

ETHICS AND STANDARDS for The Community Interpreter®

An International Training Tool



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Preface

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this document is to support the education and training of community interpreters. It does so by providing structured and detailed guidelines for professional conduct in accordance with principles and values that underlie widely accepted practice in the field. The authors also wrote *The Community Interpreter®: An International Textbook*, in which this document serves as a training tool.

The contents of this document are based on a critical distillation and selection of principles and standards included in codes of ethics for interpreters around the world. The document also represents a contribution to the further evolution of professional practice. It tackles issues that have proven controversial or unclear and proposes new guiding concepts.

The concept of *communicative autonomy* is introduced in this document as a fundamental principle. Communicative autonomy is defined here as the capacity of each party in an encounter to be responsible for and in control of his or her own communication.

In modern medicine, “First do no harm” is a precept that guides its practitioners. The authors of this document propose that supporting communicative autonomy is a comparable fundamental precept that should underlie every aspect of the development and practice of community interpreting.

Definition of Community Interpreting

Community interpreting is defined here as interpreting that facilitates access to community services. Depending on how community services are provided from country to country, they can be delivered by publicly funded organizations, for-profit entities, nonprofit organizations or any combination of the three. Typical examples of community interpreting include medical, mental health, educational, social services and faith-based interpreting. Community interpreting may also encompass some of the interpreting conducted in conflict and disaster zones and interpreting for refugees.

Community interpreting may involve interviews or meetings. It can involve consecutive or simultaneous interpreting and/or sight translation. It might be performed for two speakers, several speakers or groups. Finally, community interpreting can take place during face-to-face encounters, or—increasingly—remotely (with the aid of technology—using telephonic, video and Voice over Internet Protocol platforms).

Community interpreting as a profession has many other names around the world, including public service interpreting, dialogue interpreting and liaison interpreting. Once an unregulated and informal activity performed primarily by untrained individuals (volunteers, family members, friends or untrained bilingual staff), community interpreting is rapidly professionalizing in many parts of the world.

Note: In this document, the term *service provider* refers to anyone involved in providing a community service. The term *service user* refers to the consumer who seeks to apply for or receive that service. While it is true that interpreters, too, are service providers, for clarity they are referred to in this document exclusively as *interpreters*.

Conceptual Framework and Structure

The communicative autonomy of service users and service providers is identified in this document as a fundamental principle for the profession of community interpreting. Communicative autonomy also provides the underlying conceptual framework that shapes this document. Either in a direct or an indirect way, every ethical principle, standard of practice and example in the document supports communicative autonomy.

Communicative autonomy

When service users and service providers encounter language barriers, they may need professional assistance to communicate. Yet having an intermediary—the interpreter—inserted into the process of giving and receiving messages has an inescapable impact on the communicative process. The professional community interpreter is trained to use a variety of strategies to keep that impact to a minimum, such as strategic positioning, the use of direct speech (first person), choosing which interpreting mode to use, refraining from side conversations and so on. These strategies help both service users and providers to be responsible for their own dialogue, despite the interpreter’s presence. They support communicative autonomy.

The ethics and standards outlined in this document align with these strategies and provide a framework that can help the interpreter strive for an unobtrusive presence. In this way, the parties can stay focused on communicating directly with each other and not with the interpreter.



DEFINITION

Communicative autonomy

The capacity of each party in an encounter to be responsible for and in control of his or her own communication.

Document structure

This document includes the *Community Interpreter’s Pledge*, eight ethical principles, forty-one standards of practice and eighty-two examples.

The pledge serves a double purpose: it is a statement of commitment for the interpreter and serves as a summary of the document’s key content. As a mnemonic tool, it may help interpreters grasp the essence of the document and the interconnection among its key ethical principles.

Each ethical principle is supported by several standards of practice. Each standard of practice provides specific guidance about how to observe and adhere to the ethical principles. Each standard is illustrated by examples of how Ana and Zere, two fictional interpreters, show ethical conduct in response to real-life situations by applying relevant standards. The solutions that Ana and Zere choose in each case are not the only acceptable solutions. Rather, they offer suggestions for practice that closely align with the principles and standards of this document.

Taken as a whole, the document provides both overarching guidelines and concrete examples. This format is intended to offer practical guidance for community interpreters around the world who encounter challenging situations and seek guidance about a reasonable course of action.

Special Considerations

Legal interpreting

The interpreting profession in some countries or regions views legal interpreting as falling under the umbrella of community interpreting, while in other countries legal interpreting (or at least court interpreting) is considered a separate specialization. In many countries, there is little discussion or consensus on the matter.

The reality today around the world is that community interpreters who lack specialized training in legal or court interpreting frequently work in legal settings (both in and outside the courtroom). This document therefore includes examples of community interpreters who work in legal settings to reflect that reality.

It should be noted, however, that the requirements for legal interpreting vary from country to country and may be derived from legislation, case law, statutes and/or other rules and requirements based in law that take precedence over any interpreting ethics and standards created by professional bodies or other organizations. Community interpreters who work in legal settings should familiarize themselves with the legal interpreting ethics of the regions where they practice and the settings where those specialized requirements may apply.

