

Creating an Interpreter's Identity by Deconstructing One's Own

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Introduction

Interpreting is often called a trade, as in, a profession requiring special skill or ability one has to learn and hone, a skill that cannot be as equally and masterfully acquired by others. A famous saying claims that an interpreter is “jack of all trades, master of none.” Many interpreters love and repeat this saying, which, though seemingly a bit harsh and self-deprecating, has a grain of truth to it. Interpreters need to have excellent general knowledge, however, they do not have the time nor the possibility to study every topic in depth. A general overview and a propensity to quickly grasp new concepts, learn their basic foundation and swiftly adapt it into one's way of thinking is a necessity for interpreters.

Overall the study of interpreting is mainly concerned with the core of the work as such, that is the study of languages and the study of interpreting as a skill. Interpreters learn how to master their languages at an excellent level, they are instructed to analyze written and spoken texts and look for the core ideas and transpose the underlying messages into the target language. Studying interpretation also encompasses expanding the knowledge of languages, political, social, and cultural situation and closely learning about the different hot button topics of the day (i.e. environment, agriculture, technology etc.). Students are then taught different methods and techniques of interpreting, such as the salami technique, generalization, simplification, omission, or explanation (Jones, 1998). Amongst these different focuses of interpreting studies, one particular idea tends to be slightly glossed over, if not entirely omitted. Who should an interpreter be as a person? How are they expected to speak and deliver their interpretation?

1 Interpreter's identity

Essentially an interpreter's identity is created by their voice. In some contexts, as in consecutive interpreting, gestures and mild facial expressions may help an interpreter convey meanings, but more or less who they are and who the audience identifies them as is their voice, especially in simultaneous interpretation. A person's way of speaking, their vocabulary, their idiolect, their way of structuring sentences and text, their unique set of gestures and other aspects of their style of communication create their identity. It is an inseparable part of their personality and it is true to who they are. It is something personal and as unique and particular as one's fingerprints or the color and the structure of their iris.

In order to be an interpreter, one must assume a new identity. It is an ideal a trainee aspires for. An interpreter has to fulfill certain expectations when it comes to

their delivery of interpretation. This high standard of delivery is not innate and has to be learned. Therefore, we could say that the person has to build a new identity for themselves. They can no longer afford to speak just as they usually do, and that does not simply refer to slang, but to the overall system of one's communication. They have to create a professional manner of speaking and delivery, much like politicians do.

A trainee interpreter has to first identify themselves and mark some aspects of their delivery as positive and desirable and some as negative and in need of improvement. This way they start working on their new persona. This new identity comprises many aspects.

The jack of all trades has to gain the trust of their audience, by using all their skills to convince the listener that they are actually the master of the "trade" (i.e. the topic in question). An interpreter must be confident, but not excessively, they have to be convincing, believable and sound interesting (and in a way interested). They have to work with their voice to communicate these newly-gained aspects of their identity. They have to have excellent level and command of the language they are speaking. In a way, we could liken them to a radio presenter, who is expected to have good control of their voice, good language skills and has to keep the listeners interested. And similarly to a radio presenter, all of this has to be done using the interpreter's voice.

This new identity is multi-layered and complex. As interpreting can be often unpredictable, this identity is at times concrete and present and at times it is an ideal representation of how the interpreter should be perceived. A trainee has to achieve the highest standard possible in order to effectively handle problematic situations and not lose face. While struggling with obstacles and problems in interpretation, their identity of a confident, language proficient interpreter can help them overcome these obstacles and give a good performance despite problems. Creating an image of this identity is crucial in succeeding in the market and delivering excellent performance.

1.1 Identifying oneself

To start creating a new identity, a budding interpreter must first meticulously and consciously analyze themselves and their strengths and weaknesses. This happens based on a detailed analysis (Melicherčíková, 2014, 29). It undeniably requires a high level of self-perception, self-awareness and self-assessment, which is deemed by Machová to be a very successful technique for improvement (2015), and the desire to improve. The trainee must be as eager to work on their weakness as they are eager to capitalize on their strengths. Even with the best ability to observe and correct oneself, a trainee still needs the guidance of an experienced interpreter, preferably one that specializes in training interpreters.

