
Ethical Boundaries for Interpreters

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The Quandary

As language interpreters, we make critical judgments all the time. "Does this sign reflect the concept correctly?" "Is my expression showing the speaker's actual intent?" "Does this sign have other connotations that might be better interpreted with a different English word?" It is a complex job.

The critical decision-making process does not, start or stop at the door. Before an assignment begins, we ask ourselves whether or not we are the appropriate interpreter for the job; whether we can linguistically and emotionally handle the content; and how to manage what we know or don't know about the client's needs. During an assignment, judgments continue. They are as simple as where we take our break or as complex as requesting in an appropriate manner the things we need to properly serve our consumers. Afterward, we decide where and how we debrief to maintain our own health and sanity.

RID's Code of Ethics gives guidance on how to handle some of the questions above. They are, however, certainly "open for interpretation." Does "always rendering the message faithfully" mean we can never make a mistake? Does "shall not counsel or advise" mean we never share information? Functioning "in a manner appropriate to the situation" looks very different from one interpreter to the next.

When I was coming up in the profession, we were advised to use the "Just Say No" defense. "If you can't handle the job, don't do it!" Unfortunately, the most awkward situations I've dealt with have come up on jobs where I least expected them. We need tools for assessing our moment-to-moment decisions, and ways of thinking to guide us from the black and white into the all-pervasive "gray areas." I hope this article helps open this discussion.

Food for Thought

Below are some interpreting scenarios. They are situations that could be encountered by new interpreters and seasoned professionals alike. Think about the ethical choices you would make. Look at ways job content, consumers, role restriction, and outside perception effect your decision-making process. The italicized assessments are not meant to be the "Right" answer. They are my right answer now, at this point in my professional career. Yours may be different.

Content:

You are a card-carrying Democrat. You are asked to interpret for the Republican Caucus meeting. You are not a delegate for the Democrats and, although you may not like it if the Republicans take office, you can live with it for four years. I would take the job.

Vs

You have strong beliefs about abortion. This strongly goes against your personal and religious beliefs. You would be unable to maintain neutrality in a setting where people

were being counseled to have abortions. I would not take this assignment.

Consumers:

You have been good friends with John and Sally for years. They are buying a house together and want you to interpret for the closing. You do not have a vested interest in the outcome of this assignment (you're not paying the mortgage!) I would take this job.

Vs

John and Sally are having problems in their relationship. They ask you to interpret with them during their couple's counseling as they trust you to voice for them with the hearing counselor. You do have a vested interest in the outcome of this counseling, as they are both your friends and you don't want them to split up. I would need to decline.

Role Restriction

You are interpreting for a committee meeting, where the members are trying to develop a policy on hiring interpreters. Afterward, they ask you to share information and resources about the interpreting profession, about your agency and others, and about policies and fees for interpreting services. I would educate to the best of my ability and provide them relevant resources.

Vs

You are interpreting in a mental health setting. The hearing counselor is looking for someone to become case aide for the Deaf client. His thinking is that you have a lot of information about the client's mental status since you have been interpreting therapy, you can communicate, and therefore you are the perfect person to fill this role. I would not consider this appropriate. It would be stepping out of the interpreting role. It also compromises the consumer's confidentiality, since the interpreter has information from past appointments that anyone else would not be privy to. This Deaf person would have lost an opportunity to begin a relationship her case manager with a "clean slate."

Perception

You are interpreting for a four-day workshop. After the first day, the Deaf consumer asks to have lunch with you and your teammate. I wouldn't consider this a problem, assuming we feel so inclined. Now, consider if tables were turned, and the presenter or another participant should ask you to have lunch? I would be cautious. Does this person sit in a position of power over my consumer? Would the consumer feel comfortable having her interpreter interacting with others on a social basis? Would the Deaf person feel left out? Am I willing to interpret during lunch? I would take all these things into consideration before deciding.

Vs

You are interpreting for a legal deposition, which is expected to take several days. On the first day, the Deaf person asks to have lunch with you and your team interpreter as he is the only Deaf person and cannot communicate with the other parties. In this case, I do not have a vested interest in the outcome (other than fairness/justice) and do not have a strong relationship with the client. Although I do not feel it would be a conflict for me to "do lunch," I am functioning as an officer of the court and serving in an adversarial situation. Should the attorney on the other side see us together outside the deposition, conversing in a language that she does not understand, it would create a perceived conflict and affect the hearing party's ability to trust the interpretation? I would decline.

The Role of the Interpreter

I have to admit, as an interpreter sometimes I feel between a rock and a hard place. I am supposed to hang out enough to be linguistically competent, yet be "invisible." In the old days, we were supposed to be "machines." Thankfully, we're beyond that, but still, when I'm having a bad day, couldn't sleep the night before, or can't find my calendar, I can't let that affect my work.

As someone newly interested in art, I see the interpreter's role as that of a blank canvas. Deaf and hearing people work together, creating a communication product. I am vital to this setting. No canvas, no painting. Yet, it is also critical that the product be theirs, and not mine. If I come into the setting partially painted or with colors and lines brought from another time, this affects the product that the artists create. They end up painting by my numbers, not theirs.

My Hope

My goal for this article has been to look at the minute-to-minute decisions we make that have little to do with what comes off our hands. We can learn to sign better, improve our voicing skills and be a top-notch interpreter on the skill level, but still struggle with judgment. Deaf people often identify "attitude" and "ethics" as critical factors in determining their favorite interpreter. I believe these things are the result of thoughtful judgment. I hope this article will help to raise discussion with peers and provide some tools for thinking before taking action.