
CONFLICT ZONE FIELD GUIDE FOR CIVILIAN TRANSLATORS/INTERPRETERS AND USERS OF THEIR SERVICES



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Translators/Interpreters (T/Is) contracted to work in conflict zones are often non-professional linguists yet play a key role in communications. Operating in high-risk environments, they are extremely vulnerable and require special protection both during and after the conflict. Users of T/I services must be aware of their responsibilities to T/Is and of the need to continuously protect them. At the same time, T/Is themselves must know their rights as well as uphold the standards and ethics of the language profession to enhance their safety and standing.

This document is a guide to the basic rights, responsibilities, and practices that the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), the International Federation of Translators (FIT), and Red T recommend to T/Is and users of their services. It applies to T/Is serving as field linguists for the armed forces, journalists, NGOs, and other organizations in conflict zones.

FOR T/Is

RIGHTS

Protection

You have a right to protection both during and after the assignment. If necessary, this should include your family as well. You should be provided with protective clothing and equipment, but not arms. As a civilian, you are not required to wear a uniform unless you consent to do so. Medical and psychological assistance must be made available to you. Prior to deployment, you should be given security and emergency training.

Support

You have a right to support throughout your assignment, e.g., to appropriate comforts and facilities in the field or at the base.

Limits

The limits to your role must be clearly defined. You have the right to refuse a task that compromises your professional or personal standards and ethics and/or unduly endangers your safety.

Briefing

You should be briefed about the general and specific context of your assignment.

Conditions

You have a right to pay and other contractual provisions that reflect the hazardous conditions. Working hours should be reasonable and periodic breaks given.

RESPONSIBILITIES

Impartiality

Regardless of who engages you, serve all parties equally without expressing your opinions or sympathies. You cannot be an advocate for any cause and must declare any conflict of interest.

Confidentiality

Preserve the confidential nature of any information you obtain from any party in the course of your work. Do not divulge it to anyone or use it for personal gain.

Accuracy

Convey as faithfully as possible the messages of all parties. To do so...

- Learn the basic skills of interpreting, i.e., listen carefully to what is being said, render it clearly into the other language, and be sensitive to cultural nuances as well as non-verbal cues.
- Prepare for assignments by learning special vocabulary, acronyms, jargon, etc., and familiarize yourself with accents, gestures, customs, etc.
- Take notes if it helps your memory.
- Do not censor or modify the information conveyed by the speakers.
- If necessary, ask for clarification, request that a speaker slow down, or signal to the speaker if he/she is not being understood.

FOR USERS OF T/I SERVICES

RIGHTS

You have the right to an accurate translation/interpretation of your message. By meeting the responsibilities listed below, you will assist the T/I in achieving that objective.

RESPONSIBILITIES

Respect

T/Is are the link between you and the people of the country in which you are working. Respect the T/Is and they will respect you. Rank may be established but not abused.

Protection

T/Is may be at risk by working for you. Whether or not you are contractually responsible, protect them and, if necessary, their families both during the assignment and afterward.

- Do not arm them.
- Provide them with protective clothing and equipment, but do not require them to wear uniforms unless they consent to do so.
- Do not release names, addresses, or pictures of T/Is without their permission.

Support

Support your T/Is by providing them with appropriate comforts and facilities in the field and at the base. Be aware of their needs and worries.

Role definition

Clearly define the role of the T/I. Explain operational requirements and chain of responsibility. Generally, do not assign tasks not related to translating/interpreting, and be aware that T/Is have the right to refuse if the task compromises their professional or personal standards and ethics and/or safety.

Planning

Interpreting requires concentration, which is difficult to maintain in a conflict situation. Agree on working hours, breaks, etc. When using T/I services, factor in additional time and other logistical requirements.

Briefing

Brief T/Is generally and specifically before each assignment concerning context and purpose. Explain special vocabulary, acronyms, jargon, etc.

Assessment

If required to assess a T/I's performance, be fair and use an appropriate assessment system. Monitor whether messages are being conveyed accurately, but understand that interpreting is not word for word and that your original message must be clear. Criticism should be made in private. Rewards, recommendations, etc. should be given where due.

HOW TO WORK WITH T/Is

Positioning

Position yourself, the T/I, and the other party in a roughly triangular formation. Make sure that you, the T/I, and the other party can all see and hear each other. Introduce yourself and the T/I, explaining the T/I's role. Speak to and look at the other party, not the T/I.

Speaking

The T/I waits for you to speak and interprets when you pause. The amount of information a T/I can absorb and accurately render depends on his/her skill level.

- Use relatively simple words and short, logical sentences.
- Speak clearly and not too quickly.
- Try to avoid slang, acronyms, jargon, or references not understandable in another culture.
- Note that humor, while helpful in reducing tension, is difficult to translate.
- Be aware of your own accent, dialect, and speech pattern, and how they may affect the T/I's work.
- Be aware of what you say and how you say it.

Checking

You are responsible for ensuring that messages are understood by all parties. If you have not understood what the other party said, ask them to repeat and/or clarify. If you think the other party has not understood what you said, confirm that the T/I has understood you. However, avoid holding private conversations with the T/I unless the other party knows generally what you are discussing.

Control

Do not delegate responsibility to the T/I. They should not make a statement or ask a question on your behalf; they only translate what you say. Remain in charge of the proceedings, but seek the T/I's advice where necessary and appropriate.