

Ethics of Translation and Interpretation: Thoughts on a Nigerian Case

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Abstract

In an increasingly globalised and multilingual world, translation and interpretation are essential mediatory tools for fostering communication across cultural and legal systems. Yet, these practices cannot thrive without being underpinned by ethical standards that guide conduct, quality, and responsibility. This paper explores the necessity of ethical principles in the professional practice of translation and interpretation, particularly within the context of the ECOWAS Court of Justice in Abuja, Nigeria. We contend that ethical behaviour is not merely a theoretical requirement but a functional necessity in international legal settings, where linguistic misrepresentation or breaches of confidentiality can carry severe institutional consequences. Drawing on a Nigerian case from the ECOWAS Court between 2004 and 2024, this study assesses the ethical codes implicitly and explicitly upheld by the Language Services Division of the Court. Methodologically, we adopt a combination of textual analysis and Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN), foregrounding both institutional documentation and professional reflections, while strictly observing boundaries around confidentiality and internal ethics. Our findings suggest that while translation ethics shares core principles globally, the Nigerian legal-linguistic context demands heightened sensitivity to cultural integration, institutional loyalty, and collaborative norms. Additionally, we argue that the evolution of ethical standards in translation is both historical and context-driven, shaped by colonial legacies, linguistic diversity, and the increasing relevance of technology in multilingual courts. In conclusion, we affirm that the sustainability of translation and interpretation in international institutions such as the ECOWAS Court rests on an evolving ethical culture. As such, we advocate for continual professional development, recognition of ethical excellence, and stronger alignment with international translation standards.

Keywords: Translation ethics, interpretation, ECOWAS, Nigeria, confidentiality, international law, multilingualism.

Introduction

Translation is fundamentally a manifestation of language contact, necessitating the interaction of at least two linguistic systems, each offering a distinct worldview and means of representing reality. In this light, translation is more than the mechanical act of substituting words from one language into another; it is a form of intercultural negotiation that facilitates mutual intelligibility between speakers of different linguistic backgrounds (Venuti, 2012). The centrality of translation to cross-cultural communication is especially apparent in settings such as international courts, where legal, cultural, and institutional norms intersect and where linguistic missteps can have far-reaching implications.

Scholars have long debated the nature and scope of translation. Nida and Taber (1974) offered a seminal definition: “reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style” (p. 12). Their emphasis on natural equivalence and semantic fidelity shaped early debates within modern translation studies. Around the same period, Catford (1965) conceptualised translation more structurally, as “the replacement of textual material in one language by equivalent textual material in another” (p. 20), laying the groundwork for linguistic approaches. Later, Newmark (1988) proposed that effective translation hinges upon achieving an “equivalent effect”, a notion stressing the importance of reader response. Yet, this goal is often complicated by cultural and linguistic asymmetries, which resist neat equivalence and require more nuanced strategies such as Newmark's “cultural equivalent” method.

Baker (1992) contributed significantly to this field, particularly in discussing the challenges of cultural specificity and non-equivalence. She emphasised the importance of substituting culturally-bound expressions in a way that preserves the communicative intent, if not the literal meaning, of the original text. This tension between fidelity and functionality is particularly pronounced in African contexts, where the multiplicity of languages, colonial histories, and sociopolitical structures introduce added layers of complexity into both translation and interpretation.

In the present work, we situate ourselves within this discourse by focusing on the ethical imperatives of translation and interpretation, drawing specifically from a Nigerian case at the ECOWAS Court of Justice. While the field of translation ethics is vast and often philosophically framed, our intervention is more applied. We ask: How are ethical principles lived, practised, and institutionalised within a particular international legal setting on the African continent? Our central argument is that translation and interpretation, particularly within legal institutions, must be anchored in a robust ethical framework that takes into account the linguistic, cultural, and professional contexts in which these services are delivered.

As we will show, these ethical principles are neither abstract ideals nor imported standards without local relevance. Rather, they are lived codes of conduct that have evolved over time within the ECOWAS Court, shaped by both institutional needs and the personal integrity of the translators and interpreters. These practitioners, often working under pressure and in politically sensitive situations, must navigate questions of confidentiality, accuracy, team solidarity, and institutional loyalty. Their work is often invisible, yet vital to the administration of justice and the perception of

fairness in a multilingual, multicultural legal environment (Koskinen, 2000; Cronin, 2003).

Our methodological approach combines textual analysis with the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) method, allowing us to draw on both documentary evidence and reflective practitioner experience. This dual approach helps to foreground the voices of those who perform the linguistic work of the Court, voices often left out of more abstract discussions on ethics. At the same time, our methodology is bounded by respect for confidentiality and institutional decorum—values that are, as we will argue, themselves ethical imperatives in the world of legal translation and interpretation.

In pursuing this line of inquiry, we aim not merely to describe what ethical translation practice looks like within the ECOWAS Court, but also to contribute to the broader debate on translation ethics in postcolonial and multilingual contexts. We propose that the Nigerian case can offer instructive lessons for other international institutions, especially those operating in linguistically diverse settings where colonial languages remain dominant in legal and administrative domains. The ECOWAS Court, with its trilingual policy (English, French, and Portuguese) and pan-West African jurisdiction, offers a rich site for examining how ethical norms are enacted, challenged, and sustained over time.

Literature Review

No human endeavour thrives sustainably without a coherent set of rules, whether implicit or codified. In this regard, ethics constitutes an indispensable framework that governs the conduct, responsibilities, and values of professionals across disciplines. Although the concept of ethics is wide-ranging—encompassing branches such as metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics—this study adopts a narrowed, professional interpretation aligned with translational and interpretive practice. According to Peter Singer (2025), ethics refers to "the discipline concerned with what is morally good and bad and morally right and wrong," and this definition remains foundational to our analysis. Singer also points out that ethical judgments often transcend personal morality and increasingly function as socially recognised frameworks of conduct. This shift is especially relevant in institutional settings like international courts, where moral ambiguity must be translated into procedural clarity. Translation and interpretation, as professions that mediate meaning and intent across languages and cultures, rely heavily on such ethical frameworks to ensure accountability, impartiality, and professional integrity.

African institutions have witnessed a growing awareness of the necessity for ethical oversight in research and professional practice. Mwaka, Tindana, and Bull (2023), for instance, highlight the growing institutionalisation of ethical review boards across Africa, designed to uphold research integrity, promote collaborative knowledge production, and challenge neocolonial power imbalances in global research. Similar conversations have emerged in translation ethics, particularly in African contexts where multilingualism, colonial legacies, and the marginalisation of indigenous knowledge systems complicate ethical questions. African scholars increasingly call for translation practices that resist epistemic erasure, promote equitable representation, and respond to power asymmetries between African and global languages (Bandia, 2008; Tymoczko, 2006). Translating African realities, therefore, is not merely a linguistic task but an ethical and political one—demanding acute cultural sensitivity and a commitment to anti-hegemonic epistemologies. Translators must grapple with the risk of distorting culturally embedded meanings, especially when translating into

dominant colonial languages such as English, French, or Portuguese. These ethical challenges underscore the need for translation protocols that foreground local voices, encourage participatory translation processes, and resist reductive representations.

Scholarly interest in translation ethics has deepened considerably over the past two decades. Pym's (2012) *On Translator Ethics* advocates for a model of cooperation and mediation rather than rigid fidelity or invisibility. He presents translators as cultural agents who must balance loyalty to the source text with sensitivity to the communicative needs of the target audience. This idea is echoed in Koskinen's (2000) ethnographic study of European Union translators, where she reveals how institutional translators constantly negotiate between professional codes and real-world institutional pressures. Lambert (2014), meanwhile, probes the ethical quandaries posed by machine translation, digital platforms, and the increasing commodification of language work. As machine translation continues to disrupt traditional models of linguistic labour, questions surrounding authorship, consent, and textual ownership take on renewed urgency. The ethical challenges posed by these technologies are not merely hypothetical; they are embedded in daily professional choices regarding confidentiality, accountability, and representation.

The concept of ethics within translation is also entangled with broader philosophical paradigms. Hinman (2013), for example, categorises ethical frameworks along deontological (duty-based) and teleological (consequence-based) lines, while also exploring virtue ethics, rights-based models, and cultural relativism. These paradigms have important implications for translation: a deontological approach might prioritise accuracy and fidelity to the source text, while a teleological perspective could justify adaptation for communicative impact or social justice. Cronin (2003) brings these debates into sharp focus in *Translation and Globalization*, where he calls for an activist model of translation. In a globalised world marked by linguistic hierarchies and cultural inequities, Cronin argues that translators must engage ethically with the socio-political conditions surrounding their work. For him, translation ethics extend beyond professional deontology to include a moral obligation to marginalised cultures and communities. He therefore posits an "activist dimension to translation" that emphasises ethical engagement with power and politics in both national and transnational contexts.

Pym (2012) introduces a useful binary in the ethical discourse: *déontologie*, referring to codified professional ethics (such as codes of conduct), and *éthique*, which concerns more abstract philosophical principles like justice and fairness. While most professional translation organisations adopt the former—focusing on rules related to accuracy, confidentiality, and client relationships—scholars like Cronin and Koskinen urge for integration of the latter. This broader ethical stance recognises that translators often work within asymmetrical power structures and are thus compelled to make choices that are not only linguistically but also politically and ethically charged. In this sense, the translator's responsibilities extend beyond immediate stakeholders (clients, agencies, institutions) to encompass broader societal implications, including issues of representation, access, and justice. These overlapping layers of responsibility place translators and interpreters at a critical juncture between linguistic professionalism and cultural advocacy.

In African contexts, translation ethics must also reckon with colonial and postcolonial tensions. As Bandia (2008) observes, the translation of African texts into colonial languages risks reproducing the epistemic violence of colonisation unless accompanied by a critical ethical consciousness. Translation here becomes a site of

resistance as well as mediation. Thus, the act of translating is both ethically fraught and politically significant—bearing the weight of historical injustices and the promise of cultural recognition. This tension is particularly relevant in institutions such as the ECOWAS Court, which operate in colonial European languages but serve African populations. The ethical responsibility of translators in such settings cannot be reduced to professional codes alone; it must engage with questions of linguistic justice, cultural preservation, and institutional equity.

In sum, the literature suggests that translation ethics is a multifaceted domain involving intersecting philosophical, professional, and political considerations. From the codified codes of practice adopted by international organisations to the activist imperatives advocated by scholars, ethics in translation is both a discipline and a practice—a guide to what translators ought to do and a reflection of what they actually do under complex conditions. In our view, this layered understanding forms the ideal theoretical backdrop for analysing how translators and interpreters at the ECOWAS Court of Justice have negotiated ethical dilemmas between 2004 and 2024. It also provides a conceptual framework for considering how home-grown ethical cultures can evolve organically within African institutions, offering valuable lessons for global translation studies.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in *functionalist* approaches to translation theory, which emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a response to earlier linguistic and equivalence-based models. Functionalism asserts that the primary determinant of translation strategy should be the *purpose* (or *Skopos*) of the target text in its sociocultural context (Nord, 1997; Vermeer, 1989). As such, it shifts the focus from strict fidelity to the source text toward the communicative function of the translation within its intended audience and institutional setting. This is especially relevant in legal and diplomatic institutions such as the ECOWAS Court of Justice, where translations are not literary artefacts but working documents that must be legally precise, culturally appropriate, and pragmatically functional.

