AIIC and ethics

This article, written on my own initiative but with the approval of the president, is designed as an aide-memoire and an explanation of the fundamental principles of ethics. It is not intended to be comprehensive; rather, its author hopes it will stimulate further reactions, give rise to debate and even to further articles. The ethical obligations undertaken by conference interpreters when becoming members of AIIC can be summed up in three words: confidentiality, integrity and collegiality.

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Published: January 22, 2002 Last updated: December 2, 2015

I. Confidentiality

Professional secrecy is governed by Article 2a of the Code of Professional Ethics: "Members of the Association shall be bound by the strictest secrecy."

Confidentiality is the primary virtue of interpreters. Professional secrecy is, moreover, the first quality that interpreters use to convince a doubting client. Any confidential information communicated through the interpreter will be forever buried in his memory (or even forgotten!), and will never be passed on directly or indirectly to third parties.

This provision, which is particularly important in political meetings where journalists are constantly trying to ferret out new information, requires the interpreter to take a vow of absolute silence. It may not even be appropriate to divulge the date or venue of the meeting, or even the fact that the meeting is being held. It is imperative to maintain this silence on the content of the debates; thus, even general questions may have to be answered evasively.

Similarly, in meetings intended to present future projects to a particular audience (e.g. a company presentation on a particular market), confidentiality must be respected.

In a less controversial context, in meetings about people (e.g. candidates, elections, discussions of specific cases) or about organisational matters (e.g. composition of management bodies, amendment of statutes, etc.) maximum discretion is required; it is up to those in a position of authority to decide whether to disseminate the information and, if so, when.

In some cases the information may seem insignificant to the interpreter, but may nevertheless be fairly important. Consider meetings where figures are given (e.g. sales, turnover, economic trends) or technical information is provided (which could always be of interest to competitors). Finally, just as he must not repeat anything that is said at the conference, the interpreter, whatever his views may be, should not express a personal opinion about what happened.

Confidentiality therefore covers what is said, what the interpreter may think about what has been said, the content (including documents) and the circumstances surrounding the meeting (including
those present or absent), regardless of the interpreter's views. Who knows who may make use of this information or for what purpose?

When it comes to friends and acquaintances, one can see why it is useful to require "the strictest secrecy" of the interpreter. The absolute nature of this requirement applies to all unauthorised persons. An interpreter may feel like telling a close friend about a meeting; but he must not forget that, although he trusts his friends, they may not respect the need for confidentiality to the same extent as the interpreter.

The absolute nature of this requirement also applies over time. Interpreters must not divulge, even years later, what was learned as part of a professional activity. This explains why interpreters rarely write their memoirs, or why they restrict themselves to describing individual working conditions or personal experiences, but not the actual substance of the work.

The very rare infringements of this rule have always given rise to great indignation within AIIC. This is so even in cases where the question of time limitations for professional secrecy seems to arise, particularly in political contexts where the interpreter was the only witness to certain discussions and where a lot of water has flowed under the bridge in the meantime. Debate on this subject is entirely comparable to the controversy that arose not too long ago about a book published by a former French president's doctor, who felt that his patient's death released him from the requirement of professional secrecy.

Finally, professional secrecy applies not only to outside parties (especially journalists), but also to anyone not allowed into the meeting (including other interpreters), regardless of their position in the organisation. The corollary to the confidentiality rule is consequently strong resistance to any and all pressures exerted on the interpreter.

2. Integrity

There are two kinds of integrity: material and intellectual. On the former, Article 2b stipulates: "Members shall refrain from deriving any personal gain whatsoever from confidential information they may have acquired in the exercise of their duties as conference interpreters." This provision aims at prohibiting what would in another context be called insider trading, i.e. taking advantage of private information that the interpreter receives as a result if his position as an insider.

Article 3c stipulates that "Members of the Association shall not accept more than one assignment for the same period of time." This provision is clearly related to intellectual integrity. It is not only a common sense rule (even the most gifted interpreter cannot be in two places at once!), but is also a question of honesty. By accepting a contract, the interpreter undertakes not to work for anyone else during the period of the contract. He belongs to the team and in some cases is even a member of the staff from a legal standpoint. He therefore is bound by loyalty to his temporary "employer" and this loyalty cannot be divided.

In contrast, although the interpreter must maintain professional secrecy, he can work for competing companies, successively, for example, identifying first with one and then with the other without leaving himself open to accusations of partiality. Consequently, moral integrity, together with confidentiality, leads to neutrality.

Intellectually, an excellent service must always be provided. Article 3a states that "Members of the Association shall not accept any assignment for which they are not qualified." Each individual interpreter must therefore determine whether his training, past experience, language combination, the documentation in his possession or that he can obtain, preparation time, etc. will enable him to provide a high quality service. If not, then the interpreter should not accept the job.
In this regard it should be noted that the specific requirements in Article 7 of the Code (visibility, documentation, team composition, avoidance of relays, etc.) are not supposed to place excessive constraints on the client, but are intended to allow the interpreter to provide optimum service under the best possible conditions. The corollary to this, of course, is that the interpreter should not accept the offers that are most attractive, but rather those for which he is best qualified. Interpreters do not work for fun or in order to travel, but to ensure good communication during the meeting.

3. Collegiality

Article 4a stipulates that "Members of the Association shall not accept any job or situation which might detract from the dignity of the profession." Article 4b adds, "They shall refrain from any act which might bring the profession into disrepute." Article 6a stipulates that "It shall be the duty of members of the Association to afford their colleagues moral assistance and collegiality."

The last "ethical virtue", collegiality, is therefore referred to in the Code, even if it is sometimes forgotten in practice. This collegiality is exercised in the relationships among members, between members and their Association and between members and third parties.

Relationships among members (Art. 6a) should be characterised by solidarity; this requirement dates back to a period when conference interpreters were few in number and had to "close ranks" in order to survive on the market. In fact, the AIIC Solidarity Fund was created in order to provide financial assistance to colleagues in difficulty.

Moreover, "moral assistance" and "collegiality" can easily be interpreted to refer not only to the general rules, but also to the specific context of conferences, where teamwork, sharing the same booth, facing the same difficulties and, sometimes, living abroad under the same conditions for long periods can mean setting aside personal differences in order to ensure the quality of the work, i.e. communication during the conference. All interpreters are aware that the cohesiveness of a team, getting along well together, mutual assistance and support are vital to the quality of the work.

The second aspect of "collegiality" is seen in the relationship between the members and their Association. Although not spelled out in the Code, the rules on dispute settlement and on disciplinary measures provide safeguards in this context.

The third and final aspect of collegiality is often overlooked. It concerns the relationship between AIIC members and third parties. Each interpreter is seen as representative of the entire profession; so the slightest misdemeanour, in the eyes of non-interpreters, will reflect on the profession as a whole.

This rule requires the development of a certain amount of savoir-faire in the booth and at meetings (courtesy, respect for others, modesty, respecting the role assigned to each team member, e.g. team leader, good relationships with organisers and technicians). This attitude will make it easier to gain acceptance of the interpreters' specific needs (sound quality, visibility, documents, etc.).

This apparently secondary rule is in reality the very foundation of all the others (in particular integrity). In fact, the behaviour of the individual reflects on his boothmates, his team, his Association and, at the end of the day, the entire profession. Public relations activities undertaken by AIIC in recent years aim at highlighting precisely this point as well as at recognition by each interpreter of the responsibility incumbent upon him.

All these rules seem to oblige the interpreter to be superhuman, better integrated than anyone else, more polite, more devoted, more attentive to others. But this is not the case; interpreters have their shortcomings just like anyone else. These rules simply formally establish the constraints that apply to anyone living in society. They come into sharper focus here because the interpreter is the interface
between several cultures and, as a communicator, is in the spotlight without ever being the focus of general attention. Therefore, the interpreter must, at all times, reconcile discretion with effectiveness.

August 1997

Recommended citation format: