

The Aston Interpreter Network: Ethics in Legal Interpreting

Consultancy Services
MSc Forensic Linguistics
PhD Research Degrees
Postgraduate Courses
Professional Courses

Introduction

One of CFL's aims is to develop research and Practice Guidelines for interpreters in public service settings. Much academic research has focused on linguistic issues in interpreting in legal contexts and there exists a body of research into the role of the public service interpreter but little work is done on interpreters' specific ethical and practical dilemmas. In the UK, in contrast to other professions, there is only limited guidance in this area. There does exist a National Register for Public Service Interpreters Code of Conduct and limited statements from professional associations. Public service interpreters, however, feel left alone to deal intuitively with problematic situations that arise spontaneously and unpredictably from their work.

Aims of study:

- To discover strategies used by interpreters for dealing with ethical problems.
- To use results of study to identify gaps in training.
- To suggest protocols for professional action.

Method:

- 23 interpreters representing some 15 languages acting as informants.
- 11 real-life dilemmas emailed to interpreters for their consideration prior to focus group meeting.
- 2-hour discussion recorded with their permission.

Example dilemmas (all based on real-life situations)

A man suspected of murder is being interviewed by the police. He denies any involvement in the crime whatsoever. The interviewing police officer leaves the room for two minutes.

The man becomes agitated and tells you: "Look, it was an accident. I only wanted to scare her. I'm not guilty".

The officer comes back with his coffee.

What do you do?

At a police station in an Eastern European country a young man on a stag-night trip from England is being interviewed following a street brawl which he had apparently initiated. A police officer tells him that he faces a prison sentence but adds that 'there's another way of dealing with this situation' and leaves the room for a short time. You are aware that the young man has just been invited to offer a bribe but he has no idea this is the case.

What do you do?

A French woman originally from Lyon is seeking a divorce from her English husband, who had cheated on her and wouldn't let her work. The judge grants her the divorce but has to decide on the amount of financial settlement she is to receive from the respondent. The judge asks her about the market value of the house she has kept in Lyon. She says it's worth £30,000 but, a native of Lyon, you know that this kind of property is in fact worth at least ten times more.

What do you do?

Classifications of problems (not exhaustive)

- A. Inappropriate confidences (NES confides in interpreter) B. Conflicts of interest C. Whistleblowing
D. Interpreting lies and mistakes E. Gender issues

Interpreters' opinions and comments

- Avoid and pre-empt unwanted confidences.
- Service Users and Providers are unaware of the role.
- Starting with a statement of intent is crucial.
- A professional relationship is important.
- Emotional detachment is important.
- Whistleblowing on a colleague is problematic.
- Only registered interpreters can be disciplined.
- Service Users may lie: interpreters should interpret the lie.

Conclusions

- Some ethical problems cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of all.
- Interpreters cannot predict when problems will occur.
- This is a neglected area requiring much more research.
- Interpreters should frequently meet to discuss specific issues.
- There is no effective support structure such as a helpline for interpreters requiring guidance.

Yvonne Fowler and Krzysztof Kredens

fowleya@aston.ac.uk & k.j.kredens@aston.ac.uk