Summarization

The topic of summarization has been poorly examined in community interpreting and lacks established protocols and techniques. Many training programs forbid summarization and do not teach how to perform it. Yet most community interpreters—including highly qualified professionals—have to summarize in certain situations, such as fast-paced emergencies or when speakers are incoherent due to mental illness, dementia or the influence of drugs or alcohol.

This document accepts summarization as a professional technique, one that should be applied only when absolutely necessary. Summarization is therefore referred to in relevant standards.

Technology and ethical practice

The integration of new technologies into many aspects of daily and professional life is an inescapable reality. Technology is impacting the interpreting profession in many ways. Interpreting services increasingly include remote interpreting options, such as video remote interpreting, remote simultaneous interpreting, over-the-phone interpreting and even interpreting via mobile applications. In addition, interpreters now routinely obtain work and communicate with potential employers via email and online professional profiles. As professional practice moves onto remote platforms, so too does the need to have clear standards for how to abide by community interpreting ethics in the online environment.

Although technology is referred to in relevant standards of this document, community interpreter ethics and standards urgently need specialized supplementary guidance to help interpreters engage in ethical practice where technology is involved.

Disclaimers

The authors of this document come from Canada, Cuba, Italy, Spain and the United States. The views represented here seek to be inclusive of community interpreting as ideally practiced by professional interpreters in different countries, but they are informed by and reflect the cultural perspectives and worldviews of the authors.

The information provided here is not advice. It is provided as is, without any representations or warranties. If you have any specific questions about professional practice as reflected in this document or elsewhere, you should consult your local or national interpreters association or a lawyer.

Acknowledgment

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The Community Interpreter's Pledge

A pledge is a commitment. The following pledge for community interpreters captures key ethical principles for the profession and involves a conscious intention to take action.

“As a community interpreter, I will support the **COMMUNICATIVE AUTONOMY** of the parties I interpret for. To help them maintain responsibility for and control over their own communication, I will:

- Observe confidentiality
- Strive for accuracy
- Display impartiality
- Ensure transparency
- Promote direction communication
- Respect professional boundaries
- Support intercultural communication
- Maintain professional conduct

Ethical Principles and Standards of Practice

The Community Interpreter's Pledge above lists the eight ethical principles that this document addresses. For each ethical principle there is an explanation of the principle itself, a commentary section, a set of standards of practice that show how the community interpreter can adhere to and support each ethical principle, and two examples of situations showing how each standard could guide the interpreter's conduct in real life.

A Code of Ethics for *The Community Interpreter*[®]

Confidentiality

The community interpreter does not disclose private or proprietary information learned during the execution of his or her professional duties, except where disclosure is required by institutional regulations or by law.

Accuracy

The community interpreter strives to interpret every message without omissions, additions, distortions or any other changes to the original message.

Impartiality

The community interpreter refrains from allowing personal beliefs to manifest in his or her professional conduct, especially when rendering the content and tone of the message.

Transparency

The community interpreter interprets everything that is said to ensure that all messages expressed during the encounter are communicated to all parties.

Direct communication

The community interpreter initiates and actively supports practices that enable service users and providers to engage in direct communication.

Professional boundaries

The community interpreter should maintain professional boundaries, both during and outside the interpreted encounter.

Intercultural communication

The community interpreter intervenes to promote meaningful communication across cultural differences only when necessary for clear communication and without articulating the interpreter's beliefs or speculations about any of the parties' cultures.

Professional conduct

The community interpreter's conduct should reflect the highest standards of the profession by showing adherence to professional ethics and best practices.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Ethical principle

The community interpreter does not disclose private or proprietary information learned during the execution of his or her professional duties, except where disclosure is required by institutional regulations or by law.

Commentary

Many service professions require their practitioners to respect confidentiality, that is, the non-disclosure of private information learned while engaging in professional practice. The information not to be disclosed can relate to the identity of the service user, the business practices of the service provider's organizations and content shared during the service delivery.

While confidentiality is a fundamental right of service users in many countries, it is also a key condition for ensuring effective service provision. To be effective, most services require that a bond of trust be established between the service provider and the service user. For example, to foster a therapeutic alliance, therapists need to gain the trust of their patients. Lawyers also need their clients to trust them and not hide any relevant facts that can be crucial for a competent defense. Thus, confidentiality as a principle serves a public interest, because it is essential for the smooth functioning of community services.

Community interpreters also need to earn the trust of everyone involved in the delivery of a service. They, too, must observe confidentiality. Confidentiality is required both by the interpreting profession and by the setting and professional environment in which they interpret, such as a hospital or government agency. In many countries, confidentiality in the delivery of public services is also a legal requirement.

In some cases, public interest in disclosing information holds greater weight than public interest in the preservation of confidential information. These exceptions may be regulated and will vary from one region to another. However, in the absence of an official rule mandating disclosure, the community interpreter must observe confidentiality indefinitely.

Confidentiality is the only ethical principle that appears to be a universal requirement for the interpreting profession.

