1 Introduction

This chapter deals with the concept of linguistic first aid. Linguistic first aid refers to a situation in which a person with some proficiency in a foreign language can provide immediate help to another person or a group of people who are not able to communicate in a language to help them overcome linguistic barriers. The concept has emerged from the research on multilingual communication that occurs on the international Allegro train running between St Petersburg, Russia and Helsinki, Finland. It has been noticed that multilingual communication on the train is partly based on mutual linguistic help between the passengers, border officials and the train personnel (Probirskaja 2017).

According to Finnish border statistics, passengers on the Allegro train represent about 120 different nationalities. The train personnel and border officials are Finns and Russians. The train is officially trilingual, with Finnish, Russian and English as its announcement and service languages, but the language skills of the passengers, train personnel and border officials vary in their quality and quantity. When the passengers, train personnel and border officials are unable to find a common language through which to communicate, and the passengers are forced to communicate at least with border officials, they tend to ask someone for translational help, or someone can offer this linguistic first aid when they perceive language barriers between interlocutors. Linguistic first aid is also needed when information is given in a language that is not comprehensible to all the passengers or officials. The motivation for helping may derive from politeness, goodwill, a sense of self-significance and a personal interest in a smooth trip without any conflict situations (Probirskaja 2017). It seems that the confined moving space of the train and the common goals of its habitants to arrive at the destination safely and on time create a sense of community. The findings might be also applicable to other communities of people united by common space and/or common interests.

The concept of linguistic first aid is inspired by the concept of medical first aid, which is usually defined as preliminary help provided in emergency circumstances by bystanders who do not necessarily have the special training, education or knowledge for doing that (see First Aid in the reference list). Essentially, linguistic first aid relates to ad hoc interpreting and translation, but as a concept it is value-laden and raises ethical issues such as duty, responsibility, charity
Svetlana Probirskaja

and goodwill. These issues are also raised in activist translation, voluntary translation and non-
professional translation. In contrast to medical first aid, which is a civic duty the neglect of
which may in some circumstances lead to sanctions, linguistic first aid is completely voluntary,
and it rests on the dimensions of personal ethics and social responsibility. In other words, a person
provides linguistic first aid because of personal beliefs and habits, or because they feel responsible
for fellow human beings. What is still unexplored is the relationship between professional ethics
and linguistic first aid, that is, how professional interpreters and translators should respond to a
linguistic first aid request, what their attitude towards it is, how they should act when off duty
or outside their professional role, and whether provisions on higher values that extend beyond
their immediate professional context should be included in professional codes of ethics or as an
oath. These core issues and topics will be discussed in section 3, which will also provide a report
on a small-scale inquiry into Finnish translators’ attitudes to linguistic first aid. Related to this
discussion, I will also introduce the concept of community ethics. Recently, the issue of social
responsibility has gained the attention of researchers (see Translation, Ethics and Social Responsibil-
ity 2017). This relatively new issue will be considered in section 4 with regard to linguistic first
aid. In the Conclusion, I summarize the dimensions of linguistic first aid and indicate issues that
remain to be discussed.

2 Historical trajectory

Linguistic first aid typically takes the form of ad hoc interpreting. Ad hoc interpreting has existed
since time immemorial (Boeri 2012; Ghignoli and Torres Diaz 2015), but in many multilingual
contacts it has been so self-evident and intertwined with other activities that it has barely been
noticed, not to mention studied. Translation in multilingual societies is often habitualized, that is,
lived by and integrated in the course of everyday life (Wolf 2015). For instance, in multicultural
families, translation between family members is a matter of routine; those members who act as
translators take this role for granted, and other members also expect them to take it on (Angelelli
2016; Del Torto 2008; Hall and Guo 2012; Orellana, Dorner, and Pulido 2003). Furthermore,
assistance is taken for granted, if it is a part of a person’s social or institutional duties (Zinken and
Rossi 2016), such as in the case of family translators or professional translators. In other words,
even though translation is always a help in overcoming languages barriers, it might be taken for
granted if it is a normal work duty of a translator or a normal home task of a family member. In
contrast to this, linguistic first aid given to strangers is normally received with gratitude because
it does not belong to a helper’s mandatory duties. Volunteer work in general is associated with
nobler values than normal remunerated work, because it is seen as being conducted on an altru-
istic basis with no commercial interest involved.

The view of translation as a form of aid may be connected to the discussion of the roles of
translators in general. There are two opposing views. Traditionally, and this view is still valid in
many codes of ethics, translators are expected to stay neutral, impartial and invisible. The critics
of this view see translators as active participants in the communication, influencing the flow and
According to the latter view, translators do more than just mechanically translate – they actively
help participants overcome language and cultural barriers. The notion of translation as a form
of aid becomes especially evident in this participative aspect.

The participative view of translation has probably emerged from fields such as community or
public service interpreting, activist translation, voluntary translation and non-professional trans-
lation. Community interpreting has long been conducted by volunteers (Hale 2007, 28; Roberts
1997, 12). It still has connotations of social work, services, humanity and assistance (Hale 2007,
One of the reasons for these connotations is that community interpreting mainly serves immigrants and refugees, that is, socially weak groups who largely depend on linguistic help. Community interpreters often seek to find a balance between two roles imposed on them: that of a conduit and that of a helper (Bancroft 2015, 224–226; see also Chapter 15 “Ethics in public service interpreting” in this volume). The former restricts the interpreter’s role to only transferring a message from one language into another, whereas the latter presupposes that the interpreter takes on an active role and helps a client through cultural, social and other barriers to gain access to the service. Most community interpreters make their own decisions about the role they apply depending on their training, cultural community, institutional settings and personal values (Bancroft 2015, 225).

The aim of activist translation that gained attention in translation studies at the beginning of the 2000s is to provide translational help especially for NGOs and humanitarian organizations, often with a strong political agenda involved (see Baker 2010; see also Chapter 17 “Ethics of activist translation and interpreting” in this volume). Volunteer translation can take place in emergency situations such as natural disasters (see, for instance, Bulut and Kurultay 2001; Munro 2010). In these situations, linguistic first aid is tightly intertwined with other kinds of aid even to the extent that emergency and disaster interpreters in Turkey are taught, among other things, to deliver medical first aid (Doğan 2016, 67). Non-professional interpreting and translation, and particularly crowdsourcing, is believed to be based on the shared dominant values and ideals of the service providers, such as making communication possible, sharing knowledge and having a strong commitment to the community (Drugan 2011, 121; McDonough Dolmaya 2011, 101). Another underexplored area is peer translation and interpreting within immigrant communities. Immigrants with proficient language knowledge tend to act as interpreters for their family and friends; they convey information about the local society, assist in filling out local authorities’ forms and share their knowledge via social media (Probirskaja 2019b; Weisskirch 2017). However, translational activities of immigrants stay invisible for outsiders of immigrant communities. Although all these settings can be considered forms of linguistic first aid, initially the concept was intended for occasional everyday life situations with no dramatic scenarios (see Probirskaja 2017).

3 Core issues and topics

Lay people render linguistic first aid intuitively and spontaneously, whereas professionals might stop to consider the consequences of their intervention, including the liabilities and limits of their action (Probirskaja 2017). Indeed, one of the core issues of linguistic first aid is how professional translators should respond to it outside their professional role in everyday settings. Is it professional or personal ethics that should dictate the translator’s behaviour outside work settings? Should they be the first to respond to a request for linguistic first aid in the same way as a doctor responds to a request for medical help on board a train or plane, for example? It must be mentioned that even doctors do not have unanimous answers to whether they should always respond to requests for medical help in all situations. At least in the US, Canada and the UK, physicians do not have a legal obligation to assist, but they “have a moral and professional obligation to act as Good Samaritans” (Peterson et al. 2013, 2081). The question continues whether physicians are physicians all the time, such as “once a doctor, always a doctor,” or do they “shed the mantle of being a physician” when they are not explicitly in that role? (Houston 2017). The same questions can be asked with regard to translators: is a translator always a translator even outside their professional role?

Andrew Chesterman (2001) attempted to elaborate the idea of higher values that govern the act of translation in the form of the Hieronymic Oath. Chesterman’s idea was that translators and
interpreters should strive for virtues in their work, such as reducing communicative suffering and promoting understanding, and make these points explicit in the form of an oath. However, he limits his proposal to professional ethics that “govern a translator’s activities qua translator, not qua political activist or life-saver” (147). Chesterman admits, anyway, that “there may sometimes be more important things than professional ethics” (147) and that “any professional ethic must be subservient to more general or universal ethics” (152). The problem is that it is difficult to draw a line between distinct kinds of ethics inside the same person (see Rudvin 2007). Thus, personal and professional ethics may overlap and sometimes even contradict each other.

In contrast to Chesterman’s professionally restricted view is the activist view, according to which translators are active agents for social change, responsible for the narratives they disseminate, for the suppression of injustice and inequality in the world and for the promotion of diversity (Baker 2006; Tymoczko 2010). In this view, translational ethics covers a larger socio-cultural and political context and possibly places too much responsibility on the translator’s shoulders. Viewed in this light, linguistic first aid lies somewhere between the strictly professional context and the responsibility for peace in the entire world. It rather presupposes voluntary momentary help for the immediate community from the translator, be it a workplace, a neighbourhood, a shop or a train. Thus, linguistic first aid could be classified as a type of community ethics. The concept of community ethics is used in theological frameworks meaning “the intention to live together with others in bonds of mutual love, compassion, and service” (Kirkpatrick 2001, IX). Community ethics is opposed to Western individualism that prioritizes individual goals over the common good (Kirkpatrick 2001; Olthuis 2000). Compared to the relationships in a society as a whole, personal relations in the community are more direct, intimate, loving and mutual (Kirkpatrick 2001, XII).

In the translation studies context, Rudvin (2007, 62) speaks of a communitarian approach as opposed to an individualist one. The former refers to the translator’s activity in terms of benefits to a group or a community for whom they work, and the latter refers to the rather Western-oriented neutral and independent position of a translator concerning the translation event. Linguistic first aid presupposes a rather communitarian approach, emphasizing the non-neutral position of intervening. In general, according to modernist and liberal thinking, emotional, ethnic, religious and national neutrality promotes maximum efficiency of business – “business is business” – and it should not be restricted by personal or ethnic concerns (see Olthuis 2000, 1–2). The translator’s neutrality, accuracy and fidelity may also be seen as a means of business and marketing; it creates a positive image of translation and attracts clients who believe that their original message will remain untouched and under their control (see Lambert 2018). In other words, a translator’s neutrality is a good established brand. Linguistic first aid, on the other hand, is rather a pro bono act, not a business transaction, even though it may enhance a positive image of the provider and even lead to a work offer.

To consider the questions related to ethics of translators and interpreters outside their professional role, a small-scale inquiry was conducted in Finland (Probirskaja 2019a). The survey was posted on the two largest Finnish Facebook groups that unite professional translators, interpreters, translator and interpreter trainers and researchers. The survey contained two open-ended questions (in Finnish): (1) in your opinion, how should a professional translator or interpreter act if they notice that somebody needs linguistic help in some (everyday) circumstances? and (2) how does translation or interpreting in your leisure-time (for instance, when you translate or interpret for your relatives, friends or strangers) differ from that when you act in your professional role? Despite the small number of respondents (50), it was possible to identify several tendencies.

First, there was a polarity of opinions regarding the first question. On the one hand, 15 of the respondents answered “of course, a translator or interpreter should help; isn’t it self-evident?”
On the other hand, five of them answered that “providing help is not a translator’s or an interpreter’s duty; it is not among translators’ duties.” Yet, the majority of the respondents (30) considered linguistic first aid to be conditional and depending on circumstances, such as how serious the situation is or how busy an interpreter or translator is at the moment. The diversity of opinions tells us that there is a clear ethical dilemma which has not yet been resolved in professional circles. Those who think that providing help is not a translator’s or an interpreter’s duty probably rely on a professional code of ethics that states that “the interpreter shall not act as an assistant or advocate for those being interpreted” (Code of Ethics of a Professional Interpreter, The Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters, art. 8). In other words, they seemingly apply professional ethics outside their professional role in everyday circumstances. Sometimes work identity influences personal identity: “what we do is what we will become” (Gini 1998, 707). Along with this thought, if translators pursue the neutrality principle in their professional life, they probably also stay neutral in everyday circumstances. The other two groups of respondents who are favourably disposed towards linguistic first aid seem to rely on situation ethics, that is, ethics depending on the situation at hand, on the particular context and circumstances rather than absolute rules (Li et al. 2016, 165–166). In Fletcher’s interpretation of situation ethics, the love of one’s neighbour is the only rule one should follow, and it overrides other rules (165–166). In this, situation ethics resembles community ethics.

