Unit 5: Professional Ethics and Professional Conduct

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LEARNING OUTCOMES

Participants will be able to

» be aware of the general principles of professional ethics specific to interpreting;
» describe key aspects of professional behaviour and its application;
» understand and have reflective knowledge of specific professional codes of ethics;
» respond to moral dilemmas;
» display competences required of professional, practising interpreters.

Basic Principles of Professional Ethics

A LITTLE THEORY TO START YOU OFF

The manner in which we shape or are permitted to shape the way we live together in communities is subject to a number of behavioural norms and constraints. These serve to ensure the preservation and general well-being of each social group. Moral norms, as well as legal norms, are of key importance in human behaviour and co-existence, particularly when problems and conflicts occur.

What is morality? "Morality is all valid societal norms taken as a whole that have a normative influence on human co-existence and that serve to protect individuals who may be potentially affected by the actions of others" (Fenner 2010, 6f; own translation).

The concept of morality provides a behavioural code containing both imperatives and prohibitions; these reflect both the values of a particular group or community and its concept of self. The meaning of 'moral' therefore arises from a group. Groups themselves may vary in size, as may the criteria for (self-)inclusion. As far as members of a particular profession are concerned, it is morality in an occupational sense that guides their workplace behaviour.

To understand concepts of morality, it is important to keep in mind that while there are imperatives and prohibitions in sets of rules that may constrain an individual in their freedom to do certain things, it is equally important that these rules are not perceived to have been imposed by others or outsiders. They function as a "guarantee so that all members of a group may enjoy the greatest degree of freedom" (Pieper 2007, 20; own translation).

The purpose of a system of rules is to protect the interests of people with regard to their own actions and to enable the development of a fair and just society. What is important is that a person in such a group or society should display appropriate and responsible behaviour when dealing with others. This touches on the following questions: How should I behave? How should we behave as a group? How can I justify my behaviour? These questions are fundamental ones in a philosophical sense, and especially with reference to ethics.

AN ETHICS OF VALUES

One premise of an ethics of values is that any moral judgement of actions is based on hierarchically structured values. In Western, democratically structured societies...
such as those in most predominantly anglophone countries, the following assumptions are thought to apply (Pieper 2007):

- At a primary level on the hierarchy, there are **basic ethical values** rooted in the inviolability of human dignity. These include: the concept of freedom – personal freedom, freedom of worship, freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, scientific freedom, freedom of artistic expression; the concept of equality – equal rights and opportunities; and the concept of justice.

- At a secondary level, there are **moral values** that exist so that members of a community may live a fulfilling life. Examples of individual values are: self-determination, self-responsibility, love, friendship, quality of life, and the enjoyment of good health. Examples of social values are: solidarity, fairness and a sense of collective responsibility, while sustainability is an example of an ecological value.

- At the next level, there are **commercial values**. These include a belief in a free market, freedom of contract, earning capacity, the concept of commercial added value, property, commercial goods and money.

Value hierarchies such as these serve many purposes, not least in moral dilemmas (see below the section on dilemma situations, p. 76-78). As for the field of translation, theorist Andrew Chesterman postulates the following key values at the secondary level (Chesterman 2016):

- **Clarity** is a linguistic value that is intrinsic to interpreting and translation
- **Truth** is a value that enables an equivalence to be established and maintained between the source text and the target text
- **Trust** is an inter-personal value
- **Understanding** refers to the sense of responsibility that one has to other parties in the process of communication. This includes the duty to avoid potential communicative suffering. Translation can thus be said to be a preventive as well as a productive activity.

**FACT BOX**

**Ethics and Morality – What’s the Difference?**

In everyday language the two terms ethics and morality and their adjectival forms ethical and moral are often used as synonyms for each other. The difference between the two is that moral justifications are used to define actions in a particular way: as either good and appropriate and therefore to be lauded, or as bad and improper and therefore to be condemned. Moral justifications can be achieved in different ways: through indicating the possible consequences, or via reference to a moral code or to role-models whose behaviour shapes our own conscience. In contrast, ethical justifications seek not so much to validate individual actions but to determine why a person should behave morally and how the morality of actions can be accounted for (Pieper 2007). In debating and arguing these matters, ethicists have developed a range of approaches and theories over the last 2,000 years. Some of these may be incompatible, or even contradictory to one another (Nida-Rümelin 2005, Pieper 2007).

