

TIGHTROPE-WALKING ON THE MORAL HIGH WIRE: ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING IN CONFERENCE AND ESCORT INTERPRETING

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1. Quality of interpretation

Effective communication facilitated by a skilled interpreter offers great opportunities for creating a nexus between two strangers who may become friends even in the arena of conflict resolution. To an effective interpreter, in the arena of crisis intervention, ethical issues are involved. These are related both to the quality of the interpretation services provided and to our relations with clients and translation companies before, during and after the respective assignment.

Each professional association, including professional associations of conference interpreters, has published a Code of Ethics serving as a framework of fundamental principles. It is obvious that no code, no regulation could possibly provide specific guidance in all situations, nor would that be necessary. Similar to translation theory that relies on our critical thinking and problem solving abilities in its application to specific translation cases, our own best judgment and discretion is always preferred in the context of conference and escort interpreting (cf. AIIC 2004).

Ethics refer to our personal standards of right and wrong and these standards are subjective. In 1969 Daniel Olbrychski, already a famous Polish actor at the age of 23, came to Moscow to participate in the International Film Festival. One day he was sitting with his interpreter in the lobby of the recently built Rossija Hotel. The officially assigned interpreter who made no secret of his KGB affiliations communicated with Olbrychski in Russian because the Polish actor was proficient in the language of Pushkin and Lermontov. Then Vladimir Vysotsky showed up in the lobby and the interpreter promptly introduced Olbrychski to him describing Vysotsky as an actor, a singer and a legend. After Vysotsky left, the interpreter took Olbrychski aside, looked around to make sure nobody was listening to their conversation and whispered (Olbrychski 1991):

Daniel, what I just told you is absolutely true, but this is not the most important thing. It's true that he is a solo performer, an actor, a guitar player, a famous poet, but this is all bullshit. He sleeps with Marina Vlady!

So this was the most important thing about Vysotsky on the priority scale of the interpreter. Olbrychski concluded his description of the episode by saying that it gave him a new perspective on life and death.

Fidelity is high on the list of priorities for professional conference interpreters:

The interpreter's primary loyalty is always owed to the speaker for whom s/he is interpreting. It is the interpreter's duty to communicate the speaker's meaning as accurately, faithfully, and completely as possible, whatever the speaker's position or point of view. The interpreter is morally responsible for the integrity of his or her work and must not bow to any pressure in performing it. (AIIC 2004)

But what is one supposed to do when a speaker uses vulgar language or says something that is not appropriate or politically incorrect in a given context? According to Ms. Alison Graves, Senior interpreter English booth, Directorate General for Interpretation and Conferences, European Parliament,

We interpret faithfully and accurately from the speaker. So if a speaker is insulting, vulgar, swears, then we have to reflect that. As a rule though, we would take it down a little bit, never increase it, never make it worse¹.

However, there are cases, especially in escort interpreting, when it is very difficult, if not impossible, to lessen the intensity of a crude expression.

First, a few words about escort interpreting. Several days ago while browsing through the Internet I came across an article called "A language barrier can be breached with skillful interpretation" (Morrison & Conaway 1999). Discussing the different levels of interpreters, the authors state:

There also are different levels of interpreters. At the top are conference interpreters, who are the interpreters we associate with the United Nations...

At the bottom of the totem pole are escort interpreters. These are a cross between interpreter and tour guide. They may meet and greet foreign guests at the airport, get them to the hotel and the office, and join them for social events and tours.

...Escort interpreters usually do not have the expertise to conduct important business negotiations. And many conference interpreters would be insulted if asked to do escort work.

Of course, meeting and greeting foreign guests at the airport and getting them to the hotel and the office is not a very exciting job for a professional interpreter. On the other hand, governmental agencies and big private companies in Bulgaria that use interpretation services on a regular basis have protocol departments that usually handle such tasks. Smaller private companies usually do not use professional interpreters, mainly for financial reasons, and rely on their staff members both for protocol issues and interpretation. As a result, highly qualified conference interpreters do not receive offers to perform protocol services in Bulgaria. I would not be insulted if asked to do such work but the fee I would ask for it would most certainly scare away any potential client.

¹ "European Parliament - DG Interpretation and Conferences - Preparing the Future". <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-T1XH2F0N8A&feature=related>

However, joining foreign guests for social events and tours is pretty much a regular occurrence. For an additional fee we are often asked to join the participants in a seminar or conference for a city tour and/or for dinner to facilitate informal communication among them. Interpreting in restaurants with live music when people are more relaxed and the spirits get high is certainly a challenge and is completely different from official luncheons with heads of state or government. Having worked in both situations, I have found both of them challenging and yet rewarding for me as a professional interpreter.

2. The Interpreter as an added guest

About ten years ago I found myself in a rather delicate situation while providing escort interpreting services to a group of three high-ranking corporate officers representing big US petroleum exploration and production companies. After two days of intense meetings and negotiations at the Black Sea coast we flew to Sofia and in the evening went to a nice traditional tavern with live music. When the show started and the long-awaited folk singer came on the stage, he seemed blissfully drunk. However, his singing was perfect and everything went fine until he decided to do some socializing with the patrons of the tavern going from table to table and striking up conversations.

When he approached our table and saw three obvious foreigners sitting at it, he inquired about the nature of their visit to Bulgaria, his breath smelling of strong Bulgarian grape brandy. I interpreted the question and the answer saying that they were American tourists having a good time in Bulgaria and enjoying his singing. Obviously flattered by the compliment, he struggled to say something nice in return and came up with the following: "Tell these nice people to have a very good time in Bulgaria sleeping with stupid Bulgarian broads!" No need to say that it was said in a much more vulgar language. The men at the neighboring tables laughed approvingly. It was said with a big grin on his face and there would have been no problem for me to interpret something nice and politically correct in English but... The moment I was about to start interpreting he made some unambiguous and universally understandable gestures with his hands and arms to make sure his message would get across. The men at the neighboring tables burst out laughing and mimicked his gestures looking at us. There was no way out. With a sweet smile on my face I turned to the Americans and provided literal interpretation of the singer's statement. While the stunned foreigners were trying to figure out how to react to this expression of friendly feelings, the singer was back on stage. After a brief moment of silence one of the Americans asked me whether this was a regular way of greeting foreigners in Bulgaria. I told them that of course it was not and that they should not make far-reaching conclusions about Bulgarian national character based on this experience.

3. *Bringing sobriety to an inebriated moment*

Several years after this humorous but awkward incident I came across an article by Danilo Nogueira "His Excellency and His Interpreter" in the *Translation Journal* (Nogueira 2004). The article looks into the issue of fidelity in interpreting taking as a starting point the case of a Brazilian interpreter who, while interpreting for his President at a meeting in Windhoek, Namibia, considered that one part of the original statement of the President would be offensive to some listeners and, as a result, took the liberty of heavily editing the statement. I completely agree with Nogueira when he says that

...the audience wants to know what the President of Brazil said, not what his interpreter thought he ought to have said instead. I would go farther than that: the audience is *entitled* to know what the President said. After all, they were there to hear the President, not his interpreter.

While our duty as interpreters is to communicate the speaker's meaning as accurately, faithfully, and completely as possible, responsibility for the meaning itself lies with the speaker. Interpreters are to be transmitters, not holders of information (Seeber, Zelger 2007; cf. Solow 1981). That's why we always use the direct speech in simultaneous and consecutive modes and the interpreter uses "I" to refer to the person s/he is interpreting for. However, in escort interpreting there are situations in which the interpreter will be much better off using the indirect speech. Imagine, for instance, a situation in a restaurant when you are interpreting for a group of participants in a seminar. In such informal situations the interpreter quite often is viewed as part of the group, as an equal participant in the conversation. As a result, when someone asks you to interpret for him or her and you speak in the direct speech to the person at the other side of the table, chances are your intervention will be perceived as your personal statement, not as translation of somebody else's words. Using the indirect speech would be much safer, e.g. "Ms. Smith, Mr. Black asks you whether ..." or "Mary, Jack says that..." etc.

Imagine another situation in a bar when your less than sober client is having an argument with another less than sober patron and they start calling each other names in their respective languages. For one thing, I do not view myself as a peacemaker or negotiator and have always tried to keep low profile in such situations. If my client feels like having brouhaha with this big oaf with tattoos on his neck and arms, it's not a linguistic problem that I could possibly take care of. If, however, you are called upon to crawl from under the table and perform your duties as an interpreter, it would be much wiser to use the indirect speech. For instance, try beginning each intervention with something like "Mr. Smith says that you are ..." or "Mr. Black tells you to go..." or "Mr. Smith asks me to inform you that your mother..." etc. Try to keep calm and remember this sound advice to abate the conflict rather than intensifying it.

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