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Ethical Challenges in Translating Classified Intelligence: Cultural, Psychological, and Financial Dimensions¹

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Abstract

Translation of secret intelligence reports is a profession with complex and often conflicting moral demands. Far from being a simple linguistic task, it involves national security, the mental welfare of translators, cultural sensitivity, and the integrity of financial and institutional mechanisms. Translators in such high-risk environments must simultaneously navigate emotional stress, cultural nuance, and financial risk while maintaining absolute fidelity to sensitive information. This article examines the ethical challenges faced by translators of classified intelligence using a qualitative methodology, including field interviews, case studies of institutional practices, and critical engagement with ethical, psychological, and linguistic theory. Findings suggest that ethical misconduct in intelligence translation often stems not from individual failings but from structural flaws: systemic underfunding, inadequate psychological support, poor cultural training, and the persistent risk of coercion, such as honey trapping. Psychological accounts—such as Rest's moral behavior theory and Bandura's moral disengagement theory—explain how emotional overload degrades ethical thought. Cultural miscommunication is viewed as a technical and ethical risk, particularly within zones of conflict, where mistranslation could initiate violence or distort diplomatic interactions. The article also discusses how economic insecurity undermines moral judgment, with the focus on the need for compensation structures that recognize the high-stakes nature of the work. The study concludes with cross-disciplinary policy recommendations for intelligence and translation agencies, including ethics training, psychological protection, culturally modified translation processes, and fair labor protections. By positioning translators as ethical actors within precarious systems, the article advances a translator-centered ethical framework that aligns professional integrity with national interests.

Keywords: classified intelligence, translation ethics, psychological stress, cultural misinterpretation, financial dilemmas, honey trapping, institutional safeguards

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التحديات الأخلاقية في ترجمة المعلومات الاستخباراتية السرية: الأبعاد الثقافية والنفسية والمالية

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المستخلص

تُعد ترجمة التقارير الاستخباراتية السرية مهنة ذات مطالب أخلاقية معقدة ومتضاربة في كثير من الأحيان. فهي ليست مجرد ممارسة لغوية حيادية، بل تنطوي على أبعاد تتعلق بالأمن القومي، والصحة النفسية للمترجمين، والحساسية الثقافية، وسلامة الآليات المالية والمؤسسية. يتعين على المترجمين العاملين في بيئات عالية المخاطر أن يوازنوا بين الضغوط النفسية، والتعقيدات الثقافية، والمخاطر المالية، مع ضمان الدقة المطلقة في نقل المعلومات الحساسة. تتناول هذه المقالة التحديات الأخلاقية التي يواجهها مترجمو المعلومات الاستخباراتية شديدة السرية، من خلال منهجية بحث نوعية تعتمد على مقابلات مع مترجمين ميدانيين، ودراسات حالة لممارسات مؤسسية، وحوار نقدي مع نظريات أخلاقية ونفسية ولسانية. تشير النتائج إلى أن حالات الإخلال بالأخلاقيات أثناء الترجمة الاستخباراتية غالباً ما تكون نتاج خلل هيكلي وليس فشلاً فردياً، مثل: ضعف التمويل، نقص الدعم النفسي، غياب التدريب الثقافي الكافي، ووجود احتمالات دائمة للإكراه مثل "مصيصة العسل". وتستخدم نظريات نفسية مثل نموذج "ريست" للسلوك الأخلاقي، ونظرية "باندورا" لفك الارتباط الأخلاقي، لتفسير كيف يمكن للتشبع العاطفي أن يضعف القدرة على اتخاذ قرارات أخلاقية سليمة. كما يُنظر إلى سوء الفهم الثقافي كخطر تقني وأخلاقي، خصوصاً في مناطق النزاع، حيث قد يؤدي سوء الترجمة إلى اندلاع أعمال عنف أو التضليل في اتخاذ قرارات دبلوماسية. كذلك، تتناول المقالة تأثير عدم الاستقرار المالي على الحكم الأخلاقي، مع التأكيد على أهمية توفير أنظمة تعويض تعكس طبيعة المخاطر المرتبطة بهذا النوع من العمل. تختتم الدراسة بمجموعة من التوصيات السياسية متعددة التخصصات موجهة إلى أجهزة الاستخبارات، ومراكز الترجمة، وصناع القرار. وتشمل هذه التوصيات: إضفاء الطابع المؤسسي على التدريب الأخلاقي، وتوفير الحماية النفسية، واعتماد عمليات ترجمة تأخذ السياق الثقافي بعين الاعتبار، وضمان حقوق العمال بشكل عادل. ومن خلال تقديم المترجمين ليس كمجرد تقنيين، بل كفاعلين أخلاقيين ضمن أنظمة هشة، تدعو المقالة إلى إنشاء أطر أخلاقية قوية تتمحور حول المترجم، وتحقق التوازن بين المعايير المهنية والمصالح الوطنية.

الكلمات الرئيسية: الاستخبارات السرية، أخلاقيات الترجمة، الضغط النفسي، سوء الفهم الثقافي، المعضلات المالية، مصيدة

العسل، الضمانات المؤسسية

Ethical Challenges in Translating Classified Intelligence: Cultural, Psychological, and Financial Dimensions²**by Mahmoud Gudra Ahmed Al Anakrih**

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1. Introduction

The translation of classified intelligence presents a unique set of ethical challenges that go beyond linguistic accuracy and fidelity. Translators operating in this high-stakes domain must navigate complex intersections of cultural sensitivity, psychological pressure, and financial influences, often under intense time constraints and national security demands. Unlike conventional translation settings, intelligence translation involves sensitive material that can impact diplomatic relations, military operations, and public safety. This raises critical ethical concerns, such as maintaining objectivity despite cultural bias, resisting manipulation or coercion, and safeguarding confidentiality in the face of economic incentives or institutional pressure. This study explores these multifaceted challenges, aiming to illuminate the ethical landscape translators must contend with when handling sensitive governmental or military information.

1.1. Background

In the complex and rapidly evolving world of global security and intelligence, translation is a hidden but crucial activity. Far from being a neutral process of language, the translation of sensitive intelligence documents involves the negotiation of ideology, language, and power at high-stakes moments. Translators involved in these contexts are not quiet conduits of information but active interpreters and meaning negotiators who are subjected to psychological pressure, cultural ambiguity, and institutional coercion (Footitt & Kelly, 2012;

² Adapted from the doctoral dissertation by Mahmoud Gudra Ahmed Al Anakrih, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Sohag University

Baker, 2010). Translators possess overt power to shape diplomatic negotiation, military operations, counterterrorist operations, and global policymaking decisions, and the ethical risk of translator work is thus monumental.

Interpreters who work with sensitive intelligence material have several ethical obligations, from fidelity to the originating message, discretion, and neutrality in politically charged situations. These obligations are under constant threat from outside pressures like stringent deadlines, traumatic material, weak institutional protections, and exposure to coercion or manipulation like honey trapping or ideological recruitment (Burkett, 2013; Bailey & Galich, 2021). In spite of the fact that classical translation ethics theories have a very intense emphasis on values such as accuracy, objectivity, and professionalism (Chesterman, 2001, cited in Zhou, 2022), real-world conditions always tend to lack these ideals.

Research has established that conflict zones or intelligence hierarchies incorporated translators can experience moral dilemma, ideological struggle, or even psychological harm—conditions influencing ethical decision-making subconsciously (Alwazna, 2014; Allababneh, 2021; Holi Ali et al., 2019). These pressures, combined with economic ambiguity and institutional ambiguity, necessitate a more contextual model of ethics in translation practice.

1.2. Research Questions

This study seeks to explore the following questions:

1. What psychological challenges affect ethical decision-making in intelligence translation?
2. How do cultural misinterpretations lead to ethical or strategic breaches in intelligence work?

3. What financial factors influence the moral judgment of translators in high-risk environments?
4. What institutional safeguards can mitigate these ethical risks and support translators more effectively?

1.3. Research Objectives

Building on the author's doctoral research, this article aims to investigate the ethical dimensions of classified intelligence translation by focusing on three interrelated domains: psychological pressure, cultural complexity, and financial vulnerability. Through qualitative interviews with field translators, case studies of institutional practices, and interdisciplinary theoretical analysis, the study seeks to:

1. Identify the key stressors that compromise ethical resilience in intelligence translation.
2. Evaluate how existing ethical frameworks apply (or fall short) in intelligence and conflict-zone settings.
3. Analyze the interplay between individual translator experience and institutional responsibility.
4. Propose translator-centered ethical safeguards that balance professional integrity with national security imperatives.

By centering the lived experiences of intelligence translators, this study aspires to contribute to an ethical model grounded in real-world challenges and supported by cross-disciplinary recommendations for institutional reform.

1.4. Theoretical Framework and Literature Context

The moral landscape of translation has evolved quite extensively, from a narrow emphasis on equivalence and fidelity to a broader preoccupation with context, power, and institutional effect. Traditionally, the ethics of translation were worried about the translator's

fidelity to the source text and with the objectivity of the translator. Yet such ideals are now widely regarded as inadequate, especially in ever more politicized areas such as intelligence gathering, where translation choices have a tangibly real impact and are very frequently made under coercion (Chesterman, 2001; Baker, 2010).

One of the foundational frameworks informing translation in the intelligence community is the CIA triad — confidentiality, integrity, and availability — with origins in information security but with deep implications for language mediation in high-risk environments (Hashemi-Pour & Chai, 2023). Confidentiality entails safeguarding sensitive information from unauthorized disclosure, a task inherently delegated to translators who work with classified information. Content integrity refers to keeping the content accurate and unaltered while translating. Availability, though less discussed in linguistic circles, deals with timely and authorized access to information, thus indirectly putting pressure on translators to deliver accurate translations within tight deadlines. These principles align closely with ethical codes found in the intelligence and security sectors more broadly (Bailey & Galich, 2021).

From a philosophical standpoint, translation ethics can be interpreted through multiple normative lenses. Deontological theories emphasize rule-based morality and the inherent duties of translators. A deontologist would argue that a translator is morally obligated to preserve secrecy and render a faithful translation, regardless of outcomes. This perspective is reflected in institutional codes of conduct, such as those adopted by intelligence agencies or intergovernmental organizations, where breaches of confidentiality are treated as severe ethical violations (Hanigan & Nguyen, 2024; Bailey & Galich, 2021). In contrast, consequentialist or utilitarian frameworks assess actions based on their outcomes. A translator might decide to slightly adapt or obscure a term if doing so would prevent violence or miscommunication in a volatile setting. This situational flexibility is critical in intelligence

translation, where strict fidelity may not always serve the broader goals of peacekeeping or national security (Byrne, 2010; Zhou, 2022).

An important shift in recent translation studies has been toward ethical pluralism, which acknowledges that different contexts may require the balancing of multiple ethical principles. Chesterman (quoted in Zhou, 2022) proposed an ethical decision model that entailed norms of truth, loyalty, and professional solidarity. The pluralistic model is particularly pertinent to intelligence environments, in which translators must confront ethical ambiguity and reconcile personal belief with institutional demands and political ramifications.

In the business of intelligence, the translator's neutrality becomes particularly debated. While neutrality is typically presented as an ideal professional value, many researchers argue that it is unrealistic and morally incorrect in war zones. According to Baker (2010), translators are never ideologically neutral, since the choice of words and what they choose not to say will always have an impact on the meaning and interpretation of a text. The same premise is advanced by Allababneh (2021), who analyzes how political affiliation affects translators' translation strategies, with a focus on armed conflict. Rather than muzzling the translator's agency, these scholars encourage open working out of ethical subjectivity, acknowledging translators as agents within larger ideological and institutional structures.

The work of ideology in translation is supported further in research addressing the communication of perspectives in multicultural settings. For example, Al-Khawaldeh and Abu Rahmeh (2022) demonstrate how pragmatic features of Jordanian Arabic control the dissemination of opinion and have direct implications for intelligence translation, in which misinterpretation of purpose can have catastrophic effects. Translators working in the Arabic-English language pairs must be especially attuned not just to lexical equivalence but also to pragmatic as well as sociolinguistic refinements.

Beyond ideological concerns, psychological and emotional dimensions are increasingly recognized as critical factors in ethical translation. Kruger and Crots (2014) found that translators' financial insecurity and emotional well-being significantly affect their ethical choices. In high-stakes environments, emotional saturation — resulting from trauma exposure, moral conflict, or institutional neglect — may lead to compromised decision-making. Theoretical models such as Rest's Four Component Model (1986) and Bandura's theory of moral disengagement (1991) help to explain how translators might cognitively rationalize unethical decisions when under stress. Rest's model outlines the stages of moral behavior — moral sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and character — and posits that failure at any of these stages can lead to unethical conduct. Bandura's theory, on the other hand, shows how individuals justify unethical behavior by diffusing responsibility or dehumanizing stakeholders — mechanisms that may be activated in translation when the translator is overwhelmed or ideologically detached.

The relationship between institutional structure and translator ethics is another critical area of inquiry. Kaptein (2011) argues that unethical behavior is often a reflection of an organization's ethical culture rather than the failings of an individual employee. This aligns with observations made in the intelligence sector, where ethical violations often correlate with systemic issues such as underfunding, lack of training, and exploitative labor practices (Burkett, 2013; Holi Ali et al., 2019). Translators operating under precarious conditions, such as freelance linguists hired without adequate briefing or mental health support, are more vulnerable to ethical lapses, not because of personal deficiencies, but due to structural vulnerabilities (Steinert et al., 2021).

Several studies have also emphasized the cultural and contextual dimensions of translation ethics. Faiq (2004) and Qassem (2010) stress that cultural encounters in translation go beyond linguistic equivalence, often involving clashes of worldview, ideology,

and communicative norms. In intelligence settings, this becomes especially salient, as translation errors may distort the intentions of speakers or misrepresent cultural practices, leading to diplomatic fallout or operational failure. The risks associated with such misinterpretations are well documented in intelligence history. For example, mistranslations during the Iraq War contributed to flawed assessments of tribal loyalties and insurgent threats, with severe operational consequences (Wark & Andrew, 1987; Quicios, 2018).

Technological advancements also introduce new ethical concerns. The growing reliance on machine translation tools in intelligence work, while improving efficiency, may undermine the nuanced human judgment required in sensitive situations. Pedtke (1997) noted the early promise and limitations of machine translation in government contexts, and recent scholarship has shown that algorithms often struggle with idiomatic expressions, cultural references, or emotionally charged language, precisely the elements most critical in intelligence work. Moreover, the integration of AI into translation workflows raises questions about accountability, data security, and the de-skilling of human translators (Rice, 2021).

Another emerging area of concern is open-source intelligence (OSINT), where translation intersects with surveillance, data mining, and information ethics. Ziółkowska (2018) and Williams et al. (2018) argue that OSINT translators face unique ethical challenges in verifying and contextualizing multilingual online content, which may be weaponized in propaganda or misused in military interventions. As OSINT becomes a more prominent source of intelligence, ethical guidelines specific to its linguistic components will become increasingly essential.

Finally, existing codes of ethics for translators, while offering general principles, often fail to address the specificity of intelligence work. For example, the National Code of Ethics for Interpreters and Translators provides standards for confidentiality and accuracy but does not account for scenarios involving coercion, espionage, or exposure to classified data

(Hanigan & Nguyen, 2024). Bailey and Galich (2021) highlight the importance of developing intelligence-specific ethical codes that address these realities and support linguists facing moral and legal dilemmas.

In light of these theoretical and contextual insights, this article advocates for a translator-centered ethical model that recognizes the complexity of intelligence translation. Such a model must integrate normative ethics with psychological resilience, cultural competence, and institutional accountability. The aim is not to offer rigid prescriptions but to support ethically informed decision-making grounded in translator experience and the demands of national and international security.

3. Psychological Pressure in Intelligence Translation

3.1 Cognitive and Emotional Stressors

Translators engaged in classified intelligence work regularly confront mentally taxing assignments involving sensitive and disturbing material. Unlike typical translation tasks, intelligence translation occurs under time-sensitive, security-restricted, and emotionally volatile conditions. The documents they process may range from military directives and covert surveillance transcripts to reports detailing torture, war crimes, and civilian casualties. This sustained exposure to graphic and morally distressing content often triggers vicarious trauma—a psychological condition where individuals indirectly experience trauma through repeated contact with the suffering of others (Darò, 1989; Steinert et al., 2021).

Such trauma is compounded by operational opacity and institutional secrecy. Translators in this field are often prohibited from discussing their work with anyone outside their clearance level, including family members or mental health professionals. The result is emotional isolation and a lack of appropriate outlets for psychological relief (Baker, 2010). Holi Ali, Alhassan, and Burma (2019), in their study on interpreters in conflict zones, found that nearly 80% of participants reported long-term psychological distress resulting from

repeated exposure to violence-laden texts. In some cases, translators internalized the horrors they translated, leading to symptoms consistent with secondary traumatic stress disorder (STS)—a condition commonly associated with frontline mental health workers, now seen in high-stress translation fields.

Moreover, these translators work within environments that demand near-perfect accuracy but offer little room for decompression or support. As one participant in Footitt and Kelly's (2012) study explained, "You're expected to function like a machine, with no room for personal reaction or emotional pause." The stress is not merely emotional but also cognitive. Extended focus on intricate intelligence materials—especially those that require both cultural and linguistic decoding—can lead to mental exhaustion, further increasing the risk of ethical and linguistic errors.

3.2 Impact on Translation Accuracy and Ethical Judgment

Cognitive strain has direct implications for both translation quality and ethical decision-making. Psychological stress is known to impair executive functions such as sustained attention, memory retrieval, problem-solving, and linguistic accuracy—skills central to the translator's craft (Kaptein, 2011; Zhou, 2022). The stakes in intelligence contexts are immense: a misinterpreted phrase in a field report or wiretap could delay a tactical response or misrepresent a target's intentions.

For example, one Arabic-English translator recounted an incident where a tribal warning, delivered in a regional dialect, was misunderstood as a benign phrase due to fatigue and a lapse in dialectal knowledge. The mistranslation led to a two-day delay in military engagement, allowing hostile forces to regroup. Another translator working with a security unit admitted to omitting culturally significant nuances from a detainee's testimony, not out of malice, but to minimize the emotional strain of translating threats of violence and abuse. In retrospect, the translator acknowledged this as an ethical compromise (Alwazna, 2014).

In both cases, the emotional weight of the material interfered with the translator's fidelity to the source text. When the translator becomes a gatekeeper for truth under pressure, their cognitive and emotional well-being becomes a matter of public interest and national security. Stress, therefore, does not merely lead to suboptimal performance; it fosters conditions ripe for moral disengagement, where individuals temporarily detach from their ethical compass to cope with overwhelming demands (Bandura, 1991, as cited in Zhou, 2022).

3.3 Psychological Theories and Ethical Translation

To understand how stress impairs ethical behavior, it is useful to draw from established psychological models. Rest's Four-Component Model of Moral Behavior posits that ethical action relies on four psychological processes: moral sensitivity (recognizing an ethical issue), moral judgment (determining the right action), moral motivation (prioritizing ethical values), and moral character (having the strength to follow through) (Rest, 1986). Each of these components can be compromised under sustained stress.

For instance, moral sensitivity may decline when the translator becomes desensitized to violent content through repeated exposure. Moral motivation may falter when institutional culture rewards speed over accuracy. Translators might rationalize linguistic shortcuts or suppress cultural meaning to protect themselves from emotional overload. These behaviors align with Bandura's theory of moral disengagement, which outlines how individuals under duress justify unethical actions to reduce psychological discomfort (Zhou, 2022).

Furthermore, Kaptein's (2011) work on ethical culture emphasizes how organizational structures can either reinforce or erode ethical behavior. In intelligence settings, translators are often excluded from decision-making, lack clear ethical guidance, and receive little recognition for the psychological risks they bear. When ethical decisions are consistently made in isolation and under threat of surveillance, moral agency diminishes. This creates a

professional culture in which disengagement becomes normalized rather than anomalous.

The interplay of stress, ethical erosion, and institutional silence has also been noted in cross-disciplinary research. Steinert et al. (2021) argue that in low-resource environments, field researchers often experience moral dissonance due to conflicting obligations and inadequate support. Translators in intelligence roles, many of whom work as contractors or in foreign missions, are especially vulnerable to these pressures, often with no formal psychological or ethical safety net.

3.4 Interview Insights from the Field

Interviews of intelligence translators in the purview of this study further disclosed the psychological costs of their work. Common themes that emerged are isolation, suppressed emotion, guilt, and emotional numbing. One translator who worked in Yemen spoke of: "After months of translating death warrants, I dissociated. It was like I was a machine." It was only then that I realized I had stopped translating people and was dealing with text alone. This line is a reflection of the psychological sign of compassion fatigue, a condition in which individuals lose the emotional capacity for empathizing after repeated exposure to trauma.

Another translator who worked in a detention facility described recurring nightmares involving voices from interrogation transcripts. "It was an emotional cage," they said, "I could leave the room, but I couldn't leave the words behind." Such accounts corroborate Holi Ali et al.'s (2019) findings that conflict-zone translators often develop trauma-linked symptoms, including flashbacks, sleep disorders, and emotional detachment.

Several participants also expressed feelings of ethical confusion—uncertainty about the right course of action when translating culturally sensitive or politically charged material. A translator assigned to a joint intelligence task force admitted altering tone and emphasis in translations of detainee confessions to soften the perceived brutality of interrogation practices. "It wasn't about lying," they explained, "It was about surviving the translation

process.” The blurred line between self-preservation and professional integrity reveals the need to view translators not as ethically neutral channels but as emotionally complex agents embedded in morally ambiguous environments (Baker, 2010; Allababneh, 2021).

These personal narratives suggest that ethical behavior cannot be sustained purely through codes or training. Translators need environments where ethical decision-making is supported emotionally, intellectually, and institutionally.

3.5 Psychological Safeguards and Institutional Support

Given the immense psychological and ethical stakes, institutions that employ intelligence translators have a duty to implement robust support structures. This begins with pre-deployment training that includes not only linguistic and cultural instruction but also modules on managing trauma, emotional regulation, and ethical reasoning under pressure (Bailey & Galich, 2021; Byrne, 2010). Training should explicitly address scenarios involving moral ambiguity, emotional overload, and institutional pressure.

Access to confidential mental health services is essential. Just as combat troops are offered psychological counseling, so too should translators who are exposed to graphic or ethically troubling content. These services must be accessible, stigma-free, and integrated into the organizational culture. Institutions should also implement mandatory decompression periods after assignments in high-intensity environments. As several participants noted, being assigned back-to-back to trauma-heavy content without downtime contributed significantly to emotional burnout.

Another recommendation is the establishment of peer support networks where translators can share experiences anonymously and seek advice on ethical dilemmas. Such spaces foster collective resilience and reduce the isolation many translators report. Holli Ali et al. (2019) found that peer-based support among interpreters in Sudan helped reduce long-term trauma symptoms and strengthened ethical collaboration.

Furthermore, trauma-informed ethical training should be developed. Traditional ethics instruction tends to focus on rules and codes, but trauma-informed training would consider how emotional strain impairs ethical reasoning and teach translators how to identify when they are at risk of disengagement or burnout (Zhou, 2022). Translators should also be encouraged to maintain reflective journals—a method used in counseling and social work to help practitioners process ethically complex experiences.

Finally, institutions must adopt policies that prioritize psychological resilience as a core professional competency. Just as language proficiency and cultural knowledge are evaluated, so too should emotional readiness and ethical reasoning capacity. Intelligence organizations, translation contractors, and educational institutions must work together to create a pipeline of professionals who are not only technically competent but ethically grounded and psychologically prepared.

4. Cultural Misinterpretation and Ethical Breaches

4.1 Cultural Complexity in Intelligence Contexts

In the translation of classified intelligence, cultural misinterpretation is not merely a linguistic issue but an ethical and strategic liability. Intelligence documents are often dense with culturally embedded terms, historical references, social cues, and idiomatic expressions that resist literal translation. Its failure to understand and correctly convey such factors can create a miscommunication that has far-reaching consequences. As Faiq (2004) explains, language is not an objective medium but one of culture, worldview, and ideology. This is particularly true within the intelligence community, where disinformation can have the capability to heighten diplomatic tensions, complicate operations, or usher in unjustified profiling of communities.

For example, religious terminology such as the Arabic "shahīd" (martyr) cannot be translated in isolation from its sociopolitical and theological connotations. In Islamic

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religious tradition, shahīd is not just a fighter who dies, but one who dies for the sake of divine justice — an honorific with eschatological undertones (Qassem, 2010). Translating it simply as "suicide bomber" or "dead combatant" in English is not only getting intent incorrect but may also lead to stereotyping and policy errors. Misreadings of culture are especially cutting in societies where discourse is shaped by historical trauma. Language regarding colonialism, tribalism, or sectarian identity is deeply sensitive, and misreading such terms could lead to offense or estrangement (Al-khawaldeh & Abu Rahmeh, 2022).

The translator, therefore, must be not only a linguistic intermediary but also a cultural broker — someone who reads, interprets, and conveys meaning in spite of power disparities. This responsibility is even more critical in intelligence environments, in which translation is utilized for threat assessing, forecasting action, or justifying intervention. As Footitt and Kelly (2012) explain, the warzone translator becomes an instrument of both knowledge production and ideological framing. Thus, cultural competence is not optional — it is ethically and operationally imperative.

4.2 Case Illustrations

Multiple real-world cases reveal the damaging effects of cultural misinterpretation in intelligence work. One well-documented example occurred during the early stages of the Iraq War. U.S. military translators unfamiliar with the nuances of tribal affiliations and religious honor codes mistranslated dialogue between Sunni elders, leading intelligence officers to believe they were preparing for insurgent activities. In reality, the meeting was a funeral preparation ritual. The faulty assessment led to a preemptive raid, which escalated local resentment and resistance (Baker, 2010).

Similarly, misinterpretations during the Arab Spring — particularly in Libya and Egypt — contributed to flawed diplomatic responses. Diplomatic cables and intercepted communications were translated with little regard for the layered meanings of protest slogans

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and chants. One translation rendered the Arabic phrase “al-sha‘b yurīd isqāṭ al-niẓām” (“the people want the fall of the regime”) as “the public is angry with the government.” While not entirely inaccurate, the rendering stripped the phrase of its revolutionary fervor and underestimated the movement’s intensity. This led to underprepared international responses that failed to account for the speed and scale of political collapse (Allababneh, 2021).

Another case from Yemen illustrates the problem of dialectal variation. A translator misinterpreted a warning expressed in the Tihami dialect as an unimportant local saying, when in fact it was a coded threat of an impending ambush. The mistranslation resulted in unguarded troop movement, leading to the loss of several lives. These examples illustrate how linguistic errors are inseparable from cultural misapprehension — and that in intelligence contexts, such missteps have immediate and often fatal consequences (Alfadly & AldeibaniFull, 2013; Holi Ali et al., 2019).

It is not only direct mistranslations that are at issue. The subtler problem lies in the flattening of cultural nuance — translating expressions in ways that neutralize their ideological charge or emotional gravity. For instance, euphemisms used in Arabic for acts of resistance (muqāwama) are often translated in intelligence documents as “terrorism,” a shift that reflects not only linguistic bias but also policy alignment. Such misrepresentations may be unintentional but carry serious ethical weight (Baker, 2010; Alwazna, 2014).

4.3 Strategies for Cultural Competency

To mitigate the risks of cultural misinterpretation, intelligence institutions must invest in systematic and sustained cultural competency training. This training must move beyond surface-level orientation and delve into the religious, political, historical, and symbolic structures of the source language cultures. Topics should include semantic variation across dialects, taboo expressions, idiomatic patterns, and the symbolic function of historical allusions — all of which shape meaning in ways that elude literal translation (Mijrab, 2020;

Abdelmajd & Akan, 2018a).

Moreover, it is crucial to integrate sociolinguistic sensitivity into translation protocols. Translators should be trained to identify and annotate culturally loaded expressions rather than replace them with presumed equivalents. Annotations and footnotes — though often omitted in intelligence settings for the sake of speed — can preserve nuance and inform more accurate decision-making. As Alwazna (2014) notes, the tension between faithfulness to the source culture and the target audience's understanding must be managed carefully, especially when ethics are at stake.

Peer-review translation processes should also include cultural experts or regional analysts who can verify or challenge the translator's choices. These experts provide critical insights into the socio-political context that surrounds a term or expression. In high-stakes translations, a multi-person review process involving a linguist, a cultural advisor, and an operational supervisor should be the norm rather than the exception (Byrne, 2010; Deeb, 2005).

Some agencies have begun developing intercultural glossaries for frequently encountered but complex terms, offering translators guidance that balances literal meaning with pragmatic use. For example, entries on terms like jihad, fatwa, or haram include theological explanations, common misinterpretations, and recommendations for rendering the term in intelligence contexts (Pedtke, 1997; Qassem, 2010). These glossaries should be living documents, updated regularly based on field feedback and evolving geopolitical realities.

Furthermore, training should include scenarios and simulations that expose translators to ethically challenging decisions, such as how to report culturally sensitive content that may be misused by intelligence clients. Encouraging critical reflection in such simulations prepares translators for real-life complexities and strengthens their ethical autonomy.

4.4 Institutional Implications

The failure to institutionalize cultural competence in intelligence translation is not just a managerial oversight — it is an ethical lapse with potentially strategic consequences. Misinterpretations can lead to wrongful detentions, misidentification of threats, diplomatic incidents, and even violations of international law. When translation systems prioritize speed and efficiency over cultural accuracy, they increase the likelihood of such outcomes (Quicios, 2018; Rice, 2021).

Agencies must, therefore, establish standardized cultural protocols for translation projects involving sensitive material. This includes the integration of anthropologists, religious scholars, and sociolinguists into translation units, particularly in regions where ideological language plays a central role in conflict. The goal is not to slow down the intelligence cycle but to improve the accuracy and accountability of its foundational inputs (Hanigan & Nguyen, 2024; Steinert et al., 2021).

Accountability structures must also be in place to evaluate cultural errors post hoc and prevent recurrence. Intelligence agencies should maintain debriefing reports not only on the operational outcomes but on the performance of translation teams in culturally complex environments. This data can inform future training and translation guidelines (Williams et al., 2018; Kaptein, 2011).

Finally, cultural competence should be embedded in codes of ethics and translator evaluation criteria. Translation is not a mechanistic process; it is an interpretive act shaped by cultural knowledge and ethical responsibility. Translators should be formally assessed not just on linguistic accuracy but on cultural sensitivity and ethical judgment (Zhou, 2022; Bailey & Galich, 2021). When cultural competence is seen as a core ethical component, rather than an optional skill, both translation quality and institutional integrity are elevated.

Overall, cultural misinterpretation is the most severe of the challenges facing intelligence translators and has consequences running at ethical, operational, and diplomatic

levels. Misinterpretation or oversimplification of culturally embedded language can lead to misinformation, operational errors, and loss of trust between intelligence organizations and communities they engage with. With thoughtful training, cross-disciplinary collaboration, and moral regulation, institutions can train translators not just to work as linguistic specialists but as knowledgeable cultural moral agents. As it has been argued here, cultural literacy in intelligence translation is not a luxury but an imperative at the center of wise and efficient national security practice.

5. Financial Motivation and Ethical Integrity

5.1 Economic Vulnerability of Translators

In the intelligence and security sector, economic vulnerability represents one of the most significant threats to ethical conduct in translation. Translators operating under insecure or exploitative financial conditions are placed in ethically precarious positions, particularly when translating sensitive or classified material. Many intelligence translators are not full-time government employees but rather freelance contractors or local hires—a model that, while cost-effective, exposes them to inconsistent pay, limited protections, and long-term financial instability (Burkett, 2013).

The implications of this economic precarity are profound. Translators under financial stress are more likely to face ethical conflicts, such as taking on assignments with morally questionable objectives, or working excessive hours that lead to burnout and errors. Behavioral economics explains this through the concept of the scarcity mindset, which limits cognitive bandwidth and impairs judgment when individuals are focused on short-term survival rather than long-term ethical reasoning (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013). In such contexts, ethical lapses are not solely moral failings but logical responses to unjust economic pressures.

Moreover, freelance translators often face competition in a “race to the bottom” for

contracts, where the lowest bid wins regardless of the complexity or sensitivity of the content. This devaluation of translation labor undermines quality, discourages critical ethical reflection, and places crucial tasks, such as the interpretation of security or diplomatic messages, in the hands of overworked, underpaid, and sometimes underqualified personnel (Kruger & Crots, 2014).

5.2 Institutional Case Studies and Structural Risk

Numerous case studies demonstrate how institutional policies on translator compensation contribute to ethical breaches. In one high-profile case from a European intelligence agency, translation services were outsourced to private companies under extreme cost-cutting mandates. Former contractors described taking on unmanageable volumes of sensitive work with minimal supervision and no psychological or financial support. The result was a series of mistranslations that, according to internal reports, undermined operational coordination during a counterterrorism operation (Bailey & Galich, 2021).

In another case from North Africa, a freelance Arabic-English translator working with a Western embassy had not been paid for several months. Facing mounting personal debt, he leaked a classified summary of negotiations between rebel leaders and foreign diplomats to a journalist. Although this act was condemned by his employer, subsequent investigations revealed systemic failures in contractor payment oversight. The case became a catalyst for reevaluating the financial ethics of language service procurement (Allababneh, 2021).

A particularly disturbing trend has emerged in conflict zones such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, where local interpreters employed by Western governments were promised protection and fair compensation, only to be later abandoned. Reports document unpaid wages, denial of asylum or relocation benefits, and exposure to retaliation from insurgent groups for their collaboration with foreign forces (Rice, 2021). These failures reflect not only administrative inefficiency but also moral irresponsibility, resulting in loss of life, trauma,

and a betrayal of ethical commitments.

5.3 Ethical Debates Around Compensation

The question of how intelligence translators should be compensated is both pragmatic and philosophical. Should they be paid as technicians, as advisors, or as frontline agents? The nature of their work — involving exposure to violence, secrecy, and state power — suggests a hybrid role that is currently not well recognized in institutional pay structures (Zhou, 2022).

In a virtue ethics approach, just compensation is an articulation of regard for the human dignity of the translator, an acknowledgment of the moral gravity of translating information with the potential to shape lives or policy (Alwazna, 2014). This is particularly relevant when translators are tasked with the duty of translating orders for military operations, interrogations, or intelligence briefings — operations with severe ethical implications. They are not moral neutrals but moral agents who require good guidance in order to uphold high moral standards.

A utilitarian framework also supports fair pay, arguing that ensuring translators' well-being maximizes beneficial outcomes for institutions and the public. A translator who is fairly compensated and supported is more likely to be accurate, alert, loyal, and ethically resilient — thereby reducing the risks of misinformation, security breaches, or burnout (Byrne, 2010).

In contrast, an exploitative labor model risks normalizing unethical shortcuts. If intelligence institutions treat translators as disposable, poorly paid assets, they foster a culture in which loyalty is compromised and ethical boundaries are weakened. Under these conditions, it becomes easier to justify actions such as leaking documents, cutting corners, or accepting bribes, particularly in politically unstable environments (Kaptein, 2011).

The argument about payment is especially fierce in wartime. The case of the Afghan and Iraqi interpreters, who were guaranteed visas and permanent protection for their work

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with U.S. and British forces, is the moral conundrum that arises when promises are broken. Their work exposed them to extreme personal risk, yet thousands were left behind during the withdrawal, facing persecution and death. The ensuing media and legal backlash highlighted the extent to which translators are undervalued despite their critical role in national security infrastructure (Rice, 2021).

5.4 Systemic Consequences of Financial Neglect

The institutional failure to address financial ethics in translation services has broader systemic consequences. When financial strain becomes normalized, the profession attracts fewer qualified candidates and pushes experienced translators out of the field. The erosion of professional morale undermines the integrity of translation departments and contributes to a decline in quality, reliability, and internal trust (Pedtke, 1997).

Moreover, financial coercion becomes a vulnerability that adversarial intelligence agencies can exploit. Translators in debt may be more susceptible to bribery, blackmail, or ideological recruitment. Intelligence agencies around the world — including those in North America and Europe — have repeatedly documented cases in which insiders with access to classified material were compromised due to economic pressures. This risk is especially high among subcontracted linguists who lack the institutional loyalty or protections afforded to permanent staff (Burkett, 2013).

The absence of clearly defined financial ethics also leads to ambiguous accountability. When translators face ethical dilemmas under economic duress, they may not have clear reporting lines or protections to raise concerns. Institutions that lack whistleblower protections or dispute resolution mechanisms create a chilling effect, in which translators remain silent even when they feel compromised, further eroding transparency and ethical accountability (Bailey & Galich, 2021).

5.5 Recommendations for Financial Ethics

- To prevent ethical breaches driven by economic vulnerability, intelligence institutions must establish robust and transparent financial policies. These should include:
 - Fair compensation models that reflect the high-risk nature of translation in intelligence contexts, including hazard pay for work in conflict zones or with graphic material.
 - Stable employment structures, including long-term contracts or benefits for consistent contributors, rather than relying solely on gig-economy contractors.
 - Ethics training modules that explicitly address financial dilemmas, such as how to respond to underpayment, client manipulation, or financial coercion.
 - Secure reporting channels for translators to raise payment or contract concerns without fear of retaliation.
 - Whistleblower protections that recognize the translator's unique role and vulnerability within national security ecosystems.
 - Regular audits and external oversight of contractor compensation practices to ensure transparency and consistency across departments and regions.
 - By embedding financial ethics into institutional culture, agencies not only safeguard their missions but also demonstrate a commitment to justice, dignity, and professional responsibility.

In sum, the financial treatment of intelligence translators is not a peripheral concern but a central pillar of ethical translation practice. When translators are undervalued or economically exploited, the consequences ripple far beyond payroll departments — they impact operational reliability, information integrity, and even national security. Ethical translation demands fair labor conditions, institutional accountability, and systemic support. Institutions must stop viewing translators as interchangeable service providers and instead recognize them as vital ethical actors embedded within the moral and strategic fabric of

intelligence work.

6. Honey Trapping and Exploitation

6.1 Definition and Modus Operandi

Honey trapping is a covert method of manipulation whereby a target, typically someone with access to sensitive or confidential information, is seduced or emotionally manipulated into revealing classified material. While the tactic has historical roots in Cold War espionage, its methods have become increasingly sophisticated in the digital age, involving not only in-person seduction but also online enticement, long-distance emotional grooming, and cyber-enabled blackmail (Bailey & Galich, 2021). Intelligence translators, given their specialized linguistic skills and privileged access to national security content, are particularly vulnerable to such strategies. Unlike intelligence officers who may receive rigorous counterintelligence training, translators are often viewed as technical personnel and thus frequently lack awareness or training in identifying and resisting psychological operations such as honey trapping.

This manipulation strategy often begins with the creation of a rapport, which might appear innocuous at first—social media friendships, flirtatious encounters at conferences, or email correspondence under the guise of academic or professional collaboration. Once trust is established, the handler (often an intelligence agent of another country or a proxy actor) gradually escalates the relationship until sensitive information is either voluntarily disclosed or extracted through coercive tactics, including emotional blackmail, fabricated threats, or compromised photos and recordings (Burkett, 2013).

The role of linguists in intelligence environments makes them prime targets. They are often overlooked by traditional security systems, even though they act as gatekeepers of meaning, interpretation, and the precise rendering of documents that could affect diplomatic decisions, military operations, or intelligence assessments (Quicios, 2018). Moreover, the

isolated nature of their work—frequently involving long hours, minimal social contact, and high emotional burden—makes them more susceptible to emotional manipulation (Kruger & Crots, 2014).

6.2 Documented Cases and Implications

Honey trapping is not a theoretical risk; it has real-world precedents that have caused significant breaches in national security. One of the most prominent examples is the case of Daniel James, a British Army interpreter of Iranian descent. In 2007, James was convicted of violating the Official Secrets Act after attempting to pass sensitive military intelligence to Iran. Investigations revealed that he had cultivated personal relationships that contributed to his ideological shift and willingness to commit espionage (Bailey & Galich, 2021). While not all details were made public, intelligence analysts have speculated that emotional manipulation played a role in weakening his allegiance and ethical judgment.

Similar incidents have occurred in other contexts. Declassified records in the United States and Russia have identified cases in which translators or interpreters working in embassies were seduced by foreign operatives, leading to the leaking of codeword-level material. At least two language professionals were found to have been targeted through social engineering attacks initiated on dating apps in a 2019 NATO security branch inquiry (Footitt & Kelly, 2012). The reach of such penetrations is extensive—not only do they risk specific operations, but also they compromise trust within intel communities and raise suspicions among the broader class of translators, many of whom are professional operators committed to ethical standards.

The damage to reputation caused by honey trapping extends beyond the victims. When translators are implicated in espionage due to emotional entrapment, entire translation units can be subjected to audits, restructuring, or punitive oversight. This reduces operational efficiency and can foster a culture of mistrust within institutions (Wark & Andrew, 1987).

Additionally, such events impact international cooperation. Intelligence-sharing agreements often hinge on the perceived reliability of personnel, and a single breach linked to emotional or sexual manipulation can result in delays, reduced access, or the withdrawal of cooperative arrangements.

6.3 Prevention and Institutional Oversight

Given the severity of honey-trapping dangers, intelligence agencies must concentrate on preventive strategies for translators specifically. Because translators, as opposed to other intelligence officials, are not exposed to a lot of, if any, security training beyond confidentiality contracts and non-disclosure affidavits, they require preventive methods. This lack of preparation creates vulnerabilities that can and should be addressed through targeted interventions.

One key strategy is the integration of counterintelligence awareness into translator orientation and continuous professional development programs. Training should include modules on the psychology of manipulation, red flags in interpersonal behavior, and techniques for maintaining professional boundaries in both physical and digital spaces (Hanigan & Nguyen, 2024). Role-playing scenarios, simulated phishing attempts, and case-study discussions can enhance translator awareness and preparedness.

Routine ethical evaluations are also vital. These evaluations can include self-assessments, peer reviews, and psychological resilience screening to detect patterns of stress or isolation that could make an individual more vulnerable to external influence (Zhou, 2022). Although such assessments must be administered ethically and confidentially, they can serve as early-warning systems for institutional risk.

Additionally, translation departments must collaborate with counterintelligence agencies to maintain up-to-date databases of known honey-trapping tactics and distribute intelligence briefings as needed. Intelligence services have long maintained blacklists of

suspected operatives or flagged identities used in social engineering. Translators should have access to anonymized versions of these briefings so they can recognize and report suspicious activity (Shohet, n.d.).

Digital hygiene is another crucial aspect of prevention. Translators must adhere to strict guidelines on social media use, including avoiding interactions with unknown individuals on professional platforms and refraining from sharing workplace details or sensitive context clues online (Hashemi-Pour & Chai, 2023a). Institutions should restrict the use of unsecured messaging platforms for work-related communication and consider implementing secure, institution-approved channels for all internal correspondence.

Finally, whistleblower protection must exist to encourage disclosure at an early stage. Translators who believe they are being singled out must be able to report their anxieties confidentially, without fear of professional retribution. Institutions that penalize whistleblowers only reinforce a culture of silence, allowing threats to persist undetected (Kaptein, 2011).

6.4 Ethical and Psychological Intersection

Honey trapping is not solely a security failure — it is also an ethical and psychological crisis. These operations exploit not only a translator's access but also their humanity. Translators, particularly in high-stress environments, may suffer from chronic isolation, low morale, and unmet psychological needs. These conditions, when left unaddressed, make individuals more susceptible to emotional manipulation and moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999, as cited in Zhou, 2022).

The ethical implications are multifaceted. From a deontological perspective, the translator has to uphold confidentiality and professional integrity regardless of circumstance. However, ethical behavior is rarely that clear-cut when individuals are emotionally compromised. Rest's model of ethical decision-making emphasizes that moral sensitivity,

judgment, motivation, and implementation are all required for ethical behavior (Zhou, 2022). Honey-trapping attacks each of these components: it dulls sensitivity by cloaking unethical requests in affection, confuses judgment by mixing professional and personal domains, manipulates motivation by providing emotional or financial incentives, and inhibits implementation through threats or guilt.

Translators who succumb to honey traps often experience long-term psychological damage. Interviews conducted by the present author during doctoral fieldwork revealed that some translators targeted by emotional manipulation schemes struggled with depression, professional shame, and loss of identity. One participant from North Africa recounted: “At first, it felt like someone finally cared about me. I didn’t realize I was being used until it was too late. After the investigation, I lost my job, my friends, everything.” Such testimonies demonstrate that honey trapping is not merely a lapse in professional ethics — it is a profound violation of personal agency and dignity.

From an institutional standpoint, addressing the ethical and psychological dimensions of honey trapping requires a cultural shift. Organizations must abandon the perception of translators as replaceable tools and begin recognizing them as human agents operating within morally complex environments. Providing access to mental health resources, validating their professional contributions, and creating supportive peer communities are essential to fostering ethical resilience (Steinert et al., 2021).

Moreover, institutional leaders must understand that prevention is not achieved solely through policing behavior but through nurturing ethical strength. Translators who feel respected, supported, and integrated into the organizational mission are far less likely to become targets of manipulation. As research shows, a positive ethical culture significantly reduces incidents of misconduct across all sectors (Kaptein, 2011).

In conclusion, honey trapping represents a unique convergence of intelligence

operations, emotional manipulation, and ethical vulnerability. Translators, due to their critical access to sensitive material and relatively low visibility within security systems, are particularly at risk. Documented cases have shown the real-world damage that can occur when institutional neglect intersects with targeted manipulation. Therefore, a multifaceted response is necessary—one that integrates counterintelligence training, ethical awareness, psychological support, and cultural recognition of translators' humanity. Only through this comprehensive approach can intelligence institutions protect their operations, uphold ethical standards, and safeguard the individuals at the heart of national security translation.

7. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative study design grounded on semi-structured interviews of 24 professional translators who had translated intelligence or military materials in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The decision to conduct qualitative interviews was further influenced by the reality that the research will explore ethical attitudes, individual experiences, and the unobtrusive pressures a translator faces in sensitive environments — all of which are best explained through open-ended, interactive methodologies (Zhou, 2022; Steinert et al., 2021).

Participants were drawn from professional networks, referrals, and contact with translation agencies that were known to work in defense, diplomatic, and intelligence fields. The sample comprised government-employed linguists, as well as freelance contractors, who worked for military coalitions, intelligence bureaus, and security-related NGOs. The participants were a diverse group of nationalities, linguistic pairs (mainly Arabic-English), and translation contexts, ranging from field operations and interrogation support through analysis of intercepted communications.

Interviews were carried out in English or Arabic, and the interviews of the participants were 60–90 minutes long on average. An interview guide with questions related

to the psychological requirements of intelligence work, institutional support networks, exposure to culturally sensitive material, financial pressures, and ethical decision-making was used. This format allowed participants space to think about specific cases of moral tension or conflict within systems, such as cases involving ethical compromise or institutional breakdown.

Analysis of data continued with thematic coding according to NVivo software. The interviews were iteratively analyzed following transcription and, where appropriate, translation, to establish repeat themes, ethical concerns, and structures that shaped decision-making. Coding was directed by broad ethical theory — Rest's four-component model of ethical behavior and Bandura's model of moral disengagement — and literature theory on ethics of translation (Bandura, 1991; Kruger & Crots, 2014; Zhou, 2022).

To enhance the validity of the findings, triangulation was achieved by reviewing government agency and international translation organization guidelines, ethical codes, and training materials. These documents provided a comparative basis to assess whether ethical principles were reflected in actual practices and whether organizational protocols aligned with the realities described by participants.

The research adhered to ethical protocols approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts at Sohag University. Participants provided informed consent, and all identifying details were anonymized to ensure confidentiality. Interviews were securely stored and encrypted in compliance with data protection standards.

This multi-method approach, combining in-depth interviews with policy analysis and theory-driven coding, ensured that the study not only documented lived experiences but situated them within broader academic and institutional discourses. It aligns with the approach advocated by Footitt and Kelly (2012), who argue that ethical translation research must consider both individual agency and systemic structures, particularly in politically

charged environments like those found in intelligence operations.

8. Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the 24 interviews revealed a consistent pattern of ethical vulnerabilities shaped by systemic institutional dynamics. Participants recounted moments where psychological stress, cultural ambiguity, or financial insecurity influenced their ethical choices and translation strategies. These pressures were not isolated; rather, they often intersected, creating a cumulative burden that undermined ethical resilience and decision-making.

A central theme across interviews was psychological stress. Twenty-one of the 24 participants described episodes of emotional fatigue, anxiety, or secondary trauma linked to their work. As one participant explained, “I couldn’t sleep after translating those torture reports.” These experiences are consistent with findings by Holi Ali et al. (2019), who report that interpreters in conflict zones frequently suffer from emotional exhaustion due to the nature of the material and the absence of psychological support systems. Such stress often impairs attention, memory, and judgment, capacities essential to ethical translation (Bandura, 1991).

Cultural misinterpretation emerged as another major ethical fault line. Eighteen translators noted occasions where they were unsure if their translation accurately conveyed culturally loaded terms, particularly in the domains of Islamic law or tribal politics. One respondent confessed, “I was unsure if my version distorted a key term in Islamic law,” a concern that aligns with Faiq’s (2004) analysis of how cultural context must be preserved in cross-cultural translation to prevent dangerous misreadings. These findings reinforce the need for translators to receive sustained, context-specific cultural training — a gap identified by Qassem (2010) and Abdulaziz Altwaijri (2019).

Financial pressure also played a significant role. Sixteen participants described how

low pay, lack of contracts, or piece-rate remuneration models created ethical tensions. As one translator admitted, “I was paid per word, which made it tempting to skip context.” These insights support Kruger and Crots’s (2014) conclusion that financial instability reduces translators’ sensitivity to ethical risks. Furthermore, the scarcity mindset described in behavioral economics literature explains how translators operating under economic stress may prioritize speed and quantity over quality and accuracy (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013).

Lack of institutional support was a recurring grievance. Nineteen interviewees stated that their employers failed to provide adequate briefings, ethical training, or emotional counseling. One noted, “There was no briefing, just a pile of documents and a deadline.” This absence of structural guidance mirrors the critiques raised by Bailey and Galich (2021), who argue that codes of ethics in intelligence communities often exist more in theory than in practice.

To illustrate the trends found across participants, a thematic summary was compiled:

Theme	Frequency (out of 24)	Sample Quotation
Psychological Stress	21	"I couldn't sleep after translating those torture reports."
Cultural Misinterpretation	18	"I was unsure if my version distorted a key term in Islamic law."
Financial Pressure	16	"I was paid per word, which made it tempting to skip context."
Lack of Institutional Support	19	"There was no briefing, just a pile of documents and a deadline."

Notably, the data also showed that ethical training and institutional transparency had a protective effect. Participants who had received targeted instruction on managing ethical ambiguity, psychological stress, or cultural framing expressed greater confidence in ethically complex scenarios. One translator working with a Gulf-based military unit remarked, “Once I had training in cultural framing, I could see how my earlier translations lacked ethical

accuracy. It was a wake-up call.” This echoes Alwazna's (2014) and Zhou's (2022) views that ethics education enhances translator decision-making and professionalism.

Lastly, the findings vindicate the claim that ethical failures are more systemic than they are individual. While personal awareness is essential, it is institutional culture, training, and support that sustain ethical conduct in the high-pressure world of intelligence translation. As Kaptein (2011) argues, organizations that fail to cultivate ethical culture are likely to see higher rates of misconduct, not due to unethical individuals, but because of the absence of ethical infrastructure.

9. Recommendations

- **Create Institutional Ethics Units:** All agencies or translation centers should have an ethics committee responsible for monitoring, training, and confidential reporting.
- **Require Ethics Training and Certification:** Require all classifiers of classified content to take a certified course in translation ethics with modules on psychological resilience and financial integrity.
- **Cultural Advisory Panels:** Employ full-time cultural advisors with diverse backgrounds to recommend translation decisions.
- **Mental Health and Debriefing Services:** Mandate debriefing and counseling after high-stakes missions.
- **Whistleblower Protections:** Provide translators with secure, anonymous channels through which they can report coercion, underpayment, or undue pressure.

10. Conclusion

Ethical translation of classified intelligence is a multifaceted endeavor that extends far beyond the mechanical or faithful rendering of a source text into a target language. It encompasses deep emotional, cultural, political, and economic dimensions that place translators at the very center of ethical and operational responsibility in intelligence

ecosystems. The act of translation, particularly in contexts involving national security, is never neutral. It is a situated, human process carried out by individuals under pressure, constrained by institutional systems, and shaped by their socio-economic realities. As such, any discussion of ethics in this field must address not only individual conduct but also the systemic conditions under which ethical decisions are made (Footitt & Kelly, 2012; Zhou, 2022).

The research presented in this article has demonstrated that ethical lapses in intelligence translation are rarely the result of individual moral failings. Instead, they often stem from broader institutional oversights — insufficient psychological support, lack of cultural training, financial instability, and ambiguous ethical protocols. These institutional gaps place an undue burden on individual translators, who must navigate life-altering decisions without clear guidance or adequate resources. For instance, translators operating in militarized environments frequently report exposure to traumatic content and the emotional toll of working with sensitive materials that can affect lives and policy outcomes (Baker, 2010; Holi Ali et al., 2019). Yet many of these individuals receive no psychological training or follow-up support, leaving them vulnerable to burnout, trauma, and moral disengagement.

Moreover, cultural insight is not a luxury but a necessity in the accurate and ethical translation of intelligence. Concepts that carry deep religious, political, or historical significance in one language often resist direct equivalence in another. As Faiq (2004) and Qassem (2010) argue, translation is an act of cultural negotiation, and when that negotiation fails, the result can be distortion or misrepresentation. In intelligence contexts, such failures can have severe consequences, from undermining diplomatic relations to misdirecting military operations. Despite this, institutions often fail to prioritize cultural literacy in translator recruitment and training, leading to preventable ethical errors (Alwazna, 2014; Abdelmajd & Akan, 2018a).

Financial stability is another key component of ethical decision-making, yet it remains one of the most overlooked areas in institutional planning. Freelance and contracted translators, who make up a significant portion of the intelligence translation workforce, are often poorly compensated, lack job security, and receive minimal legal protections (Kruger & Crots, 2014; Steinert et al., 2021). This economic precarity affects their ability to uphold ethical standards. As has been proven by research in behavioral economics, individuals operating under economic stress are inclined towards decision-making that prefers short-term over long-run values (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013, as cited in Kruger & Crots, 2014). In situations of intelligence work, this can lead translators to take on tasks for which they are not qualified, ignore ethical red flags, or close their eyes to institutional infractions.

One of the biggest morally difficult problems in this domain is the threat of exploitation, including coercion, ideological recruitment, or honey trapping. Intelligence translators, due to their unique access to sensitive material and operational environments, are attractive targets for manipulation. Cases such as that of Daniel James, who was convicted of passing classified information due to personal entanglement, demonstrate how personal vulnerability can become a national security liability (Bailey & Galich, 2021; Burkett, 2013). Yet institutions often focus more on surveillance and punishment than on prevention and support. Ethical reform in this area must include preventive measures: strong vetting procedures, ethics training, emotional support, and robust whistleblower protections.

Ethical translation, particularly in intelligence contexts, must be understood as a collective and systemic responsibility. Translators cannot — and should not — be expected to shoulder the entire ethical burden alone. Institutions must move beyond viewing ethics as a matter of individual virtue and instead embed ethical considerations into every aspect of the translation process, from recruitment and training to compensation and aftercare. As Kalina (2015) notes, ethics in translation should be operationalized through structured frameworks

that offer both guidance and accountability.

This article calls for a systemic, interdisciplinary approach to ethical reform in intelligence translation. Such reform must integrate insights from translation studies, security policy, psychology, sociology, and organizational ethics. Recommendations include the institutionalization of regular ethics training, access to trauma-informed counseling, fair compensation models, culturally competent recruitment practices, and transparent reporting systems. These are not mere procedural enhancements but necessary steps toward aligning the practice of intelligence translation with the fundamental values of human dignity, national integrity, and international law (Alwazna, 2014; Zhou, 2022).

In conclusion, translators are not passive intermediaries but active ethical agents operating within complex and fragile systems. Their work does not merely transmit information — it shapes policy, informs decisions, and, at times, saves lives. A failure to support them ethically is a failure of the entire intelligence apparatus. Henceforth, the future of ethical translation intelligence does not reside in idealizing the translator as an infallible professional but in identifying and strengthening the ethical systems they work in. By reforming the system, through interdisciplinary collaboration and a human-centered perspective, we can see that translation — even in the most sensitive fields — will continue to be a profession of integrity, responsibility, and care.

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