Hans Vermeer, who introduced the Skopos theory, argued that the goal or function of the target text should govern translation decisions rather than any presumed equivalence between source and target languages (Vermeer, 1989). In practice, this means that a translation may diverge from the form or even the content of the original if such adaptations better serve the needs of the target audience. Katharina Reiss, working in tandem with Vermeer, contributed the concept of *text typology*, suggesting that the nature of the source text—informative, expressive, or operative—should influence the translator's approach (Reiss & Vermeer, 2013). In legal contexts, this typology is crucial: texts are primarily *informative* and *operative*, requiring terminological precision, consistency, and clarity to enable correct legal interpretation by multilingual judges, lawyers, and court users.

In the ECOWAS Court, translation is not merely a linguistic operation but a procedural necessity. Documents must be rendered accurately across English, French, and Portuguese—the official languages of the institution—in a way that ensures equal access to justice, preserves procedural fairness, and aligns with the communicative norms of each language community. Therefore, functionalism provides an ideal framework for analysing the ethical and professional obligations of translators and interpreters in such a setting. The communicative *purpose* of each translation—whether

to inform, adjudicate, or deliberate—is closely tied to the Court’s ability to function effectively as a multilingual legal institution.

Christiane Nord (1997) further developed functionalist theory by introducing the concept of *translation briefs*, which instruct the translator on the intended purpose and audience of a given task. She also introduced the idea of *loyalty*, a key ethical concept that balances the translator's responsibility to the source text, the target audience, and the client or commissioning institution. Loyalty does not mean blind obedience; rather, it demands that translators make their decisions transparently and in consultation with stakeholders when necessary. In our case study, loyalty becomes particularly significant, as the translators and interpreters at the ECOWAS Court must navigate the demands of legal fidelity, institutional loyalty, and multilingual comprehensibility. Their decisions often influence judicial outcomes, institutional credibility, and even the public’s perception of legal fairness across member states.

This theoretical orientation also helps explain the specific ethical tensions inherent in court translation. For example, the *function* of a translated judgment differs from that of internal memos or procedural notices. A judicial ruling must preserve the formal tone, legal reasoning, and binding character of the original decision, whereas an internal communication might prioritise clarity and brevity. Functionalist theory therefore encourages translators to assess not only the linguistic features of the source text but also the broader institutional purpose the translation serves. This is particularly critical in ECOWAS, where legal terminologies differ across Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone traditions, and where judicial translation must navigate those divergences without compromising meaning or authority.

In this study, we apply functionalist theory not simply as an abstract frame but as an analytical lens for evaluating the ethical practices observed within the Language Services Division of the ECOWAS Court. We argue that translators’ ethical responsibilities—such as maintaining confidentiality, ensuring accuracy, fostering team collaboration, and honouring institutional loyalty—are all rooted in the functional demands placed upon them by the institution. In this sense, functionalism bridges the gap between theoretical principles and lived professional practice. It allows us to evaluate whether the translators’ and interpreters’ decisions serve the Court’s broader objectives of justice, equity, and multilingual inclusion.

Ethical Practices in Context

Confidentiality remains one of the most fundamental ethical principles in both translation and interpretation, especially within institutional and legal settings (Taibi & Ozolins, 2016). At the ECOWAS Court of Justice, this principle is not treated as an abstract guideline but is deeply embedded in daily operations. Translators are required to emboss their initials on every translated page of official documentation, creating a direct link between the professional and their work. This practice, while simple in design, exerts a significant psychological and ethical effect: it reinforces individual accountability and deters negligence. From a functionalist perspective (Nord, 1997), such measures are aligned with the “loyalty” requirement, where translators must act responsibly toward all stakeholders—employer, audience, and text. In a legal context, breaches of confidentiality could undermine the legitimacy of the court and jeopardise ongoing proceedings, hence the strict institutional emphasis. It is therefore unsurprising that even internal staff members may be denied access to certain documents, highlighting how confidentiality operates not only vertically (between court and public) but also horizontally within the institution.

Translation and interpretation in international institutions are rarely solitary tasks; rather, they involve high degrees of collaboration and shared linguistic responsibility. At the ECOWAS Court, translators and interpreters are expected to conform to unified terminological standards and consult one another regularly regarding new or ambiguous expressions. This practice fosters a spirit of collegiality and professional mutualism, echoing what Pym (2001) terms “cooperative ethics” in translation—an ethics that prioritises mediation and teamwork over individualism. Given the multilingual nature of international law and the diversity of legal systems represented in ECOWAS member states, terminological consensus is essential for consistency across judgments and legal opinions. The shared objective is to produce high-quality translations that are both legally sound and accessible to jurists from varying legal backgrounds. Such team collaboration, while often informal, constitutes a form of tacit ethical governance that sustains both interpersonal trust and institutional integrity. It also facilitates knowledge exchange, allowing less experienced staff to benefit from peer support and contributing to continuous professional development.

Accuracy, while conceptually straightforward, is one of the most contested and challenging ethical standards in legal translation. It does not merely refer to linguistic fidelity but encompasses conceptual clarity, legal equivalence, and contextual appropriateness (Sarcevic, 1997). At the ECOWAS Court, the translation output is evaluated not only by the Language Services Division but also by legal officers and judges—many of whom are native users of the Court’s official languages. This adds a layer of institutional quality control that, while external to the translation unit, strengthens the professional rigour of the final output. As Nord (1991) notes, translation quality must be judged according to the expectations and functional requirements of the target audience—in this case, multilingual legal experts. Furthermore, the process of internal peer review among translators allows for divergent views on translation choices to be debated constructively, which enhances the final product and deepens professional competencies. Although “quality” may remain a somewhat subjective criterion, especially in legal translation where multiple target-language versions are produced, the Court’s structured evaluation system ensures that standards are not left to individual discretion alone.

A notable feature of the ECOWAS Court’s approach to translation ethics is its institutional monitoring of individual productivity. A clear quota is set for the number of pages each translator must produce monthly, and translators are required to submit regular reports justifying any shortfall. This system not only enforces discipline and consistency but also aligns with broader ethical expectations of accountability and diligence in professional practice (Koskinen, 2000). However, such a system must balance quantity with quality—a dilemma frequently discussed in translation studies, where the pressures of institutional timeframes can sometimes conflict with best practices for terminological accuracy and cultural nuance. While high productivity is commendable, the phenomenon of “translation fatigue” can impact long-term output quality, especially in high-stakes legal contexts. Ethical practice, therefore, involves self-regulation as well as institutional oversight, requiring translators to manage their workflow intelligently without compromising professional standards. This balance between individual responsibility and institutional expectation reflects the hybrid nature of ethical agency in international legal translation.

The ethical landscape of the ECOWAS Court is further shaped by the symbolic and procedural ritual of oath swearing. Before taking up their duties, all staff—including translators and interpreters—are required to publicly recite a formal oath pledging loyalty, discretion, and conscientious service to the Court. This ritual, documented in

institutional archives and reinforced by Article 17(2) of the Court's Rules of Procedure, functions not only as a legal formality but also as a moral anchor. The oath serves to internalise ethical expectations, transforming them from external regulations into personal commitments. From an anthropological perspective, such rites of passage mark a transition into a community of practice governed by shared values (Wenger, 1998). For translators, who are often 'invisible' actors in the legal process, the oath gives weight to their role, affirming that their work is not merely technical but moral, with implications for justice and institutional legitimacy. Moreover, the fact that this oath binds even retired professionals underlines the enduring ethical responsibility carried by those who have served in the Court's Language Services Division.

A unique but essential ethical principle at the ECOWAS Court is the notion of *corporate ownership* of all translated and interpreted content. While translators are required to mark their work with their initials for accountability, this identification does not imply authorship in the traditional intellectual sense. Rather, the output is institutionally owned—a product of service rather than of individual creativity. This distinction is ethically significant because it discourages personal ego, promotes team-based professional humility, and aligns with the institutional mission of the Court. Nord (2005) underscores that in institutional translation settings, particularly in legal environments, the translator's role is one of service to the communicative purpose, not self-expression. This ethic of corporate authorship further cultivates a sense of collective responsibility, which is crucial when translation errors could have serious legal implications. As former ECOWAS President Her Lordship Awa Nana Daboya noted in the 2009–2011 Annual Report, the collective survival and success of the Court ultimately depend on the contributions of all its staff—including its translators and interpreters—as custodians of institutional credibility.

Loyalty to the institution is a profound yet often under-explored dimension of ethical translation practice. At the ECOWAS Court, translators and interpreters are expected not only to serve the institution with technical competence but also to uphold its image, internal morale, and long-term vision. This goes beyond silence over internal flaws; it implies proactive involvement in problem-solving and a commitment to the Court's evolving mission. Former Vice-President of the Court, Justice Benfeito Mosso Ramos, emphasised this during a staff training programme, urging employees to focus less on complaints and more on constructive service. From an ethical standpoint, this aligns with Pym's (2001) principle of translator responsibility not only to the immediate client but to broader social structures and institutional values. In the face of occasional imperfections—as exist in any human institution—this loyalty ethic promotes a stabilising professionalism, where criticism is internal and reform-minded rather than publicly destructive. Such loyalty becomes particularly vital in international institutions that straddle postcolonial linguistic divides and serve as symbols of regional legal integration.

While much of the ethical discourse in translation focuses on obligations and duties, recognition of ethical excellence is equally crucial for fostering a culture of sustained professionalism. At the ECOWAS Court, a system of performance evaluations exists, but the manuscript rightly suggests going further by instituting formal rewards—prizes, commendations, and public acknowledgements—for ethical behaviour and exemplary professional conduct. Such measures serve a dual purpose: they motivate individuals to uphold high ethical standards and institutional loyalty, while also cultivating a culture of internal peer recognition. This mirrors calls in the literature for *positive ethics*, which emphasises virtue cultivation alongside rule observance (Slote, 2010; Hinman, 2013). Moreover, within a diverse, multicultural professional

environment such as ECOWAS, acknowledging staff members who excel in teamwork, confidentiality, and respect for institutional norms also models inclusive professionalism. These reward systems, if designed thoughtfully, can act as soft-power mechanisms that reinforce the harder, codified rules of conduct—creating a more holistic ethical environment.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodological framework that integrates textual analysis with the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) approach. These complementary methods were selected to capture both the institutional and experiential dimensions of translation ethics within the ECOWAS Court of Justice. Textual analysis was employed to examine publicly available documents, such as Court bulletins, official reports, and provisions of the Rules of Procedure. These materials offer rich insights into the formal ethical structures guiding translation and interpretation practices. Textual analysis, particularly in legal and institutional contexts, is a valuable tool for revealing embedded power structures, norms, and expectations (Fairclough, 1995; Krippendorff, 2018). By analysing the Court's documentation, we were able to extract the codified ethical expectations placed upon language professionals, as well as the institutional ethos underlying those expectations.

In parallel, the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) method was used to integrate the lived experiences of the authors—both of whom have worked within or alongside the Court's Language Services Division. As Nash and Bradley (2011) argue, SPN offers a powerful mechanism for linking personal experience with broader theoretical frameworks and institutional realities. Rather than dismissing subjectivity, this method foregrounds it as a legitimate site of knowledge production, especially within professional contexts. In our case, reflections on internal practices—team interactions, confidentiality procedures, and personal ethical dilemmas—help to reveal the practical consequences of institutional codes of conduct. Importantly, no confidential or privileged information was inappropriately disclosed; all insights shared fall within acceptable academic and ethical boundaries. The use of SPN allows us to explore how abstract ethical principles manifest in daily professional decisions and interpersonal dynamics within the Court.

The combination of these two methods allows for a layered understanding of translation ethics that bridges the gap between institutional structures and individual agency. Whereas textual analysis provides a macro view of institutional expectations, SPN brings forth the micro-level realities of those who interpret and implement those norms. This methodological pairing is particularly apt for a study situated in an international legal institution, where official protocols often interact unpredictably with human subjectivities and professional instincts. Furthermore, given the sensitive nature of judicial environments, this dual method allows for rigorous inquiry without violating the confidentiality provisions that govern the Court's internal affairs. As Reiss and Vermeer (2013) suggest in the context of translation studies, ethical scholarship must itself observe the ethics it seeks to analyse—an insight we have upheld throughout the research process.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations inherent in this approach. Access to some institutional documents was necessarily restricted due to confidentiality agreements, and the reflective narratives are, by design, shaped by the subjectivities of the authors. While this may be seen as a methodological constraint, it also enriches the analysis by adding context-specific, experiential nuance. In line with

qualitative research principles, we do not claim objectivity in the positivist sense; instead, we assert transparency, reflexivity, and methodological coherence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical clearance was not required as no human subjects were interviewed, nor was privileged internal information solicited or used. Our methodological design therefore balances empirical depth with ethical responsibility, aligning with best practices in both translation studies and qualitative research ethics.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the ethical dimensions underpinning the work of translators and interpreters at the ECOWAS Court of Justice in Abuja, Nigeria, within a time frame spanning two decades (2004–2024). Drawing on textual analysis and the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) approach, we examined how professional codes and personal commitments intersect in a high-stakes multilingual legal environment. Our findings affirm that ethical standards in translation and interpretation are not merely external regulations but internalised practices shaped by institutional culture, team dynamics, and the gravity of judicial responsibility. These ethical practices—ranging from confidentiality and teamwork to institutional loyalty and output quality—have matured into an indigenous framework of ethical conduct that reflects both global best practices and local adaptations. In this regard, the ECOWAS Court serves as an illustrative case of how African institutions can develop robust professional cultures without relying solely on external models. It also contributes to the broader scholarly discourse on translation ethics by providing empirical evidence of how ethical norms evolve in response to sociolinguistic complexity, postcolonial legacies, and institutional mandates.

Moreover, the research reinforces the importance of adopting a *functionalist* lens when analysing translation ethics in legal institutions. The Skopos, or purpose, of translation in the ECOWAS Court is inseparable from its legal, political, and communicative functions. Translators and interpreters are not neutral transmitters of content but active agents in the pursuit of justice, tasked with rendering authoritative texts accessible across linguistic divides. As Cronin (2003) and Nord (1997) argue, ethical responsibility in translation must extend beyond deontological codes to include socio-political awareness and a commitment to institutional goals. In this context, the ECOWAS Language Services Division demonstrates how professional ethics can be operationalised in the everyday routines and symbolic gestures—such as oath-swearing and document signing—that structure institutional life. These practices not only sustain the internal integrity of the Court but also bolster its external legitimacy in the eyes of the wider ECOWAS community and international observers.

Our conclusion also points toward a broader implication: the importance of embedding ethics into the professional identity of translators and interpreters working in postcolonial, multilingual legal systems. As Pym (2012) suggests, ethical mediation is at the heart of intercultural communication, especially in domains where power, law, and language converge. This is particularly critical in African legal institutions, where translation is often the medium through which legal discourse is democratised and rights are rendered legible across languages. In the absence of ethical rigour, translation can easily become a site of exclusion, misrepresentation, or institutional failure. Conversely, where ethics are embedded and practiced, as seen in the ECOWAS Court, translation becomes a vehicle for justice, inclusion, and institutional continuity.

In sum, the translators and interpreters of the ECOWAS Court have cultivated an ethical culture that is both functional and aspirational. It is functional in that it ensures the Court's daily operations run smoothly in three official languages—English, French, and Portuguese. Yet it is also aspirational, reflecting a collective commitment to professional excellence, institutional loyalty, and the ethical ideals of fairness and transparency. These language professionals, though often behind the scenes, are essential actors in the life of the Court and, by extension, in the promotion of regional legal integration and human rights. Their ethical standards, evolving over time and rooted in both policy and personal conscience, provide a model for other multilingual institutions in Africa and beyond. As translation studies continues to engage with globalisation, postcolonialism, and institutional discourse, the ECOWAS experience offers an important case of ethical practice in action—grounded, localised, and enduring.

