The ethics of medical translation

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Abstract

Much has been written about the ethics of medical interpreting, but not so much about purely written translation. What moral principles apply (or should apply) when I translate a document for a client? Do I need to invent these principles myself, or is there help available?

In this article I explore the personal moral principles we might apply to our work, and the institutional backup that is available, for instance the Institute of Translation and Interpreting's Code of Conduct. I explore what a code of ethics for medical translators might look like.

I n researching the definition of ethics, I soon found that this is a complicated and highly disputed field, which has sparked endless discussion among philosophers. Boiled down, though, the various definitions of ethics include "how one should live",[1] and "a set of concepts and principles that guide us in determining what behaviour helps or harms sentient creatures".[2] Going further back and looking at the etymology of the word, "ethics" comes from the Greek meaning "relating to character and moral nature". So using the broadest possible view, ethics is how best to develop and use one's own character and the behaviour that a person of good character will demonstrate.

It soon became apparent to me that I couldn't address the whole history and discourse around ethics in one feature article – so the key question is how we determine what ethical behaviour for a medical translator is. This is professional ethics; in other words, the behaviour expected from people working in a specific field. Of course, our personal ethics will emerge when we work; how

could they not? However, it might not be safe to assume that individuals will do the right thing at all times, and there needs to be a collective agreement on what constitutes ethical behaviour. For this reason, professional ethics are imposed from elsewhere, in the form of codes of professional conduct, either compulsory (in regulated professions) or voluntary. But there is, to my knowledge, no specific code of ethics for medical translators, so below I outline what such a code might contain. I draw upon the code of conduct of the UK's Institute of Translation and Interpretation (ITI),[3] and my own experience of working in the field.

A proposed code of ethics

The main points that are covered are as follows:

Skills to do the job

The main pillar of ethical behaviour has to be the ability to do the work. For translators, this means having the right skills in language knowledge, with degrees and certification as required (these are mandatory in some countries and not in others). In addition, translators require the right subject expertise and research skills, and the

willingness to invest in oneself to keep this skillset up to date. Of course, linguistic skills are necessary but not sufficient to be a good translator, and these specific skills relating to transporting meaning between languages should also be part of our ethical armoury. All these skills will combine to help produce accurate translations that convey meaning without loss and without misleading the reader.

Customer care

The next set of behaviours broadly covers the category of client care. We might be working for private individuals (a lot of my work is of this type), for a client company directly, or for an agency. In each case, there is a duty to provide a translation that's fit for purpose, but that is not the whole of the job. A private individual who needs medical translation may be going through a very difficult time, either because they are themselves the patient or because they are a family member who is organising the translation as part of their relative's needs, and this has to be handled with sensitivity. This individual may be liaising with doctors in two or more countries, and the translator can act (or offer to act) as a

support here, by remaining available to answer any queries that arise when the translation is used. Even when working for a client company or agency, there is still the human element and broadly we should bear in mind that our interlocutors are human, even though we might only have contact with them via brief emails. And of course, we shouldn't forget the basics, which are adherence to deadlines, asking the right questions, and not sub-contracting work without the client's knowledge.

Data protection and confidentiality

We often handle personal data, and translators should be aware of their obligations under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and make clients aware of the policies we adhere to. Data should not be kept for longer than needed, and individuals must have the right to have their data deleted should they wish. Client companies and agencies will often anonymise documents before they reach the translation stage, but if patients send their reports to us directly, they must be handled with care. Thought should be given to possible solutions and their implications – is the cloud-based provider trustworthy and secure? Where will the data be stored, and can I guarantee that it will be handled so that I meet my obligations under GDPR?

Relationships with others in the profession

The ITI's code of conduct requires members to share knowledge and experience – and the organisation facilitates this by providing subject and language networks in which members can discuss professional matters, whether tricky terminology queries or questions about client relations. The Medical and Pharmaceutical Network is an excellent, long-standing example of an ITI network and is an invaluable source of help and support for many, including me. In addition, in-person workshops with high-profile speakers are a good way to ensure that one's subject knowledge is kept up to date. These workshops also provide opportunities to get hands-on with texts, and in groups with colleagues, and a knowledge of colleagues' skill levels and ways of working is invaluable when expanding our networks and finding people to work with.

The first category in the ITI Code of Conduct is "Honesty and Integrity" and it is the last I shall tackle, though it is a key area and encompasses all the others. This covers everything from advertising services accurately and in a way that is fair to colleagues (not unfairly denigrating others' services, for instance), which is a matter of honour and correct behaviour, to formal prohibitions of bribery and corruption, which are backed up by the force of law.

Artificial intelligence and other topics

The ITI Code of Conduct is silent on the matter of artificial intelligence and on the tools of the trade. The implication is that if a good product is produced, it doesn't matter how it was produced. But if a translator enters a patient's confidential information into an online machine translation tool, or into ChatGPT, that translator is no longer in control of what happens to that data and cannot assure the client that this personal data is protected from harm. So, the use of artificial intelligence can be a matter of ethics, and perhaps our professional ethics documents should be updated to reflect this – although the AI landscape is changing so rapidly that the issues are hard to pin down at the moment. Another aspect that is not tackled in current codes of conduct, to my knowledge, is the environmental impact of translators' work. We may not travel for work as much as interpreters do, but our decisions still have an impact; for example, any data we store online requires energy just for storage. An organisation may wish to encourage members or employees to choose greener ways of travelling when they do travel, such as choosing train travel over flying.

Conclusions

The ITI has acknowledged that its Code of Professional Conduct perhaps does not meet the criteria to be a code of ethics and is, at the time of this writing, undertaking a review to consider whether a separate Code of Ethics is needed, and if it is, what it should contain.[4] The discussions that arise from this process should be an interesting examination of what ethical behaviour is in our profession, how it can be promoted, and the role a professional association can play.

Professional ethics is such a huge field that it is difficult to sum up. Current Codes of Conduct for translators (which for our purposes we can assume are also codes of ethics) are fit for purpose in some ways but could benefit from revision in areas such as environmental awareness and new developments in technology. Above all, we should take the opportunity to create codes that reflect the best of what we can do, in terms of our professional skills, the way we treat others, and how we face the future.

Disclaimers

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and not necessarily shared by her employer, the Institute of Translation and Interpreting, or EMWA.

Disclosures and conflicts of interest

The author is employed by University College London as a teaching fellow and is a Qualified Member and former Board member of the Institute of Translation and Interpreting in the UK.

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Author information

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