

Codes and coffee houses

Joseph Lambert explains ITI's progress towards drawing up a code of ethics, and the role that the online Coffee House sessions have played in this

I've been talking about various aspects of ethics in translation for many years now, and for almost as long I've been really keen to revamp the ethical provision available to translators. Regardless of location, practice type, or language, that guidance usually follows a similar pattern and comes in the form of a blanket code of conduct. Such codes are of course very useful, but they also have a number of clear limitations.

Codes of conduct consistently echo eight common principles: accuracy, competence, confidentiality, conflicts of interest, continuous professional development, impartiality, integrity and role boundaries. That list does of course include many important elements to consider in our work. Maintaining confidentiality, developing our skills, and ensuring that we actually have the necessary skills to complete our work to the standard required are rather uncontroversial (and general) principles to abide by. But even here there can be complications, and when it comes to things like accuracy – codes often require that nothing be omitted or added when translating – the stipulations are sometimes not realistic, advisable or enforceable. In the case of subtitling, for instance, removing elements is not only necessary but good practice.

Perhaps more problematically, codes are often rather outdated and fail to reflect the current preoccupations of professionals across the translation industry. Glaring omissions in most codes include technology (yes, really – half the codes I've looked at don't even mention it), rates of pay, data privacy, bias, environmental sustainability, and inclusivity. Ultimately, even though codes are so well established across the sector, I'd argue that they don't address complex ethical questions with the depth or sensitivity that is required.

The bigger picture, the vision and the context

With all this in mind, towards the end of 2023, a group of us including ITI chief executive Sara Robertson started thinking about potential ways we could build towards developing a new ethical framework for ITI members, with the ultimate aim of developing a code of ethics, distinct from ITI's current code of

professional conduct (which is currently being revamped in its own right).

This is quite an innovative move, given that the distinction between the two is largely ignored in the translation world, and both terms are often used interchangeably. By contrast, we're working from the understanding that a 'code of conduct' covers the small-scale side of things; this includes specific rules governing the day-to-day expected behaviours of a professional and, importantly, provides actually enforceable rules, mitigating one of the criticisms of codes such as the ones I mentioned above. A 'code of ethics', meanwhile, considers the bigger picture and the broader, overriding philosophical vision guiding our decision-making, taking a stance on the key issues at stake.

With its focus on broader values and moral principles rather than specific actions, a code of ethics is typically less enforceable than a code of conduct.

It is obviously of vital importance that these documents are developed in conversation with members, and ultimately, the aim is for the two codes to work together to guide industry professionals when they're handling the ethical issues that increasingly crop up in our work and in our lives.

Beyond this long-term aim of developing the two codes, which is obviously going to be a serious undertaking, we also wanted to develop, in the shorter term, an evolving range of resources on ethics. To get the ball rolling, I started out by hosting, in November 2023, an open discussion meeting for ITI members. In this meeting, we outlined the current state of ethics in translation and interpreting and asked attendees to share their initial thoughts and areas of interest.

The discussion meeting really emphasised just how difficult it is to marshal discussions of ethics. It's such a wide-ranging and dynamic area that our general discussion saw us being pulled in multiple different directions at once and having to skim over huge, and really important, areas. What it did do, however, was help to focus our thinking, and to identify the range of topic areas that we wanted to explore in more detail. From there, and after a bit more brainstorming, we decided that the best way to give the time and space necessary to properly explore this wide range of topics, and to ultimately make some more tangible progress, would be to

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break things down and have a whole series of events looking at the topics we wanted to explore individually.

And so that's where the ITI Coffee House sessions came from.

Conversation and enlightenment

Sara came up with the great name, following the spirit of the coffee houses of the 18th century where men (it was only men at that time, I'm afraid) gathered to discuss ideas and hammer out new ways of seeing the world. Our idea was to have fairly informal, free-flowing conversations, and for members (and non-members in some cases) to have their say on the issues that matter and are relevant to them, shaping the way that this revamped ethical provision develops. Instead of introducing each session myself, I decided to invite an expert in each individual topic area to guest-host each one: they give a brief talk to introduce the area and then kick off the discussions with a series of broad, thought-provoking questions.

At the time of writing, we've run four sessions (one a month from June 2024), and we have another four in the calendar, running until January 2025 (and possibly beyond). We've discussed financial sustainability and ethical payment practices; environmental sustainability in translation and interpreting; the ethical issues that come with evolving translation technologies; and ethical practices in interpreting assignments. Other topics include trauma and ethics in audiovisual translation; emotional wellbeing for translators; ethical issues in the use of AI in interpreting; and an agency perspective on good ethical practice.

It's always a bit of an anxious moment when you launch a new initiative without knowing how it will be received, but attendances have been great so far, the quality of the discussions has been really high, and the sessions seem to have been of use to everyone who has taken the time to attend and share their ideas. Personally, I think that all the sessions have been excellent, thanks to the brilliant hosts and the attendees who have come along and embraced the spirit of the events, ready to engage with quite challenging issues and share their experiences and feelings. Whether we'll run further sessions after January remains to be seen: there's certainly been a lot of food for thought already, and I could see us moving in a number of different directions!

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Ethics on the internet: summaries and next steps

Even with the narrowed focus of these sessions, discussions have been wide-ranging, and it's been quite a task to summarise everyone's contribution. However, with Sara's help, that's what we've aimed to do within a new 'Ethics' space on the ITI website, which also includes a short video intro to ethics from me, if you can face that!


Here, we've published summaries of each of the discussions and a list of 'recommendations and next steps' that have emerged from what attendees had to say. This space is really important, as unlike more static codes of conduct or ethics, we want the resources we're developing to evolve over time, to be updated and edited as the field develops, and to be able to inform members, non-members, clients, and maybe even the public at large on what ethical issues come up in these contexts and potentially how we can navigate them! Those actionable steps and recommendations coming out of each of the discussions are an



For details of the remaining Coffee House sessions and to book, go to the ITI events calendar on the institute's website

important part in making that happen. There's still a long way to go, of course, but there are signs that members' input in the sessions is leading to concrete change already.

To give an example, in our session on environmental sustainability in July, attendees agreed that it would be really useful for ITI to create resources gathering information about the environmental impact of AI technologies in translation to help members communicate effectively with both colleagues and, importantly, clients about the costs and benefits of these tools. At the time of writing, the guidance is being drafted and it will hopefully be published online soon, while we also have plans in the pipeline for new resources on self-care and wellbeing. This is something that I find really exciting as it has emerged organically out of our events and should have a really tangible value for people across the field.

It may well be that similar developments will continue to emerge in other areas. We still need to reflect on everything we've heard so far, and with some really exciting sessions lined up for the rest of the series, that volume of next steps to consider is only going to grow. So, how is this contributing to our long-term aim of building towards a code of ethics? We still have a way to go, but I'm proud of the progress we've made already, and am grateful to ITI for the opportunity to explore these possibilities and for its commitment to taking concrete steps to engage with ethical issues. And challenging as this may be, it feels more important than ever. 



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