Standards

To observe **CONFIDENTIALITY** before, during and after the interpreted encounter:

1. The community interpreter should use professional discretion to avoid sharing personal information disclosed by participants, even when that information was disclosed at a public event.

Example 1: During a public school forum, a father discussed his struggles to support his child's learning after a painful divorce. As the interpreter at the event, Zere refrained from ever mentioning that story, despite the public setting where he learned of it.

Example 2: Ana interpreted for a birthing class, during which a wife and husband disclosed to the group that their house was in foreclosure in Ana's neighborhood. Ana told no one about the foreclosure.

2. The community interpreter should honor confidentiality indefinitely.

Example 1: Ana interpreted in a nursing home for an older woman who soon passed away. Ana revealed nothing about the woman to anyone, even after her death.

Example 2: Zere interpreted for an asylum seeker who lost his case and was deported to his homeland. Though Zere's friends wondered what had happened to this person, Zere never told anyone about the deportation.

3. The community interpreter should take additional steps to maintain confidentiality when information pertaining to an interpreted session is shared with other parties through the use of computers, electronic mail, facsimile machines, telephones, voicemail and other electronic technology.

Example 1: Zere often filed required reports about assignments through electronic means. He therefore set up strong password protection for his computer, phone and email to ensure service user privacy.

Example 2: Ana not only deleted assignment-related emails that included service users' names; she also made sure to immediately delete these messages from her email trash folder.

4. The community interpreter should not disclose private information, unless one of four conditions pertain:
 - (a) The service user has given explicit permission (preferably in writing) for disclosure of that information;
 - (b) A law, statute, legal requirement or workplace requirement compels the interpreter to disclose otherwise confidential information;
 - (c) The interpreter has signed an agency or inter-agency confidentiality agreement permitting the interpreter and a group of service providers to communicate information with one another about the service user; and/or
 - (d) The information disclosed is relevant for the service being provided and/or the service user's health, well-being or safety; it follows institutional regulations for the service being provided; and the interpreter discloses it only to a member of the treatment team or service team working with the same service user.

Example 1: After interpreting for a rape survivor and a therapist, Ana received a subpoena to testify in court about the session. A lawyer for the sexual assault center informed Ana that she was legally required to testify. Ana testified only after she made sure she understood why she was legally required to do so. (See condition (b) above.)

Example 2: A patient told Zere in private that he had a sexually transmitted infection but asked Zere not to tell the doctor about it. Zere had to share the diagnosis with the patient's doctor, because the diagnosis was vital for the patient's treatment plan. (See condition (d) above.)

5. The community interpreter should take the necessary steps to be informed about the terms and conditions for mandatory disclosure in his or her country and within the organization(s) where he or she interprets.

Example 1: Ana participated in a training session to better understand the complicated legal requirements governing confidentiality in healthcare in the country where she interpreted.

Example 2: After Zere moved to another region, he consulted an interpreter's association, websites and other interpreters about local confidentiality and reporting requirements. Soon after, he was able to correctly report a case of potential child abuse to the local government authority.

ACCURACY

Ethical principle

The community interpreter strives to interpret every message without omissions, additions, distortions or any other changes to the original message.

Commentary

Rendering a message inaccurately—however small the inaccuracy might seem—is equivalent to changing the message itself; to saying something different from the original. Changes in meaning due to inaccuracy can be subtle or extreme, but in either case a distorted message defeats the purpose of interpreting.

While accuracy is necessary for all interpreting, it is particularly important in community interpreting, where communicative autonomy is a fundamental principle. Most community interpreting involves interpreting a dialogic process: two or more individuals have a conversation where they build a shared understanding. The process of service provision is based on the exchange of messages and information, where details and nuances can impact decisions and courses of action. For that reason, accuracy in community interpreting is critical for effective service delivery and for the intended outcome of the communication process.

That said, even though accuracy is essential, the interpreter cannot always be sure to have achieved it. One reason for this paradox is that what the speaker means and what the listener understands are not always aligned. Interpreters cannot always control discrepancies between what is meant and what is understood (by them or by the parties). In addition, many concepts and expressions lack precise equivalents in other languages, yet the interpreter has to come up with linguistic solutions on the spot. As a result, interpreters can only strive for accuracy, yet the importance of that effort cannot be overstated.

Standards

To strive for ACCURACY before, during and after the interpreted encounter:

6. The community interpreter should interpret everything, including vulgar language and nonsensical statements.

Example 1: When a service user began to curse after hearing that his social welfare benefits were being terminated, Zere interpreted the curses in a comprehensible way without softening or changing the intended meaning.

Example 2: When the caseworker asked a mother why her children went hungry to school, the mother started changing the subject, interrupting herself every few words and discussing unrelated matters. As a result, her message was not coherent, yet Ana faithfully interpreted everything, rather than summarizing the coherent parts or creating her own clear version of the mother's words.

7. The community interpreter should make every effort to maintain the style, tone and register of the speaker.

Example 1: When an immigration representative used technical vocabulary that according to Ana might have been incomprehensible to the service user, Ana did not simplify the terms. Instead, she alerted both parties that these technical terms might cause misunderstandings.