Respondents to the survey generally appeared to consider linguistic first aid to be a personal choice derived from the love of one’s neighbour (cf. community ethics) rather than a duty derived from their profession. As some of them answered, “I help not because I am an interpreter but because I am a fellow human being” or “I do not think there is any duty derived from the profession” or “it is everyone’s personal choice whether to help or not.” In other words, unlike doctors whose profession obliges them to render medical help in a case of emergency, most translators do not feel that their profession obliges them to provide linguistic first aid. Some of the respondents answered that they do not immediately offer their help when they perceive problems in communication. In Sande’s (1998) research on refugee interpreters, who often have a refugee background themselves, one of the interpreters realized after supervision sessions “that interpretation is a profession rather than a duty” (Sande 1998, 406). It is interesting that professionalism somehow seems to spoil innocent goodwill and intention and narrows responsibility to the professional context only, as if calling, passion, mission and professionalism were mutually exclusive. On the other hand, professionalism protects interpreters from being misused. Some translators (12) in the survey expressed their concern about some people asking for translational help for free as if translation were not a profession at all. It is probably the concern about the profession, its prestige, reputation and remuneration that make translators less generous in rendering help than doctors, for instance. Furthermore, because the translator’s profession does not require accreditation, in other words, because anyone can practise translation, and because the command of language is not the exclusive skill of professional translators (Rudvin 2007, 61), this to a certain extent releases them from the responsibility of being the first to render translational aid.

Considering the second question about translation during leisure time, opinions were also divided. Some respondents (23) think that their translation style during leisure time is more participative, more empathic and more relaxed than during work time. It sounds as if the straitjacket of the professional role would not allow them to be participative, emphatic and relaxed, which are essentially positive features. As one of them mentioned, “[during leisure time] I can really help people much better than as an interpreter.” This situation when translators cannot act in accordance with their values may cause ethical stress (see Chapter 27 “Ethical stress in translation and interpreting” in this volume). Ethical stress usually occurs in professions such as nursing and social work, in other words, in caregiving professions in which personal values or work
morals do not always match the constraints of the reality of the work conditions, such as time or cost constraints (see Fenton 2015; O’Donnell et al. 2008; Ulrich et al. 2007). Thirteen respondents did not see any difference between translation during leisure time and when performing professional duties, except that the latter is paid for. Furthermore, 14 respondents mentioned that when they interpret during leisure time, they clearly mark their roles as an interpreter and as a primary interlocutor, while others replied that they try to avoid interpreting and translation for friends and family altogether, because it is their profession that they must be paid for. In other words, business rules are not always compatible with community ethics and personal concerns.

4 New debates and emerging issues

The discussion on social responsibility is relatively recent in translation studies. The concept of social responsibility is more familiar in the corporate world, where it broadly refers to the business’s responsibility to the wider society and to the environment (OECD 2001). In translation studies, social responsibility is defined as “interpreters’ and translators’ responsibility to the broader social context beyond the immediate translated encounter” (Drugan 2017, 128). The concept of social responsibility overlaps with the activist view, but in contrast to that, it seems to be less politically laden. The social responsibility of translators is more about making professional choices that are good for society. However, the emerging discussion about the social responsibility of translators seems to focus on revealing the social impact of translation rather than on discussing the social responsibility of translators as such (see Translation, Ethics and Social Responsibility 2017).

Discussion on social responsibility comes into conflict with numerous professional codes of ethics which tend to emphasize translators’ neutrality and impartiality, whereas social responsibility presupposes an active position, stepping out, responding to social challenges and not remaining bystanders (Drugan and Tipton 2017, 120). As Baker and Maier (2011, 3) have noted, the ethos of neutrality and non-engagement often blinds translators to the consequences of their actions. Probably, the same ethos of non-intervention prevents translators from rendering linguistic first aid.

Linguistic first aid relates to social responsibility in that it is also directed to the common good; it also presupposes an intervention of some sort and an active position of a translator. Pleading that one is “just a translator” might also be a way to escape social responsibility. For instance, former interpreters of the Nazi regime tried to avoid responsibility by claiming that they were “just interpreters” (see Pöchhacker 2006, 196). In his recent article, Chesterman (2019) discusses the “loose ends” of translation ethics and examines professional choices alternative to the attitude, “I was only following orders, doing my duty.” This attitude is comparable to that “providing help is not a translator’s or an interpreter’s duty” discussed earlier. Apparently, a socially responsible translator intervenes more readily in the situation of misunderstanding or non-understanding than a translator who has adopted the principle of being just a translator. Chesterman (672) speaks of the priority of utilitarian ethics over contractual ethics related to fidelity, accuracy, impartiality and so on, as a default. The balancing between different types of ethics is the hard task of the translator. The problem is also that clients tend to expect translators to be just translators, accurate, faithful and neutral, because the clients are not familiar with all the nuances of the translation process (see Lambert 2018).

The position of being “just a translator” sometimes protects translators from being responsible for the texts translated and for the acts of those being translated. In some delicate or conflict situations, it would be easier for translators to provide linguistic first aid knowing that other participants do not see them immediately as biased.
In some fields, social responsibility takes on the form of an oath. Thus, physicians have
their Hippocratic Oath with its famous “do no harm.” Now programmers and data scientists
have been discussing a kind of digital Hippocratic Oath (Simonite 2018). Rudvin and Tomas-
sini (2011, 11) see that the Hippocratic Oath of community translators and interpreters is the
Universal Declaration of Human Rights, according to which all individuals should have equal
access to legal, social and health services. Viewed in this light, the responsibility of translators and
interpreters stretches over the immediate translation event to cover the social context. Promoting
understanding across language barriers is also one of the provisions of the Hieronymic Oath
proposed by Chesterman (2001). The still open issue is whether professionals should take care
of promoting understanding and providing access to information even when they are off duty
when they perceive such a need. Current codes of ethics only cover the professional context of
translators and say nothing about their social or cultural responsibility in general (Kruger and
Crots 2014, 152). What is apparently missing is a discussion about the overarching values that
stand behind the immediate professional context of translation. Once they become included in
the codes of ethics, this will also give translators food for thought in considering their off-duty
role, since the professional tenets seem to have impact on the off-duty role as well.

Principles of justice and equal access to resources, including information, belong to the rela-
tionships that are constitutive to a society and that are “normally indirect, impersonal, and deter-
mained primarily by law and contractual obligations” (Kirkpatrick 2001, XII), whereas linguistic
first aid is more about direct, intimate and personal relationships between people determined by
utilitarian sense and community ethics.

Chesterman (2019, 673) asks at the end of his article: “Are translators professionally respon-
sible for working towards a fairer world, or just personally responsible?” Well, at least according
to the small-scale inquiry related to linguistic first aid, translators seem to consider that this is a
matter of personal, not professional, ethics.

5 Conclusion

To sum up, the ethical dimensions of linguistic first aid seem to cover community ethics, a
communitarian approach and common sense. Offering linguistic first aid is a voluntary action
by nature, and it takes place in everyday occasional and emergency situations. It is language-
related help provided by fellow citizens on a mutual, direct and personal basis, not regulated
by society (cf. Kirkpatrick 2001). If a society promotes humanitarian values, this might influ-
ence the relationships between citizens. If a professional community promotes certain values,
this might influence the attitudes of professionals. In the same vein, if the translators’ social
responsibility gathers more attention in academic and professional circles, it might influence
translators’ actions outside the profession. After all, professionals should be more competent in
rendering linguistic first aid than ordinary people are, because they have mastered advanced
translation skills.

Linguistic first aid presupposes a communitarian approach prioritizing the common good
instead of individualistic benefits. The common good does not need to mean altruism; it may
eventually also benefit the individuals who render linguistic first aid. For instance, the fast solv-
ing of a communication problem enhances the smooth flow of travelling, shopping or negotiat-
ing between colleagues. It also brings a feeling of self-significance. Refraining from providing
linguistic first aid based only on neutrality and non-intervention seems to go against common
sense, or utilitarian ethics in Chesterman’s (2019) terms. What is needed instead is a discussion
about the responsibilities, liabilities and limits of action of professional translators in situations
of linguistic emergency (Probirskaja 2017). This discussion, like that held by physicians, can
include issues of competence, ability and liability in a situation in which something goes wrong, or a translator makes a mistake.

Translation in general is always a help in overcoming language barriers. Compared to professional translation, linguistic first aid is not so sophisticated; it is just momentary immediate ad hoc help. However, what makes it important is its emergency nature and sometimes the impossibility of delays. If the provision of linguistic first aid would someday be included in a kind of Hieronymic Oath, it would become ethically binding on professionals. Until then, translators provide assistance in overcoming language barriers in the course of exercising their profession, and some of them additionally in the course of everyday life.

Related topics in this volume

Virtue ethics in translation; professional translator ethics; ethics of volunteering in translation and interpreting; ethics of activist translation and interpreting; ethics codes for interpreters and translators; ethical stress in translation and interpreting.

Notes

1 I have used translation to cover both translating and interpreting.
2 All translations are author’s unless otherwise mentioned.

References

Probirskaja, Svetlana. 2019b. “Peer Translation Within Russian Immigrant Communities in Finland.” Presentation at the 9th Congress of the European Society for Translation Studies, Stellenbosch University, South Africa, September 9–13.
Further reading


The first attempt to elaborate the overarching ethical code for translators.


A comprehensive overview of the three kinds of ethics of translation: personal, professional and activist (socio-cultural responsibility) ethics.


Probirskaja describes in detail the translational space of the cross-border train and first employs the concept of linguistic first aid, referring to mutual linguistic help that train travellers provide to each other.