**VIRTUE ETHICS**

The basis of **virtue ethics** is that appropriate behaviour is grounded in the virtues displayed by protagonists. Virtues here refer to protagonists’ attitudes, dispositions and actions. Our own moral judgements relate not so much to an individual’s actions as to the nature of their actions, or in other words, to how they think, consider things and behave, taken as a whole. These virtues are acquired in real-life contexts, usually through replication of those concepts of virtue that are socially established, rather than through an understanding of moral principles as such. In such real-life contexts, a protagonist is put in the position of having to choose courses of action appropriate to the situation (Nida-Rümelin 2005). Virtuous actions are the key to a responsible and happy life. Virtues classically...
considered relevant are intelligence, a sense of justice, courage and moderation.

Applying the concept of virtues to the professional activities of interpreters and translators, Chesterman (2001) identifies the following as virtues characteristic of practitioners:

○ fairness
○ truthfulness
○ trustworthiness
○ empathy
○ courage
○ determination

**Fairness** presupposes, to a great extent, a sense of impartiality – that is, that actions must not be deliberately biased. Among those things associated with **trustworthiness** are the capacities to display a degree of reliability and to justify the decisions made in interpreting or translation. What is meant by the concept of **empathy** in communication is readiness to put oneself in the position of other participants in the interaction. Willingness to accept certain risks on behalf of trusted persons is an example of **courage**. **Determination** is displayed in an interpreter’s or translator’s persistence in attempting to come to an optimal solution.

Among qualities that interpreters need in order to practise, it is important to identify competencies as a separate category to virtues. Competencies include linguistic, specialist and cultural knowledge, as well as technical and research skills.

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**Ethical Principles for Interpreting in Asylum Procedures**

In this section, four principles of professional ethics are discussed that are of key importance when interpreting in asylum procedures: **confidentiality**, **impartiality**, **accuracy** and **integrity**, as well as professional conduct with other participants in the communicative interaction. These principles are commonly found in the specific professional codes of ethics or codes of conduct applying to interpreters. From an ethical perspective, these principles can, to an extent, be considered to be virtues as well as values.

Confidentiality is a virtue promoting individual values such as confidence and self-determination, and, in relation to the primary level of hierarchically structured values, it corresponds to those values to do with equality. The same applies to the virtue of impartiality, which at the same time promotes another value, that of fairness. Accuracy and integrity are manifestations of the individual values of truth, clarity and understanding that can be classified under the values of justice and equality. Accuracy and integrity can also be classified as virtues or as examples of honesty, determination and fairness.

We examine these four principles here by firstly giving a brief definition of what they are. This is followed by a discussion about them, after which examples from real-life situations are provided. In the examples provided, comments focus on the principle that applies in each of them. Examples presented in the practice exercises should be examined keeping all four principles in mind (see “Activity 2: Hypothetical situations”, p. 81).

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

Interpreters do not pass on to others information that they gain in interpreted interactions.

The principle of confidentiality has a number of implications:

○ Interpreters are not permitted to pass on to others details, either of a personal or general nature, which they learn of in the course of a communicative interaction.

○ Interpreters are not permitted to pass on to interviewers any confidential or personal information about applicants that they may have acquired (either during interpreted interactions or through other means).

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**EXAMPLE:** An interpreter, who himself is a migrant, is called upon to interpret for an applicant who is from the same country. After the interview, the interpreter by chance meets a person who is also from the same country. The interpreter mentions to this person that he has just interpreted for a newly arrived applicant who, in the opinion of the interpreter, appears to be encountering great difficulties.
Note. In this example, the interpreter has contravened the principle of confidentiality by mentioning details of an interview to an outsider.

EXAMPLE: An interpreter finds herself called upon to interpret at an interview for an applicant for whom she has already interpreted. From this previous interaction, the interpreter learnt of information relating to the applicant’s occupational background. At the interview the interpreter provides, of her own accord, information in relation to the applicant’s background.

Note. The interpreter has broken the principle of confidentiality by relating details learnt about in another interpreting assignment.

IMPARTIALITY

Interpreters do not take the side of any participant in an interaction. The quality and accuracy of interpreters’ interpretations are not influenced by personal opinions, attitudes, value judgements or other preconceptions.

The principle of impartiality is the basis for the following behavioural norms:

○ Interpreters neither favour nor prejudge any of the participants in an interpreted interaction.

○ Interpreters allow other participants in a communicative interaction to express their own opinion. They do not limit their freedom of expression and do not offer advice to others.

○ Interpreters do not express any personal opinions, attitudes, value judgements or preconceptions.

