the principles may be applied in real-life examples. This contribution explores some of the most hotly debated topics in public service interpreting ethics, like advocacy and intercultural mediation.


This chapter analyses 16 codes of ethics, compares notions like “accuracy,” “impartiality” and “role,” and discusses views in favour and against the code of ethics.

Ozolins, Uldis. 2014. “Rewriting the AUSIT Code of Ethics: Principles, Practice, Dispute.” Babel 60, no. 3: 347–70. https://doi.org/10.1075/babel.60.3.05ozu

This article reflects upon the process of rewriting the AUSIT Code of Ethics, including a look at other territories, traditions and contents. Actual drafts from the code rewrite are discussed in light of the concerns raised and relevant scholarly contributions on the topic.


This article stresses the potentially transformative power of ethics codes by analysing seven standards of practice for public service interpreters. This contribution includes an outline of the contents of these texts and discusses how those contents operate in the social, cultural and symbolic dimensions.


This report looks at codes of ethics and standards of practice for interpreters around the world. It contrasts nations, interpreting mediums, text types and domains. This work also identifies areas of consensus, difference and dissent in broad and also very specific terms.

Codes references

Due to space limitations, it is not possible to include a thorough list of the ethics codes for T&Is that were reviewed during the preparation of this chapter. The ones that are referenced in the text appear in the following list. Other lists of documents may be found in the following publications: Bancroft (2005), Hale (2007), Lobato Patricio (2007), Mikkelson (2016), Ozolins
(2014); and by visiting professional associations’ websites. (A compilation of T&I professional associations sites may be found in InBox Translation [n.d.])


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