

Lectio Praecursoria

Pekka Snellman's Public PhD Defence at Tampere University on 21 August 2026

- - - - -

It is said that all research begins with a problem. My doctoral research began with a very concrete military problem: what can a crisis management force do when it has no interpreters available?

I served in Afghanistan in 2009–2010. During that period, three locally recruited interpreters serving with my unit were killed in action. These casualties temporarily left the force without any local interpreters. Only the unit's own military interpreters remained, and they numbered only a fraction of what its tasks required. In practice, the loss of some seventy local interpreters meant that many tasks across the unit—comprising approximately 1,500 soldiers—had to be suspended temporarily.

After returning to Finland, I began to consider whether *linguistic support* for military crisis management operations could be organised more effectively. In a manner typical of soldiers, I approached the question directly: I focused on solutions. I thought that research might yield practical answers and thereby provide concrete assistance in the field. For my Master's thesis, written in 2012–2013, I received permission to interview fourteen Finnish military interpreters.

The interviews soon made it clear, however, that linguistic support for international operations is not as simple as it may initially appear—and this is probably a fairly common observation among researchers. At the surface are various administrative and institutional factors: military interpreters' backgrounds, recruitment, training, management and security. The military interpreters' experiences also revealed deeper dimensions of the phenomenon: what motivates them; what influence they exercise; and how trust, personal relationships, prejudice and fear affect their service. I came to realise that there was no easy or quick answer to the simple question that had originally aroused my interest: how might linguistic support in crisis management operations be organised more effectively?

The most important outcome of my discussions with military interpreters, however, was my growing understanding that ethical questions are particularly important. A more detailed analysis of the interviews brought the interpreter's role and agency to the fore, further highlighting the importance of ethics. A military interpreter occupies a dual role: soldier and interpreter at the same time. Yet the professional ethics of these two *professions* are not easily reconciled. Interpreters, for example, have traditionally been expected to remain impartial, whereas unconditional loyalty to one's own unit and nation has been regarded as a military virtue. The central question therefore became this: can the professional ethics of the interpreter and the soldier be combined and, if so, under what conditions? Existing ethical guidelines for interpreters also appeared, in some respects, poorly suited to military interpreters, indicating a possible tension between the two sets of professional ethics. Had I

finally found a research topic through which I could make a concrete contribution to linguistic support for crisis management operations—by outlining a dedicated code of professional ethics for military interpreters? I was informed, however, that such a concrete objective would not be compatible with what is generally expected of academic research. I shall return to this point at the end of my speech.

The subject of my doctoral research is military interpreters. Most interpreters supporting military operations are civilians, and some are recruited directly from the area of operations. The concept of a *military interpreter* differs from that of a *civilian interpreter*—or a *locally recruited interpreter*—because military interpreters, by definition, serve within a military organisation, hold military rank, wear a uniform and carry a weapon. There are exceptions: depending on the mission, a military interpreter may wear civilian clothes, while a civilian interpreter may use military equipment such as body armour and a helmet. The most important distinction, however, is that a military interpreter is both a soldier and an interpreter and is therefore an integral part of the military organisation.

A second key concept in my research is *ethical action competence*. It combines two terms: ethicality and action competence. Ethical action competence forms part of the broader concept of *military action competence*. In simplified terms, military action competence refers to an individual soldier's ability to adapt, recover and retain the capability to act in complex and unpredictable situations. It comprises four dimensions—the physical, psychological, social and ethical dimensions—which together form an indivisible whole. The ethical dimension describes an individual soldier's ability to act consciously and responsibly. At a general level, ethicality refers to the principles, choices and actions that shape practical responses to ethical dilemmas. A soldier with ethical action competence is committed to his or her duties, understands different values and perspectives, and is capable of independent deliberation. I wish to emphasise that, although soldiers invariably operate as part of a larger unit, military action competence concerns the attributes of the individual soldier.

In my doctoral research, I examine military interpreters' ethical action competence. My aim is to identify the challenges that military interpreters' professional ethics will face in the future. In the dissertation, this research problem is divided into three sub-questions. First, what are the differences and similarities between the professional ethics of soldiers and interpreters? Second, what ethics-related expectations do users of military interpreters and military organisations have? Finally, what potential challenges will future developments in warfare pose to military interpreters' ethics?

My dissertation is article-based, and its constituent articles were completed at a measured pace over ten years. The research problem and research questions bring together the themes examined in the individual articles. I have heard it said that a hallmark of good research is the precision with which its scope is defined. I may therefore say with some satisfaction that the research questions I have just presented are considerably more precise than the broad reflections with which I began after returning from Afghanistan.

The results of my dissertation show that the professional ethics of soldiers and interpreters contain both similarities and differences. Ethics is important in both professions: each requires practitioners who are capable of ethical action and committed to ethical conduct. This is partly because *trust* is a central value in both. Yet the foundations and functions of trust differ. In interpreters' professional ethics, trust rests above all on a high level of professional competence. In addition to language proficiency and cultural knowledge, this competence is manifested, for example, in *impartiality* and *confidentiality*. For interpreters, trust is a form of professional capital: they must be trustworthy. In soldiers' professional ethics, by contrast, the principal underlying factor is *security*. This is expressed, for example, through *loyalty* and the fulfilment of one's *duties*. For soldiers, trust concerns the acceptance and management of the extreme *risks* inherent in the profession: they must be able to trust others.

Put simply, both the military and interpreting professions are founded on trust. Trust, however, is a broad and highly complex concept, and how it operates depends on a person's *positionality*. In other words, trust is shaped by factors such as loyalty, impartiality and identity. Its assessment must take account both of individual factors, such as personal relationships, and of external factors, such as a person's position within an organisation.

A second finding of the dissertation is that military interpreters' ethical action competence can be developed and supported by strengthening trust between military interpreters and their primary users. It can also be fostered through specialised ethics training and the development of *interpreter tactics*. By interpreter tactics, I mean all matters connected with the provision of linguistic support for military operations—for example, the recruitment of interpreters and translators, language proficiency testing, training, administration, leadership and equipment.

The third finding turns our attention to the future. The nature of warfare is constantly changing. New technologies enable *cognitive warfare*, extending the *battlespace* to the human mind and increasing the importance of language as an instrument of warfare. Language technology is already highly advanced, and it continues to develop at a breathtaking pace. Yet technology will not remove the need for linguistic support in military operations: such services will remain indispensable. New applications of language technology may nevertheless partly replace military interpreters in their traditional role while also enhancing their capabilities. As translation technologies advance, ethical considerations relating to linguistic support will become increasingly important. The rapid development of language technology therefore places new and greater demands on military interpreters' ethical action competence.

The principal conclusion of the dissertation is that the professional ethics of military interpreters—which I describe using the new term *military interpreter ethics*—consist of a contextual combination of military ethics and interpreting ethics, with an emphasis on military ethics. One example is that military interpreters, unlike civilian interpreters, are not bound to observe impartiality or confidentiality in their work.

Although this dissertation focuses on military interpreters, its findings and conclusions may also be useful to civilian and locally recruited interpreters serving within military organisations. The results may also be applied in contexts other than armed conflict. These include military crisis management operations and training missions, civilian crisis management operations, and humanitarian assistance operations.

Distinguished listeners! You may already have gathered from my lecture that the subject of my dissertation is close to me, and that the dissertation therefore bears the imprint of its author. Many of you may know what it is like to work in a completely unfamiliar linguistic environment, and many will undoubtedly have first-hand experience of working through an interpreter. I suspect, however, that only a few of you have experience of serving on a military mission in a hostile environment. In my research, I have therefore drawn daringly upon my military background while remaining attentive, at every stage, to the influences of my own positionality.

There is still room for improvement in the way Finland organises linguistic support, although there has been ample time and opportunity for corrective action. Finland, for example, participated in the crisis management operation in Afghanistan for almost twenty years. I argue that this would have provided sufficient time to train ordinary Finnish reservists to become proficient in Dari, Pashto and Uzbek, as well as in Afghan culture. Since the Afghanistan operation, new language-service needs have arisen—most recently as a result of the war raging in Ukraine.

No dedicated ethical code of conduct for military interpreters has yet been drawn up. Perhaps its time will come; this dissertation provides at least part of the theoretical foundation. Before such a code is drafted, however, military organisations should clearly define their own ethical requirements for military interpreters. These requirements should be defined separately by the armed forces of different nations, because military ethics vary between countries. Any future code should also take account of the demands created by the latest developments in language technology.

At the beginning, I asked what a crisis management force can do when it has no interpreters available. The answer is: regrettably little. Conflict is ultimately a human activity, and all human interaction requires a shared language. In the future, technology may increasingly translate, interpret and even make sense of meaning. Yet military interpreting involves far more than transmitting words from one language into another. It requires judgement and the assumption of responsibility: responsibility for ensuring that translated words provide a basis for sound and ethically sustainable decisions. For this reason, military interpreter ethics forms part of the ethical foundation of all multilingual military activity.

- - - - -

Translation from Finnish by Pekka Snellman.

© Pekka Snellman.