Example 2: When a mother heard from a police officer that her son was murdered, she screamed and wept. Zere raised his voice and let it reflect the mother's distress without either shouting or crying himself.

8. The community interpreter should correct interpreting errors during or after the interpreted session, whether orally or in writing.

Example 1: After a medical appointment, Ana realized she had misinterpreted certain information about a blood disorder. She contacted the nurse, who immediately rectified this important error.

Example 2: While interpreting for an employee who was being fired, Zere realized he had omitted a whole sentence. Immediately he intervened to correct the omission.

9. The community interpreter should interpret in the mode that enables the greatest clarity and accuracy with the least distraction.

Example 1: During a session between a therapist and a torture survivor, Zere performed consecutive interpreting until the survivor became emotional and started speaking very quickly. Then Zere switched into simultaneous mode to avoid interrupting.

Example 2: After informing a father about his child's hearing test results, the teacher started a side conversation with the speech therapist. Ana switched to simultaneous interpreting but returned to consecutive interpreting when the teacher addressed the father again.

IMPARTIALITY

Ethical principle

The community interpreter refrains from allowing personal beliefs to manifest in his or her professional conduct, especially when rendering the content and tone of the message.

Commentary

Impartiality is a general principle of justice: non-judgmental treatment is needed for equity. Applying impartiality means avoiding taking sides based on personal preferences when making decisions (e.g., by judges) or reporting information (e.g., by journalists). Whether those preferences relate to personal vested interests or to personal feelings, the individual needs to acknowledge his or her own personal biases before being able to act impartially. An important guide to impartiality in general is to always bear in mind that the points of view and interests of all are equally important.

This last statement is particularly important for communicative autonomy. In community interpreting, the interpreter is always an intermediary. Precisely because the interpreter works as the middle person in the service delivery process, he or she should try to maintain the same attitude towards all participants. For the community interpreter, showing impartiality means not allying through one's behavior or conduct with any of the parties more than with any other. Impartiality also involves not displaying personal judgments about the attitude, beliefs or decisions of any of the parties.

In practice, impartiality in interpreting usually refers to transferring messages (through tone, body language, demeanor, etc.) in a manner that reveals none of the personal feelings or beliefs of the interpreter. But impartiality also applies to any professional decision made by the interpreter during or after an assignment.

No human being can distance themselves entirely from their feelings or internal bias, yet every interpreter can make a conscious effort to maintain respect for others and display a nonjudgmental attitude. In other words, community interpreters cannot be neutral in their feelings. Yet they can make every effort to be impartial in their behavior.

Standards

To show IMPARTIALITY before, during and after the interpreted encounter:

10. The community interpreter should refrain from taking sides during the interpreted session.

Example 1: A representative in social services showed insulting behavior towards a service user. Zere continued to interpret accurately and did not intervene to defend the service user or correct the provider during the interpreted session. (He did consider however reporting the incident once the interpreted session was over. See standard 15.)

Example 2: A doctor and nurse asked Ana to help convince a pregnant patient to have an amniocentesis, despite her religious objections. Ana politely refused but offered to interpret their concerns.

11. The community interpreter should avoid offering opinions or advice, even when requested to do so.

Example 1: During a medical appointment, a patient asked Ana, “Should I tell the doctor about the cornsilk tea?” Having stated in her introduction that she would interpret everything, Ana interpreted the question, and the doctor asked the patient about the tea.

Example 2: After the service user left, an attorney asked Zere, “Do you think my client was lying, or was that just his way of speaking?” Zere answered, “I don’t know, but I’d be happy to interpret any questions you have for the client.”

12. The community interpreter should, when interpreting, let his or her tone of voice, body language and demeanor reflect the speakers’ feelings, not the interpreter’s.

Example 1: A victim of domestic violence was speaking about her experience with an abuser. Ana’s tone reflected the speaker’s sadness, and it did not show her own reaction of distress.

Example 2: When interpreting for a young man in detention who was mistreated by a police officer, Zere did not show his anger or allow any personal feelings to influence his interpreting. (He did consider however reporting the incident once the interpreted session was over. See standard 15.)

13. The community interpreter should consider declining or withdrawing from an assignment if her or his faith, ethnic group, tribal, political or other affiliation may be perceived as unduly influencing her or his impartiality.

Example 1: Zere was asked to interpret for an individual whose tribal group was persecuted by Zere’s ethnic group. Zere informed the service user and service provider of this fact and let the service user and provider decide whether Zere should be the interpreter for that assignment or not.

Example 2: During the session, Ana was accused by a service user of being prejudiced against that person’s religion. Ana stated that she was ethically required to act impartially and she also offered to withdraw if her presence made the service user uncomfortable.

14. The community interpreter should declare all actual and potential conflicts of interest.

Example 1: Ana was asked to interpret for an assisted suicide. As an active supporter of an organization that opposed assisted suicide, Ana declared this conflict of interest to the interpreting agency and declined the assignment.

Example 2: On arriving at an attorney's office, Zere saw that he had already interpreted for the service user in several other settings. He disclosed the situation and let the attorney decide whether or not it constituted a conflict of interest.

15. The community interpreter, while avoiding taking sides during the interpreted session, may consider reporting a service provider who is breaking the law or violating his or her professional ethics to an appropriate supervisor or an institution of justice.

Example 1: A child-abuse investigator consensually recorded an interview with the father of the child but without warning him about the potential legal implications. After the encounter, Zere consulted a lawyer to learn if he should report such a situation and, if so, to whom.

Example 2: After a doctor forced a patient to sign a consent form for amputation surgery without explaining the benefits and risks of the procedure, Ana consulted the hospital ombudsman and her interpreting service to find out whether she should report the doctor before the surgery took place.

TRANSPARENCY

Ethical principle

The community interpreter interprets everything that is said to ensure that all messages expressed during the encounter are communicated to all parties.

Commentary

In the media, the corporate world and politics, the idea of transparency can be associated with the concept of accountability. In that context, transparency means operating in the public sphere, letting third parties have access to how companies and individuals make decisions, receive funding or present information. Corporations or political parties can be held accountable only if their actions are visible to others. Transparency is about visible processes.

In community interpreting, the interpreted encounter must be transparent so that everyone knows what is happening at any time. The interpreter has a clear obligation to accurately interpret everything that is stated by all parties. The interpreter should also interpret his or her own utterances whenever he or she has to intervene and speak as the interpreter.

In situations where third parties briefly become part of the interpreted encounter (for example, when a service provider consults a colleague by phone or when a new person briefly enters the room), what is said to and by these individuals should also be interpreted, or at least reported as accurately as possible.

Achieving transparency for the interpreter is relatively straightforward during dialogues where each participant takes turns and allows time for the interpreter to render the message fully. However, when the natural flow of the conversation is disrupted by conflict, when events move quickly or emergencies arise, maintaining transparency can be a challenge. In such cases, the interpreter may occasionally need to summarize or omit a portion of the utterances. In these cases, the principle of transparency is applied by letting the parties know that accurate interpreting was not possible at that time and that summarization took place instead.

Standards

To ensure TRANSPARENCY in interpreted encounters:

16. The community interpreter should interpret everything that is stated during the interpreted session wherever possible, including his or her own utterances.

Example 1: When the service provider called a colleague, Zere interpreted for the service user what he could hear, even though the call included some personal conversation between the service provider and the party on the other end of the phone line.

Example 2: During an appointment at a human-rights office, Ana shared her concern with the investigator that what she had interpreted about the plaintiff's next steps might not be clear. She immediately conveyed to the plaintiff exactly what she had told the investigator.

17. The community interpreter should make sure all parties know that everything that is stated will be interpreted.

Example 1: Ana always began her introduction by saying that she would interpret everything. Starting that way, even if she was cut off (which happened sometimes) she would be sure to have informed everyone of this basic aspect.

Example 2: Zere once interpreted by phone for a fire emergency. There was no time, at first, to state that he would interpret everything, but at the first opportunity he did so.

18. The community interpreter should inform the parties whenever he or she has had to summarize or omit part of the session.

Example 1: After a parent, a teenage child and a teacher began speaking all at once, Zere was obliged to summarize. As soon as possible, he informed all parties that summarization had taken place.

Example 2: Ana was interpreting at a child advocacy center when a small child who was being interviewed burst into tears. Ana interpreted what she could hear and then informed the investigator and everyone present that she had omitted the parts she couldn't understand.

19. The community interpreter, when intervening, should inform all parties that he or she is speaking as the interpreter.

Example 1: Zere made it a habit always to begin by saying, "As the interpreter, I..." whenever he intervened to request a clarification.

Example 2: Ana interpreted often in court, where a written record was made of the proceedings and interpreters were required to refer to themselves in the third person to avoid confusion. She maintained this habit outside the courtroom too as a clear way to mark the difference between interpreted messages and her own messages. For example, she said: "The interpreter requests a repetition."

DIRECT COMMUNICATION

Ethical principle

The community interpreter initiates and actively supports practices that enable service users and providers to engage in direct communication.

Commentary

The principle of direct communication is core to the interpreting profession. It addresses a real tension in interpreted exchanges: the role of the interpreter is to help overcome an existing barrier (the language barrier); yet, when working to overcome that barrier, the interpreter can easily become a barrier too. For example, many service users may feel more at ease with the interpreter than the service provider, because they share the same language and in many cases the same ethnicity and culture too. Some service providers, on the other hand, may see interpreters as “one of them,” for interpreters are also professionals offering their services. It is thus very frequent for either party or all parties to view the interpreter as a confidant or ally and to engage in side conversations with the interpreter, both during and outside the session.

But an interpreter engaged in conversation is no longer interpreting. Rather, he or she is part of a new, separate conversation and cannot interpret at the same time. In order to support effective communication, the interpreter should foster the parties’ interest in communicating with each other and not with the interpreter.

The interpreter needs to be aware of and, when necessary, actively deploy strategies to keep redirecting the service users and providers to engage directly with each other and, where possible, help them to forget the presence of the interpreter. An ideal encounter, often described by service users and providers, is when they simply cease to notice the interpreter and feel that they are communicating with each other without a barrier. This remarkable achievement represents the pinnacle of direct communication: striving for it should be the conscious goal of community interpreters.

Standards

To promote DIRECT COMMUNICATION in interpreted encounters:

20. The community interpreter should refrain from becoming an active participant in the communication and should intervene only when a major barrier to communication emerges.

Example 1: During a restaurant health inspection, Zere worried the owner did not understand the situation but waited to see if the misunderstanding would clear up. When it did, Zere was glad he had not intervened.

Example 2: A domestic-violence victim referred to her partner as her husband. Ana interpreted accurately, although she knew the victim was not married. When the victim’s legal marital status became an issue for her case Ana then intervened to point out a possible miscommunication about whether “husband” meant “legal spouse,” prompting the counselor to verify the victim’s marital status.

21. The community interpreter should make every effort to ensure that all parties communicate directly with each other and not the interpreter.

Example 1: As part of her introduction, Ana always asked the service user and provider to speak to each other, not to her.

Example 2: Whenever a service provider looked at or talked to Zere, he would glance down at his notepad and point his hand in the direction of the service user.

22. The community interpreter should remain attentive to possible misunderstandings, including his or her own potential misunderstandings arising from misconceptions, biases or prejudices.

Example 1: During a parent-teacher meeting, Zere understood and interpreted for the teacher that the parents were refusing to take their daughter to after-school activities, when in fact they couldn't drive. Once Zere realized his misunderstanding, he clarified it at once.

Example 2: When a doctor used advanced medical terminology with a patient in worn-out clothing, Ana thought it would be necessary to request that the doctor use simpler language. Then the patient mentioned he was a retired doctor, and Ana realized her assumptions were mistaken.

23. The community interpreter should, whenever necessary, offer professional guidance on how to support direct communication.

Example 1: Ana sometimes made suggestions about the best positioning of chairs for the interpreted session.

Example 2: During a home visit, the caseworker kept asking Zere questions about the family instead of addressing the parents. After several attempts to redirect her, Zere intervened to explain why it was important to direct questions to the parents, not the interpreter.

PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

Ethical principle

The community interpreter should maintain professional boundaries, both during and outside the interpreted encounter.

Commentary

Professional boundaries are a relevant concern for all those who work in the “helping and healing” professions, such as nurses, teachers and social workers. These professions require establishing some kind of rapport with service users. However, when a professional becomes personally involved with service users, negative outcomes are a common consequence, including occupational burnout.

Defining and respecting professional boundaries is also important for community interpreters, who are frequently expected to perform acts that exceed their scope of practice (that is, the range of tasks and duties that fall within the purview of the interpreter’s professional responsibilities). For example, community interpreters are often asked to render personal services, such as driving a service user to the next appointment, or to perform a service provider’s work, such as filling out forms or taking a patient history. As interpreters, they lack the service provider’s training, credentials or experience and should engage only in the interpreting activities they were assigned to perform and for which they are trained.

Many community interpreters hold additional roles within the organization, because they are bilingual employees who interpret only part-time as one part of their job duties. It is acceptable for them to interpret on occasion in this way, if they have the requisite interpreter testing, training, skills and qualifications, but it is not feasible for them to interpret professionally *while* they execute other job responsibilities. In other words, a bilingual employee should not perform his or her primary job and interpret at the same time. Acting as a nurse, case manager or police detective *and* as an interpreter at the same time can lead to problems of accuracy, impartiality and role confusion. A nurse who interprets, for example, may have to touch the patient and reassure her, which will get in the way of the intense focus and complex cognitive skills required for interpreting.

Because community interpreting is still a young profession and widely misunderstood, it usually falls to the community interpreter to clarify his or her role and to decline requests that exceed the interpreter’s scope of practice.

Standards

To respect PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES before, during and after the interpreted encounter:

24. The community interpreter should limit his or her assistance to facilitating communication and refrain from engaging in other types of assistance or support, even when requested to do so by the service user or provider.

Example 1: A service user asked Zere in private to help him negotiate with a creditor about an overdue bill. Instead, with the permission of the interpreter service that sent him to the assignment, Zere referred him to a charity that assisted immigrants.

Example 2: A receptionist asked Ana to fill out a patient health history form with the patient. Ana offered instead to sight translate the form in front of a qualified service provider so that patient and provider could fill it out.

25. The community interpreter, who simultaneously holds other professional or voluntary responsibilities should, during the interpreted session, limit his or her role to interpreting, even when requested to perform additional duties.

Example 1: Zere was a part-time refugee caseworker but never interpreted and acted as a caseworker in the same encounter.

Example 2: When requested to transport a patient Ana was interpreting for, Ana asked the nurse to bring in someone else to do that task, even though she had transported patients as a hospital volunteer in the past.

26. The community interpreter should, wherever feasible, avoid personal, business or romantic engagements with the service user.

Example 1: At a local market, Ana encountered a service user that she often interpreted for. After a polite greeting, with a smile and a warm voice, Ana left quickly to avoid engaging in overly personal conversation.