The trainee along with their mentor must identify the trainee's strengths and weaknesses. They decide which aspects of the trainee's delivery and skills are to be

kept and which need to be replaced, enhanced or worked on. They deconstruct the trainee's identity and organize it into small building blocks, which are then rearranged to create a new persona.

In order to get the best results possible, the mentor needs to give constructive criticism and offer solutions and techniques to achieve the goals set by both the interpreter and their teacher. The trainee must be open to criticism and ready to confront their flaws and turn them into strengths. This may be very difficult for many students as such criticism, though delivered by a professional, is still very personal. After all, it means criticizing something that is part of the very nature of an individual, something deeply inscribed into one's personality. Trainees may find it difficult to work on their speech and may feel reluctant to change their old ways. Nonetheless, it is important to focus on this goal and understand that it is something all interpreters need to go through. Very few have the innate talents of excellent public speakers combined with great command of languages and the ability to interpret without any previous effort or training.

Once the trainee knows what they have to work on, they need to constantly focus on improving while under the supervision of their teacher. Say, their main problem is often resorting to colloquialisms, not respecting the register. Or they have a tendency to repeat themselves. Throughout the rest of their training they have to focus specifically on these bad habits and try to eliminate them.

An interpreter needs to understand that these flaws are not condemnable transgressions and that these tendencies are absolutely acceptable in regular speech. However, as mentioned earlier, an interpreter strives for an ideal and should represent high language culture. Therefore, most trainees have to work on their speech and delivery to maintain this high standard. It is a continuous process and it means constant searching for perfection. Makarová compares becoming an interpreter to getting a driver's license, reasoning that it needs constant effort and work (2004, 5).

2 Voice

Once the trainee's weaknesses are identified they can start working on them in order to improve their performance. The most common issues connected with the interpreter's identity are divided into three areas in this paper: voice, language and text structure, and believability. An interpreter must get used to public speaking and "like an actor, a talk-show host or a news announcer, must learn how to use his or her voice" (Nolan, 2005, 8).

Voice may be one of the most important aspects of interpreting which are often overlooked in teaching. To put it simply an interpreter should sound like an ideal radio presenter or an actor. They should speak the correct standard of the language, have a broad vocabulary, they should articulate clearly, sound professional and they should use their voice and intonation to convey shades of meanings and to catch the attention of the listener.

First and foremost an interpreter needs to have correct, thorough and clear pronunciation, avoiding any deviations from the standard. Regional and local variants of pronunciation may be acceptable depending on the language culture of every language, as norms may vary across countries and cultures (Garzone, 2002, 115). The interpreter should articulate clearly but not excessively. Neither extreme is advisable: nor sounding like you are chatting with friends over a pint of beer, neither speaking like a Shakespearean actor. As an interpreter, you have to sound natural, articulate clearly and have correct pronunciation.

Next the melody and intonation. It often happens that interpreters naturally place stress on words as is usual in their language, but they forget to place stress in a sentence and fail to create melody. It may be because it is the way the interpreter speaks naturally, or because concentrate on the content of the speech or because interpreting feels automatic for them. Robotic voice with no intonation is not desirable. Interpreters always have to remember to use melody and avoid monotony. In the sentences and in the speech as such, they have to emphasize what is deemed crucial. An interpreter must also “pronounce” pauses and commas to structure sentences. They should always remember to finish sentences not only grammatically and logically, but also with their intonation and a small pause.

They say one should not judge a book by its cover. But often it is the cover that often sells. In this case, a lack of voice modulation, monotonous voice may ruin the experience for the listener, even though in terms of quality, the interpreting is excellent. Monotonous speaking should always be avoided. Interpreters always have to use melody in their sentences, regardless of how they speak naturally. Melodic sentences and speech should become an inherent part of their new identity.

Intonation can also be tricky. Often while the speaker emphasizes certain words and phrases in their own language, the interpreter might follow suit and unwittingly transpose foreign intonation into the target language. So rather than simply copying stress from the source language, the interpreter has to think what is most naturally emphasized in the target language in order to convey the same meaning. Listening to quality news on the radio may be one of the ways to learn the most natural intonation of a language.

Intonation is also closely connected with believability. