Northeastern University
Center for Atypical Language Interpreting

Assignment: Ethical Decision-Making in Meaning Construction

Purpose

Interpreters frequently encounter language that does not follow expected grammatical patterns (e.g., missing tense markers, reduced syntax, non-standard structures, atypical language production, language dysfluency, or contact signing). In these moments, interpreters must make ethical decisions about meaning construction while maintaining fidelity, transparency, and respect for linguistic difference.

This assignment asks you to analyze your decision-making process and connect it to professional standards such as those outlined by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf Code of Professional Conduct.*

Note to Instructor: This could also be modified to fit an educational setting with reference to the National Association of Interpreters in Education's Code of Ethics.

Scenario

You are interpreting in a healthcare or social service setting. A Deaf consumer's language includes: (choose one or two from the list below)

1. Missing or inconsistent grammatical markers
2. Non-standard ASL structure
3. Limited English influence
4. Possible language deprivation indicators

The **hearing provider** appears confused at times and looks to you for clarification OR The **hearing teacher** appears confused at times and looks to you for clarification.

You must decide how to construct meaning ethically and accurately.

Guiding Questions

Address each of the following in your analysis:

1. Meaning Construction

A. How do I construct meaning when expected grammatical markers are missing?
B. What internal strategies do I use (e.g., inference, context, clarification, repetition, prosody analysis)?
C. What risks accompany these strategies?

2. “Filling in the Blanks”

A. When is filling in implied meaning appropriate?
B. When does it become over-interpretation?
C. How do you determine the boundary between clarification and distortion?

3. Provider Transparency

A. What information, if any, must be conveyed to hearing providers about the consumer’s language use?
B. How can this be done without pathologizing or undermining the consumer?
C. When does the interpreter have a responsibility to clarify linguistic features versus simply rendering the message?

4. Preserving Linguistic Difference

A. How can meaning be conveyed without erasing linguistic difference?
B. What are the ethical implications of “cleaning up” language?
C. How might power dynamics influence your choices?
D. What additional support might I need to request in this situation? (props, more time, a Deaf interpreter, a second team, etc.)

5. Ethical Framework

A. Identify specific tenets from the RID Code of Professional Conduct (or NAIE Code of Ethics) that guide your decisions.
B. Explain how those tenets apply to this scenario.

Expectations

Your response should:

1. Demonstrate advanced critical thinking
2. Clearly articulate your decision-making process
3. Identify ethical risks and consequences
4. Address power, access, and respect for linguistic difference
5. Avoid oversimplified answers (e.g., “always” or “never”)
6. Reflect professional language and terminology

Learning Outcomes

By completing this assignment, students will:

1. Develop metacognitive awareness of meaning construction
2. Strengthen ethical reasoning in complex interpreting situations

3. Practice articulating boundaries between accuracy and overreach
4. Increase sensitivity to language variation and language deprivation issues

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Optional Extension for Deeper Analysis & Application

You may include:

1. A comparison of two different interpreting choices and their outcomes
2. A brief mock dialogue demonstrating two approaches
3. A reflection on how your own language ideologies influence your decisions (connects to assumptions)

Grading Rubric

Assignment: Ethical Decision-Making in Meaning Construction
Total Points: 100

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1. Analysis of Meaning Construction (25 points)

Criteria	Excellent (22–25)	Proficient (18–21)	Developing (12–17)	Needs Improvement (0–11)	Score
Explanation of Meaning-Making Strategies	Clearly and thoroughly explains internal decision-making processes; identifies multiple strategies and associated risks	Explains strategies with some depth; identifies some risks	Limited explanation; minimal discussion of risk	Superficial or unclear explanation	_____ /25

2. Ethical Boundaries: “Filling in the Blanks” (20 points)

Criteria	Excellent (18–20)	Proficient (15–17)	Developing (10–14)	Needs Improvement (0–9)	Score
Boundary Analysis	Insightfully distinguishes between appropriate inference and over-interpretation; acknowledges gray areas	Adequately explains boundaries with some nuance	Basic explanation; limited nuance	Oversimplified (“always/never”) or unclear understanding	_____ /20

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3. Provider Transparency & Respect for Linguistic Difference (20 points)

Criteria	Excellent (18–20)	Proficient (15–17)	Developing (10–14)	Needs Improvement (0–9)	Score
Communication About Language Use	Thoughtfully explains what information should/should not be conveyed to providers; avoids pathologizing language	Identifies key considerations with some explanation	Mentions transparency but lacks depth	Fails to address or demonstrates misunderstanding	_____ /20

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4. Preservation of Linguistic Difference (15 points)

Criteria	Excellent (13–15)	Proficient (10–12)	Developing (6–9)	Needs Improvement (0–5)	Score
Respect for Language Variation	Clearly articulates risks of “cleaning up” language; addresses power dynamics and access	Identifies importance of preserving difference	Limited exploration of linguistic difference	Does not address linguistic difference meaningfully	_____ /15

5. Application of Ethical Framework (10 points)

Criteria	Excellent (9–10)	Proficient (7–8)	Developing (4–6)	Needs Improvement (0–3)	Score
Use of RID Code of Professional Conduct	Accurately references and meaningfully applies relevant tenets from the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf Code of Professional Conduct	References ethics appropriately but with limited depth	Mentions ethics vaguely or incorrectly	No ethical framework referenced	_____ /10

6. Professional Presentation (10 points)

Written Submission:

- Organization and logical structure
- Academic tone and terminology
- Grammar and mechanics

ASL Video Submission:

- Clarity and fluency
- Logical organization
- Professional register

Performance Level	Description	Score
Excellent (9–10)	Clear, professional, well-organized with minimal errors	_____ /10
Proficient (7–8)	Generally clear with minor issues	
Developing (4–6)	Noticeable clarity or organization issues	
Needs Improvement (0–3)	Disorganized, unclear, or unprofessional	

Total Score: _____ /100

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