○ Interpreters do not make pejorative comments about other participants in the communicative interaction.

○ Interpreters do not engage in conversation with any participant in the communicative interaction about other participants present. They do not make fun of others or look down on them.

○ Interpreters refrain from using words, gesture or body language that reveal their own value judgements about the statements or behaviour of others.

EXAMPLE: An applicant claims to be from a country that is experiencing civil war. The interpreter is well informed about the situation in that region. In the course of the interview, the applicant is asked questions that seek to confirm his place of origin. The accent of the applicant and his apparent lack of knowledge of the conditions in the area lead the interpreter to the following conclusion: that the applicant is probably from the country that he claims to be from and that he speaks the language that is spoken there, but that he comes from an area not sufficiently affected by conflict for this to be grounds for an asylum application. Without being asked, the interpreter expresses this view and is openly derisive about the applicant.

Note. It is not the responsibility of the interpreter to evaluate the accuracy of reported information. Where the interpreter does this, she is taking on the role of one of the parties to the communicative interaction and showing preferential treatment towards them.

EXAMPLE: An applicant gives an account of how his family was tortured before his own eyes and then set free. The applicant relates this without showing any emotions. The interviewer finds this account hard to believe and makes her doubts known to the applicant in very clear terms. She also addresses the interpreter personally, expecting him to confirm her view of the situation. The interpreter states that it is not part of his work as an interpreter to judge others.

Note. The interpreter acted appropriately. It is not part of an interpreter’s work to provide comments or judgements on those present in the interaction.

ACCURACY AND COMPLETENESS

Interpreters provide accurate and complete interpretations of spoken and signed language into the other language. The work of interpreters includes explanation of culturally-specific background information and conveying the affective meaning of interlocutors’ speech or signing, where this aids comprehension.

The principle of accuracy and completeness is the basis for the following behavioural norms:

○ Interpreters retain the content of others’ speech or signing. They do not allow their own ideas of the accuracy or veracity of others’ speech or signing to influence their interpretations. The content of others’ speech or signing remains unchanged, even where this is personally unpleasant to the interpreter, for example use of swear words, obscenities or blasphemous language.

○ Interpreters retain the stylistic characteristics of the type of expression used by the interlocutors in the communicative interaction, for example formal and informal means of expression.

○ Interlocutors may use terms that are highly specific to their culture, background or occupational role, so much so that they cannot be readily interpreted via direct equivalents but through longer paraphrases or through accompanying explanation. Where such paraphrases or accompanying explanation serve the purpose of fully conveying to the other interlocutor what has been said or signed, they are not to be considered “additions” or “alterations”. In such
situations, the interpreter may use their discretion in conveying to the source speaker/signer that the interpreter employed paraphrase and/or explanation in their interpretation.

- Where necessary, interpreters seek the agreement of the interviewer or the applicant when requesting clarification.

The role of explaining culturally-specific information does not mean that interpreters take on the role of expert witnesses.

**EXAMPLE:** An applicant becomes increasingly agitated with the interviewer in the course of the interview and uses a variety of abusive terms. The interpreter finds this unpleasant, as she never actively uses these words when communicating with others. As a result, she omits these words in her interpretations.

**Note.** It is the responsibility of the interpreter to provide a complete and unaltered rendition of what others say or sign, even when the interpreter finds this uncomfortable or embarrassing. It is important for all participants in the interaction to register that another participant is upset and how they are expressing themselves.

### PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

Interpreters show respect towards all participants in the interaction. Interpreters seek to facilitate interactions in which participants show respect towards each other.

The principle of professional conduct is the basis for the following **behavioural norms**:

- Interpreters conduct themselves in a dignified and respectful manner towards all applicants, interviewers and other persons present, regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, age, skin colour, religious or cultural convictions, political or ideological beliefs or their social status.

- Interpreters may question statements that appear disrespectful to other participants before interpreting them.

- Interpreters are conscious of their own appearance and endeavour to minimise the possibility that this may be disrespectful to others.

**EXAMPLE:** The interviewer addresses the applicant by his first name. The interpreter asks the interviewer if he would like the interpreter to use the first name in her interpretation when the applicant is being addressed. The interviewer says no.

**Note.** The interpreter acted appropriately. She recognised a lack of respect in a statement of one of the participants to the interaction. By asking this question about which form of address should be used in the interpretation, she made the interviewer aware of a potential problem. In so doing, she contributed to the interaction being conducted in a respectful manner.

**EXAMPLE:** The interpreter appears at the interview in a t-shirt. It has a caption printed on it that angers both the applicant and the interviewer.

**Note.** Interpreters should not dress themselves in a manner that shows disrespect to the other participants of the interaction.

### PROFESSIONALISM

Professionalism refers to the particular manner in which one carries out one’s duties. Professionalism is shown when a person fulfils the requirements of their occupation and displays field-specific knowledge or capabilities. Further to this, professionalism is understood to be the ability to employ specialist problem-solving skills, to follow field-specific behavioural norms and to be able to perform things that cannot be expected of lay people.

In real terms, what this means for the asylum procedure is the following:

- The interpreter is aware of their role as an interpreter and conscious of the duties that this involves. The interpreter does not go beyond the bounds of this role and, where appropriate, clarifies their role to others.

- The interpreter observes all principles mentioned above.

- The interpreter may decline or withdraw from an interpreting assignment where their own personal suitability for the specific interpreting assignment is called into question.

- In instances in which the interpreter has a relationship to another participant that could influence the interpreter’s impartiality or lead to doubts about the interpreter’s impartiality, then this needs to be declared. In some cases, it may lead to the interpreter declining or withdrawing from the assignment.

- Preparation for interpreting assignments. Preparation in many areas of competence is necessary, so that the interpreter has the following:
  - a good knowledge of the asylum procedure system as a whole and of the significance of individual interactions within it; the interpreter should also be familiar with the structure of asylum interviews.
Interpreters should ensure that their working conditions are adequate with regard to physical constellation, working space at their disposal and length of assignment.

Errors or mistranslations that the interpreter becomes aware of should be immediately and clearly conveyed to other participants in the communicative interaction, and a corrected interpretation should be provided.

EXAMPLE: After an interview has already commenced, the interpreter discovers that the applicant speaks a dialect that is barely comprehensible to the interpreter. The interpreter informs the interviewer of this.

Note. The interpreter acted professionally. If the interpreter does not possess the necessary competence to perform their role, then the interpreter should withdraw from the assignment.

EXAMPLE: An interpreter arrives late to an interview, and the interviewer and the applicant are already waiting for her. Due to being in a rush, the interpreter forgets to switch her mobile telephone to "silent" and her mobile telephone starts ringing in the middle of the interview. Instead of switching off her mobile phone, the interpreter answers the call.

Note. The interpreter’s behaviour is unprofessional in many ways. Her late arrival may have led to less time being available for the interview to take place. A feeling of insecurity, time pressures and the feeling of a lack of respect towards the other participants or a lack of confidence in others often has a negative impact on the dynamics of the interaction. In addition, this kind of unprofessional behaviour does a disservice to others and leads to interpreters as a whole gaining a bad reputation.
A professional code contains occupational-specific instructions and prohibitions. It is usually an authorised group of practising professionals within a professional association who draft such a code, which also needs to reflect a consensus of thought amongst professionals as a whole. Where comment on the morality of certain types of behaviour form part of the code, then the professional code also takes on the function of a professional code of ethics (Pieper 2007).

Professional codes have a function within each professional group, and they also have a function to those who are outside the professional group (Ko 2006). They serve to:

- Protect the rights of clients or users of services who rely on the interpreter’s expertise but who are unable to judge this;
- Protect the interests of the members of the profession;
- Ensure a standard of quality in the practice of interpreting or translation;
- Advance the profession in a broad sense.

The general standing and status of the profession is of particular importance to all members of that professional group. Those who contravene rules of the profession damage not only their own personal reputation but that of the entire profession. The responsibility that a practitioner has towards the standing of their profession is usually explicitly mentioned in professional codes (Rudvin 2007).

### Dilemma Situations

A dilemma is understood here to be an “unavoidable conflict between values or duties” (Vorstenbosch 2006; own translation). Such a conflict arises when a number of courses of action appear possible on the basis of particular values and duties, but only one course of action can be undertaken. In opting for a particular course of action, one is compelled to disregard the values and duties that underlie another course of action.
In the study of human ethics, there are different schools of thought about what to do in a moral dilemma. (In fact, some schools of thought dispute whether moral dilemmas even exist.) Regardless of questions relating to various schools of thought, moral dilemmas happen in our private and in our work lives. Not everything that appears to be an insoluble conflict of duties, values or interests is necessarily a moral dilemma. This is especially the case when, on closer examination, apparently competing values and duties need not actually conflict with each other on the same level.