Example 2: Zere was invited to lunch by a service user that he had interpreted for and found attractive. Zere politely declined the invitation.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Ethical principle

The community interpreter intervenes to promote meaningful communication across cultural differences only when necessary for clear communication and without articulating the interpreter's beliefs or speculations about any of the parties' cultures.

Commentary

Intercultural communication refers to the ability to communicate across cultural differences. Understanding and respecting other cultures brings about new worldviews that are beneficial to all in multicultural societies.

Interpreters support intercultural communication through the act of accurately transferring messages across language differences. Their position as intermediaries is also crucial in detecting sources of misunderstanding caused by cultural differences. Community interpreters should promote communicative autonomy, even when cultural misunderstandings arise.

Service providers and users who experience cultural misunderstandings often think that an interpreter can remove such misunderstandings. Service providers who lack training in how to provide culturally responsive services often view the interpreter as a "cultural expert," while many service users expect the interpreter "to take care" of cultural misunderstandings. The reality is more complex.

Being an expert in any given culture is impossible: cultures are not fixed or tangible. On the contrary, cultures evolve and overlap both for geographical regions and individuals, so it is unreasonable to expect an interpreter to know everything about a certain culture at a given point in time as it relates to a specific individual.

In the presence of a cultural misunderstanding, the community interpreter might choose to intervene. The interpreter may point to a possible cultural difference that interferes with effective communication, but should avoid providing cultural explanations of his or her own. To promote intercultural communication, the community interpreter should let the parties explore each other's cultural views themselves.

It is worth noting that service systems have cultures too. These systems are culturally complex and often confusing. Interpreters may sometimes need to alert service providers to explain systemic cultural differences, rather than having interpreters tell service users "how things work here."

The interpreter's ability to support intercultural communication is thus based mainly on skills sets that involve maintaining an open-minded, respectful and proactive attitude; avoiding assumptions; assessing the probable cause of a cultural misunderstanding and being receptive to new perspectives and different communication styles.

Standards

To support INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION in interpreted encounters:

27. The community interpreter should point out cultural differences that service users or service providers have not identified themselves when they appear to be barriers to meaningful communication.

Example 1: An immigration representative was unaware that the client's cultural use of last names could jeopardize the case. Zere pointed out a possible misunderstanding about naming practices regarding paternal and maternal last names.

Example 2: Ana realized a patient might be resisting a particular date for surgery because it had cultural associations of death. She informed the doctor and patient that there might be a specific cultural meaning associated with the date.

28. The community interpreter should refrain from providing cultural explanations and instead direct parties to seek relevant cultural information from each other.

Example 1: Ana realized that a woman who had been raped by her abusive husband seemed to believe he had a right to forced conjugal sex. When Ana suggested to both parties that there might be different views about the rights of a husband to conjugal intercourse, the lawyer explored the client's beliefs about this subject.

Example 2: During an interview at school, Zere felt the mother was confused about the meaning of the term "progress report." Instead of explaining it, he pointed out this possible misunderstanding to both parties so that the teacher could explain.

29. The community interpreter should show respect for all parties while interpreting and when identifying and pointing out cultural differences and misunderstandings.

Example 1: Ana had to interpret for a group of abusive husbands who shared cultural opinions she found offensive. Ana showed respect by not allowing her own values to distort their statements.

Example 2: When Zere intervened to suggest that the service user clarify the cultural meaning of a religious belief, Zere was careful to do so with respect although the religion was not his own.

30. The community interpreter should never make statements about the service user or the service provider's cultural beliefs or intentions.

Example 1: A married woman grew upset over questions from a gynecologist. Zere felt he knew which questions offended her but simply pointed out a possible cultural misunderstanding about the types of sexual questions that some married women might find inappropriate.

Example 2: After a resident in a nursing home fastened a man's tie around her neck, a therapist asked Ana if there was a cultural explanation. Ana suspected there was but recommended that the therapist ask the resident directly.

31. The community interpreter should provide his or her explanation of a cultural difference or cultural misunderstanding only when such misunderstanding does not appear to be resolvable by the parties themselves and is likely to jeopardize a service user's health or safety, or to jeopardize public safety.

Example 1: Ana interpreted for a rape survivor who came from a country where the police could not be trusted, so she did not want her assault reported. Ana, concerned about public safety if the rapist remained free, privately alerted the victim advocate about different cultural beliefs regarding police.

Example 2: A patient refused critical blood tests without mentioning her cultural belief that her spirit could be harmed if blood was taken from her. Zere alerted both parties to a possible cultural misunderstanding about the consequences of blood drawing. When the doctor did not seek clarification about it, Zere advised both parties that the patient's refusal might relate to a belief about the potentially fatal consequences if blood was taken.

PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

Ethical principle

The community interpreter's conduct should reflect the highest standards of the profession by showing adherence to professional ethics and best practices.

Commentary

The work environment often shapes professional conduct. Hospitals, schools, factories and farms are all examples of work settings in which both explicit and implicit rules govern professional activity to ensure safety and efficiency. There are also other rules, often designed by professional bodies, which address ethical and moral concerns, generally through codes of conduct. In part, because of all these rules, a professional culture emerges and evolves that leads to general expectations about appropriate behavior by professionals in that field.

