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Felipillo

This month, let's head back to Incan times to meet **Felipillo**, a controversial figure in our sometimes speckled professional history. While I'll admit he is not a source of inspiration nor a model to be emulated by interpreters, perhaps even this "**Peruvian Malinche**" (traitor) can offer us some valuable lessons.

If there was a code of ethics for interpreters during the Spanish conquest, Felipillo paid no heed. He was not particularly qualified to interpret. **He spoke neither Spanish nor Quechua natively**, but interpreted between them anyway. Felipillo had conflicts of interest left and right. While he was interpreting between the conquistador [Pizarro](#) and [Atahualpa](#), the Inca king, he began having an affair with one of Atahualpa's concubines (so much for impartiality!) **Felipillo was from a rival tribe**, and therefore not a fan of the Incas to begin with. Due to Felipillo's many mistakes, Atahualpa said unflattering things about the Bible, the Spanish and their religion, leading them to kill the king. Many



mourn this loss even today, blaming Felipillo for the Inca ruler's death. Others believe the Spanish would have killed Atahualpa no matter what.

However, **Felipillo betrayed the Spanish too**. During [Almagro](#)'s expedition of Chile, Felipillo reportedly encouraged the local tribes to attack the Spanish. Almagro found out, and is said to have ordered a brutal death for Felipillo, tearing his body apart with horses.

So, **was Felipillo a traitor?** To be a traitor implies that a person should be loyal to one side versus another, the very opposite of what interpreters are meant to be. But in times of war, the boundaries blur. Felipillo was not loyal to either side, but was perhaps loyal to his own people, a minority indigenous group that had less

power than the Incas did. Other, lesser-known interpreters at the time actually pledged much stronger allegiance to the Spanish. None of them are viewed so negatively as Felipillo in the eyes of history. One thing is certain -- Felipillo was far from impartial.

This story is relevant even now. For a modern-day example, we only need to consider current global conflicts. Earlier this year, an Afghan interpreter [attempted to kill](#) a U.S. military officer in Afghanistan. Was the interpreter impartial? Obviously not. Interpreters are human beings, and therefore not immune to error, and certainly prone to their own internal struggles. How can interpreters **avoid a conflict of interests during a time of conflict**? History -- and the latest news -- show us that for many interpreters, it is neither simple nor easy.