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In the first place, there are no “quick-fix” solutions for . What is important here is to be able to look at the “right” and “wrong” courses of actions (there are at least two and usually more of these) and to make a decision in an unbiased way. The best way to solve a moral dilemma is to make a decision that is based on clear and informed reasoning. Attributes such as common sense and the ability to think critically and to self-criticise, as well as to think logically, are prerequisites (Smallwood 1995).

These ideas find expression in some of the guidelines that are developed for medical interpreting. The guidelines of the California Healthcare Interpreters Association (CHIA 2002) serve here as an example. They recommend the following:

1. Ask questions to **determine** whether there is a problem;
2. **Identify** and clearly state the problem, considering the ethical principles that may apply and ranking them in applicability,
3. **Clarify** personal values as they relate to the problem,
4. **Consider alternative actions**, including their potential benefits and risks,
5. Decide to **carry out the action** chosen,
6. **Evaluate the outcome** and consider what might be done differently next time.

In real-life situations, decisions usually have to be made on the spot without the option of deliberating over things. This makes it all the more important that interpreters approach moral dilemmas in a self-aware way. They need to exercise reflection and sensitivity about the various courses of actions open to them, and to be prepared to account for what they do.

EXAMPLE: The interviewer speaks to the applicant using a form of address or expression that is normally considered disrespectful by native speakers of the language that the interviewer is speaking. The interpreter asks the interviewer if he would like the interpreter in her interpretations to use this disrespectful form of address or expression when interpreting to the applicant. The interviewer says no.

In this example, the principles of accuracy and completeness on the one hand conflict with the principle of professional conduct on the other. Possible options include the following:

- To render the use of the disrespectful form of address or expression in the target language, whenever the interviewer uses these forms in his language.
- Not to render the use of the disrespectful form of address or expression in the target language, and instead to use an appropriate form of address or expression.
- To choose a form of address or expression that is appropriate and to inform the applicant that the interviewer used a less respectful form of address or expression.
- To render the disrespectful form of address or expression in the target language and alert the applicant that this form of address is a disrespectful form of address in the language of the interviewer.
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Each option has different consequences on the mutual perceptions of each other held by all three participants in the communicative interaction, and the perceptions that they have of themselves. Each option also leads to different consequences for the subsequent course of the communicative interaction. The decision by the interpreter to prioritise a “smooth conversational climate” over content accuracy can be rationally justified.

**EXAMPLE:** In the course of the interview, the applicant breaks down in tears. She had suffered physical violence in her country of origin and is now in a state of despair. The interpreter feels great empathy for the applicant and spontaneously reaches out and holds her hand to comfort her. On the basis of her knowledge of cultural norms, the interpreter strongly feels that the applicant will not be able to compose herself if either she, the interpreter, or the interviewer simply sit there impassively, doing nothing. At the same time, the interviewer reminds the interpreter that she should behave in a neutral way.

In this case, the universal virtues (or duties) of readiness to help others, assisting the victim of a crime, and empathy are in conflict with professional ethical principles. What also needs to be considered here is the interpreter’s knowledge of culturally-specific forms of behaviour that may positively influence the course of the interaction, but which stand in potential conflict with the principle of impartiality.

Occupational-specific principles usually take precedence over personal values in work-place settings. However, in cases such as this, it is important to consider whether principles such as confidentiality need to be adhered to, when the well-being or even the life of a person is potentially threatened.
References


Basic Reading


Further Reading

https://rua.ua.es/dspace/bitstream/10045/52569/1/MonTI_2015_Special_Issue.pdf


Useful Links

Internet addresses of codes of ethics in six predominantly Anglophone countries:


Activities

Activity 1: Professional codes

Form of activity: Participants initially work in small groups and come together at the end of the activity for plenary discussion.

Duration: 45 minutes (30 minutes in small groups, 15 minutes plenary discussion).

Description: Participants first read and acquaint themselves with the relevant professional codes or interpreter codes of ethics that apply to the country that they work in. A list of codes of Ethics is given above for the following, predominantly Anglphone countries: Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, United Kingdom and United States. If participants are working in a country other than these, they should refer to the appropriate professional code that applies in their country or region.

After participants have read and acquainted themselves with the relevant code, the following questions are discussed, firstly in small groups, then in plenary discussion.

1. What kind of instructions and prohibitions are contained in the code?
2. What aspects of the code are relevant to some of the examples discussed above?

Activity 2: Hypothetical situations

Form of activity: Participants initially work in small groups and come together at the end of the activity for plenary discussion.

Duration: 20 minutes per scenario (10 minutes in small groups, 10 minutes plenary discussion).

Description: Participants discuss the hypothetical situations presented below (all adapted from authentic sources; see printable worksheet “Activity 2: Critical reflection on hypothetical situations”, p. 82-83). Participants discuss these first in small groups, and the issues brought up are then presented at the plenary session.

Just under the captions that contain the hypothetical situations are further points marked as Further questions and What should I do? These can serve as further points of discussion.

The main aim of discussing hypothetical situations is to develop or increase participants’ awareness and sensitivity. This is done firstly by identifying values and principles relevant to the hypothetical situations, and secondly by discussing the various courses of action that could be followed and assessing their advantages and disadvantages.

The hypothetical situations described here are based on real-life ones and are not made up. In many cases, more than one value or principle may apply to a situation, and participants are therefore encouraged to explore all key values and principles. Where participants are unclear about some details or where further information about the situations is not available, participants may supplement these with details of their own. This can broaden the discussion with further scenarios, for example: “If it were the case that...”
Printable Worksheet Activity 2: Critical reflection on hypothetical situations
(adapted from authentic sources)

Hypothetical Situation 1: During the course of the interview, the applicant becomes quite emotional and speaks at a speed that is difficult for the interpreter to work with. The interpreter does not share the same first language as the applicant, and it is hard for him to understand and note down all the things that the applicant says. With the agreement of the interviewer, the interpreter asks the applicant to speak more slowly and reminds him that he would like to be able to fully and correctly interpret all of the words of the applicant.

Further questions
- How do you think that the interview will proceed after this request from the interpreter?
- What kind of reactions could be expected from the applicant, the interviewer and the interpreter?
- What are the implications of this for interpreters who are not native speakers of the language used by the applicant?
- Are there any implications from this for interpreters who are not native speakers of the language used by the interviewer?

What should I do?
- Ask the applicant to speak more slowly without involving the interviewer?
- Restrict my interpretations of what he says to those parts that are clear and that I can understand?
- Add the phrase “I think what he’s saying is…” at the start of my interpretations or say something like “… but I couldn’t really understand when/what/who/why/where…”

Hypothetical Situation 2: An interpreter is required to interpret for an applicant who comes from the same country as her, but who belongs to a different ethnic group. The interpreter is very familiar with the format of the interview and knows that certain questions are asked in a particular order. She therefore anticipates a question and asks it without it being asked by the interviewer. The interviewer had actually intended to ask a different kind of question, not the one asked by the interpreter. Just before the applicant leaves the room in which the interview takes place, he asks the interviewer through the interpreter how long it will take before a decision is made about his application. The interpreter is in a hurry and she refuses to interpret this question as she also knows that the interviewer will not be able to answer this question anyway.

Further questions
- What sort of an impression would the interviewer and the applicant have of the interpreter? The interviewer may think that the interpreter has taken too many liberties in interpreting questions that were not asked in the first place. The applicant may gain the impression that the interpreter is, in some way, prejudiced against him on the basis of ethnic or gender differences, or for some other reason.
- In your opinion, what are some of the issues that can arise when the interpreter comes from the same country as the applicant but has a different religious or ethnic background?
- What is the length of time that an interpreter should make themself available before or after the interview? What are the time boundaries of an interpreting assignment?

What should I do?
- At the start of the interview, the interpreter brings up the topic of different ethnic groups for the benefit of the interviewer.
- The interpreter explains to the applicant that in the interpreter’s experience, there are many questions to which the interviewer cannot provide an answer.
- The interpreter says to the applicant that she has no further time for him because she has to go somewhere else.
Hypothetical Situation 3: The interviewer and the interpreter know each other well and engage in a brief chat about personal things just before the interview. At the same time, the applicant is waiting nervously for his interview to begin.

Further questions
- How do you think the applicant would have felt in this situation?
- Which principles are being contravened here?
- As an interpreter, are you obliged to interpret things that are said outside the interview?

What should I do?
- Have a short chat with the applicant as well?
- Tell the applicant that he needn’t feel nervous?
- Tell the applicant that the conversation with the interviewer was just about the weather?