Community interpreting is a young field of specialization. Too often, it is carried out by untrained volunteers or assistants. While some clear guidelines for professional conduct exist, they are not widely available or applied consistently. This situation contributes to general confusion about the role and practices of community interpreters. It also perpetuates a climate of low expectations.

When the role of the interpreter is not formalized, when expectations are unclear and standards are low, the impact on the profession and its ability to offer quality services can be huge. This problem has led to a low public opinion of community interpreters in many countries.

Sending a clear message about the value of professionalism in community interpreting is critical. Advocating for professional conduct is a shared responsibility of all interpreters.

Standards

To show PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT before, during and after the interpreted encounter:

32. The community interpreter should arrive at the interpreting assignment prepared and on time.

Example 1: When asked to interpret for a gay-rights discrimination complaint, Zere looked up websites and relevant terminology in both languages, watched a film about this type of discrimination and spoke to a senior interpreter for guidance.

Example 2: After accepting a new assignment, Ana researched how long it would take to arrive and left in advance to avoid rush-hour traffic.

33. The community interpreter should adopt a dress code appropriate for both professional interpreters and the setting where the assignment takes place.

Example 1: At one nonprofit legal service where Zere interpreted often, even lawyers frequently wore jeans, but Zere always wore professional clothing. However, in other settings, such as hospital operating rooms, he asked for guidance about required or recommended clothing.

Example 2: For home visits to new mothers in high-crime neighborhoods, Ana wore discreet, casual clothing in order not to draw attention to herself, but just before entering each home she added an attractive scarf to look more professional.

34. The community interpreter should display a respectful demeanor that balances professionalism and warmth for all parties present.

Example 1: Ana decided to make conscious efforts to show equal respect for both service users and providers in her posture, tone of voice and general conduct.

Example 2: Whenever he interpreted for torture survivors, refugees and others who had endured great suffering, Zere smiled during his introduction and displayed an open posture and respectful tone of voice to indicate that despite his professional boundaries he was a compassionate human being.

35. The community interpreter should make sure that the conditions of the working environment support quality interpreting and should politely request any necessary adaptations.

Example 1: In a refugee resettlement center, a family group kept interrupting each other, making it impossible for Zere to interpret accurately. He politely requested all parties to take turns speaking.

Example 2: During a Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) assignment, the sound quality was so poor that Ana (who was working from a different location than the nurse and patient) politely requested the nurse to move closer to the microphone to ensure clear audio signals.

36. The community interpreter should not be involved with personal matters during an assignment.

Example 1: When Zere's childcare provider was sick, Zere did not take his child to the interpreted session but instead made sure to have a family member available to care for the child.

Example 2: Ana's phone vibrated in her pocket during a session, but Ana refrained from checking for messages until after the assignment.

37. The community interpreter should accept only assignments for which he or she is qualified and should disclose all professional limitations when appropriate.

Example 1: At a hospice, Zere was asked by a chaplain to sight translate a prayer text that he did not understand well. Prior to the assignment, Zere checked online for a possible translation, which he could not find. Zere then disclosed his limitations and offered to withdraw.

Example 2: Ana declined all requests that involved local conferences and meetings until she had received adequate qualifications and experience in simultaneous interpreting.

38. The community interpreter should typically refrain from accepting gifts from service users or providers.

Example 1: A grateful service user brought Ana a bracelet. Ana graciously thanked her but suggested that the gift giver instead might wish to write a note of thanks or donate the gift to a charity.

Example 2: When Zere refused a gift and the service user grew culturally offended, Zere explained that if he accepted gifts, many other service users with little money might feel that they too should give him gifts. He also disclosed that he could lose interpreting assignments and violate his professional ethics if he accepted gifts.

39. The community interpreter should not seek new business opportunities for his or her own benefit while on assignment.

Example 1: Zere had business cards, but when on assignment for interpreting service providers, he never handed out his own business card to anyone.

Example 2: When Ana was sent by a language company to interpret for a driver's license exam and saw other people waiting there who probably needed an interpreter, she did not try to sell her services to them.

40. The community interpreter may accept a new business opportunity offered during an assignment only with formal approval from the first assigning organization.

Example 1: The service provider at an organization that served children with autism asked Ana to come back to interpret for the same family. Ana referred the requester to the nonprofit interpreting service that had sent her on the assignment.

Example 2: While on an interpreting assignment, Zere was asked to translate a document in a language for which he was a qualified translator. He referred the requester to the language company that sent him, which then gave Zere the assignment.

41. The community interpreter should engage in activities and initiatives that advance his or her professional development.

Example 1: To improve her performance and increase her knowledge of interpreting, Ana joined her local professional interpreters association, took several advanced training courses online and attended conferences. She also asked for advice and feedback from other interpreters.

Example 2: Once a week, Zere and another interpreter met and practiced together. Zere also set up a plan to learn 10 new English terms a day and take advanced training in simultaneous interpreting.