Recommendations

Given that the ECOWAS Court operates exclusively in colonial European languages—English, French, and Portuguese—it is vital to ensure that language professionals maintain an exceptionally high level of proficiency in these languages. Although these are not native tongues for most West African translators and interpreters, the standards expected of them are no less rigorous. To bridge this gap, the Court should expand its periodic training programmes, particularly immersion-based linguistic development in native-speaking environments such as France, England, and Portugal. Research in applied linguistics consistently shows that language immersion enhances not only fluency but also sensitivity to cultural and idiomatic nuances (House, 2015; Gile, 2009). Such exposure would sharpen translators' grasp of legal register and professional style—particularly important in judicial translation, where ambiguity can have severe legal consequences. A more systematic and well-funded approach to immersion training will significantly improve both the quality and consistency of output across the Court's three working languages.

Recognising ethical excellence in translation and interpretation can serve as a powerful motivational tool and reinforce the values the institution seeks to uphold. While performance evaluations are already in place, the Court could go further by instituting annual ethical awards or commendations for outstanding conduct. These awards might include categories such as confidentiality, teamwork, accuracy, and professional discipline. Recognition serves not only the individual but also the institution, fostering a culture of internal accountability and ethical pride. As suggested by Slote (2010), moral development is often encouraged more effectively by positive reinforcement than by punitive codes alone. Publicly acknowledging such contributions within Court bulletins or staff assemblies can have a lasting impact on morale and performance. Ethical recognition becomes particularly meaningful in diverse multicultural environments where shared values must be constantly affirmed through institutional practices.

Although the ECOWAS Court benefits from clear institutional rules and procedures, its ethical codes could be further localised to address the region's unique sociolinguistic and postcolonial realities. Ethical concerns in African translation contexts often differ from those in European or North American institutions due to historical marginalisation of local languages, legal pluralism, and sociopolitical dynamics (Bandia, 2008). The Court could consider convening an internal ethics committee tasked with developing a supplementary guideline that contextualises global ethical standards within the ECOWAS legal and cultural framework. This

would help bridge the gap between universal codes and local practices, thereby increasing relevance and adherence. Moreover, such a document could serve as a resource for new staff, orienting them not only to the technical requirements of the role but also to the moral ethos expected within the Court. This kind of institutional self-reflection would align with the evolving discourse on decolonising translation ethics and increasing inclusivity in professional codes (Tymoczko, 2006).

To further elevate its ethical and professional standards, the ECOWAS Court could benefit from stronger partnerships with other regional and international institutions. Establishing structured exchanges with the European Court of Justice, the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, or even language departments within the United Nations, would allow for benchmarking, skill-sharing, and ethical dialogue. These partnerships could include joint workshops, collaborative publications, and reciprocal training programmes. Such exchanges would not only expose ECOWAS translators to global best practices but also give visibility to the region's evolving ethical culture in translation. As Koskinen (2000) notes, ethics in institutional translation are shaped not only internally but also through networks of professional practice. These relationships could enhance the international profile of the ECOWAS Court and position it as a model of African legal multilingualism and ethical leadership.

While the working languages of the Court are European, there remains a broader ethical imperative to ensure that public-facing translations—especially those related to human rights, public interest cases, and social media communication—are accessible to a wider demographic. Nigeria and the broader ECOWAS region are home to hundreds of indigenous languages, and while it is unrealistic to accommodate all in official proceedings, strategic outreach translations in major regional languages (e.g., Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Wolof, Akan) could significantly enhance public engagement and transparency. This would demonstrate ethical responsiveness to linguistic diversity and align with global principles of linguistic justice (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2001). Moreover, it would symbolically affirm the value of African languages in legal and civic discourse, countering the colonial legacy of exclusion. Pilot programmes in this direction could be initiated through partnerships with universities or translation associations across ECOWAS member states.

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