Hypothetical Situation 4: An applicant says that he had to leave his country of origin because he was subject to persecution as a convert to Christianity. The interviewer then asks the applicant some questions related to the Christian faith. The interpreter is not Christian and not familiar with vocabulary to do with Christian theology. The interpreter interprets the interviewer’s question “What is Christian scripture?” as “What is Christian handwriting?” In answer to the question which part of the Bible is his favourite one, the interpreter interprets the applicant’s response as “The Gospel of David” instead of “The Psalms of David”. In response to a question from the interviewer about “the last book of the Bible” (ie. the ‘Revelation of John’ or the ‘Book of Revelation’), the applicant is able to answer correctly. However, the interpreter does not understand the applicant’s response and says “I don’t know”. A further question from the interviewer about the meaning of the Immaculate Conception is not understood at all by the interpreter, and he is unable to interpret this. As a person with a particular responsibility who speaks the same language as the applicant and who is aware of mistakes in his interpretation, the interpreter warns the applicant that these mistranslations may have a negative impact on his application for asylum.

Example: Anna Maria Jalalifar

Further questions
- What is your assessment of the behaviour of the interpreter with respect to ethics and professionalism?
- What would you do as an interpreter if you were not able to interpret what you heard?
- How would others react to this? What would the effect of your actions be on the interaction?
- To what extent is it important that professional interpreters are proficient in specialist terminology?
- To what extent can one’s own religious background have an effect on understanding the speech of others and on one’s ability to interpret this?

What should I do?
- Tell the others that I don’t know the terms used?
- Say to the others that I do not have good knowledge of some aspects of the Christian faith?
- Ask the interviewer whether the applicant can be asked for clarification of what he said, in order for it to be interpreted?
- Suggest to the interviewer that the responses from the applicant be recorded in writing via a phonetic transcription of what the applicant has said?
- Suggest to the interviewer that the interview be rescheduled and another interpreter with a more detailed understanding of this topic area be requested for the interview.
**Test yourself!**

**Answer the following questions in plenary discussion. Feel free to talk about the issues and circumstances that influence your responses to the questions.**

1. Are there types of clothing, jewellery or other physical adornments that may be problematic for the cultural groups for whom you interpret?

2. Which of the following tasks are those that can reasonably be expected of an interpreter? Which ones cannot? Consider those that you are able to answer unequivocally and those about which you may be less certain. What are the reasons that you can think of that would guide you in how you respond?

- sight translation of written documents belonging to the applicant
- data entry of statements made by the applicant onto a computer
- an exact back-translation of the contents of the interview transcript into the language of the applicant
- a word-for-word translation of the statements made by the applicant
- checking the veracity of statements made by the applicant
- translation of written grievances made by the applicant
- accompanying the applicant through various administrative hurdles
- translation of written documents belonging to the applicant
- thinking up questions that the applicant could possibly be asked
- informing relatives or friends of the applicant of the progress of the asylum application
- providing truthful interpretations of the information provided by the applicant

3. What options are available to the interpreter in the following scenarios? Consider arguments for and against particular options, and provide reasons for your responses.

**Scenario 1:** An interpreter is called to interpret for an applicant’s asylum procedure. As the interpreter approaches the building in which the interview takes place, he notices a distant relative of his (the interpreter) standing nearby. As soon as this relative sees the interpreter, he recognises him and quickly turns his back to him. At the reception, the interpreter enquires as to the name of the applicant for whom he will be interpreting. It turns out that the interpreter has been called to interpret for that person who happens to be a distant relative of his.

**Scenario 2:** An interpreter’s services are requested for a particular date and at a particular time for an asylum procedure interview. Just before this date, the interpreter receives a request from another government authority to interpret on the same day for a few hours but at a time later on after the first interview. The person making this request says that she is in great need and unable to source another interpreter, and the interpreter agrees to her request. When the interpreter arrives at her first interview that day, she realises that it will last much longer than expected and that she will now be very pressed for time.
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Preface

“It is a fiction that I am neutral and invisible.”

Interpreters play a crucial, yet often underestimated role in asylum interviews. An asylum applicant who does not speak the language of the country of asylum will be reliant on an interpreter to present their claim accurately. Similarly, if the interviewer is to assess the applicant’s claim effectively and fairly, they have to rely on the interpreter to facilitate communication. As it is often not possible for applicants to provide written evidence to corroborate their claims, their oral accounts of what has happened to them are usually the sole basis for an official’s decision and ultimately a pivotal point in the applicant’s life. These oral accounts are rendered by the interpreters between the official language of the proceedings (that is to say, the language(s) of the host country) and the applicant’s language (the applicant’s mother tongue or another language used by the applicant).

It seems obvious that such a critical situation calls for a well-trained and professional interpreter who has the requisite linguistic, cultural and technical skills and is aware of their role and the enormous responsibility they bear towards the other parties involved. In many countries, however, interpreters are appointed on the strength of their language skills but often do not have specific training for the asylum situation. The aim of this handbook is to offer a specific training curriculum for interpreters working in an asylum context.

This handbook was originally drafted in German, within an UNHCR-led project entitled QUADA (“Qualitätsvolles Dolmetschen im Asylverfahren”, literally: quality interpreting in the asylum procedure). The curriculum and content was designed between January and December 2014, in cooperation with experts in the field. The project was co-financed by the European Refugee Fund and the Austrian Ministry of the Interior. The major purpose of the QUADA project was to contribute to improvement of the quality of interpreting and communication in the Austrian asylum procedure.

The German handbook contains a comprehensive asylum-specific training curriculum that was published as a 200-page PDF-document and print version in 2015 and includes twelve different units on perspectives that are key to interpreting within the asylum context in Austria.

This English version, based on the original German handbook and adapted and modified with the help of international experts, was prepared between October 2016 and May 2017, in cooperation with the Department of Translation Studies at the University of Graz and financed by UNHCR. The English handbook offers a modified, country-independent version of the handbook that can be used in European countries and beyond.

The handbook responds to the need for qualified interpreters, which is evident in the asylum context both within Austria and beyond, by offering a theoretical insight into a variety of topics relevant to interpreters in the asylum context, as well as activities and exercises enabling experiential and interactive learning. It is aimed both at interpreters at asylum procedures who have no formal training and trained interpreters who wish to specialise in the field. In addition, the handbook is intended for facilitators and trainers to use in face-to-face training courses. The handbook is also relevant to asylum authorities and interviewers, providing them with insights into and guidance in working with interpreters.

We hope that this handbook will offer guidance and support to interpreting practitioners, trainers and authorities and that it will advance efforts to promote the use of trained and qualified interpreters in asylum interviews.

Christoph Pinter & Annika Bergunde
UNHCR Austria

Sonja Pöllabauer & Iris Topolovec
Department of Translation Studies, University of Graz

1) Comment of an interpreter at asylum interviews

2) For ease of reading, the term “interviews” is used for all three of the following situations: initial asylum screening interviews, where the admission of an applicant’s claim or their return to a safe country is determined, the personal interview, where the applicant gets an opportunity to describe their reasons for claiming asylum, and interviews in the appeal process against negative decisions. Accordingly, a state official conducting any one of these interviews is referred to as “interviewer.”
How to Navigate the Handbook

The handbook consists of an introductory unit on role playing exercises in interpreter training and 12 units covering different aspects of interpreting in the asylum context:

1. Asylum and International Protection
2. The Personal Interview and Interview Techniques
3. The Basic Principles of Interpreting
4. The Interpreter’s Role
5. Professional Ethics and Professional Conduct
6. Interpreting Modes
7. Note-taking
8. Sight Translating Interview Transcripts
9. Interpreting for Vulnerable Applicants
10. Interpreters as Experts in Multi-lingual and Transcultural Communication
11. Information Mining for Interpreters
12. The Interpreter’s Emotional Experience

Each unit is structured in a similar way. Specific symbols help readers and users to navigate the content more easily.

Learning Outcomes: This bullet-point list indicates the knowledge, skills and understanding that users can develop by means of the teaching and learning activities.

The handbook consists of an introductory unit on role playing exercises in interpreter training and 12 units covering different aspects of interpreting in the asylum context:

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11. Information Mining for Interpreters
12. The Interpreter’s Emotional Experience

Country-Specific Information: Some aspects of asylum procedures and interpreting in the asylum context are largely shaped by national regulations and practice. Since these regulations and practices can differ significantly across countries, answers to certain questions may vary in different countries. Country-specific information boxes list questions that should be tackled by trainers in the particular national context in which the handbook is being used.

Literature and Links: This sections presents literature used in the theory section (“References”) and lists materials and sources of information so that more can be learned about the different topics (“Basic Reading”, “Further Reading”). It also includes a list of relevant websites.

Activities: This section offers diverse training activities and exercises. It also includes ready-to-use worksheets and templates for trainers.

Test yourself: This section invites readers to reflect critically on what they have learned in a specific unit. It is a mixture of questions (in an open and/or closed question format), examples and scenarios that can be analysed and reflected upon. The questions can be reflected on individually or discussed in plenary sessions.

While we have taken every care in compiling this handbook, we cannot guarantee that the information it contains is accurate, complete and up-to-date.
“It is a fiction that I am neutral and invisible.”*
* Comment of an interpreter at asylum interviews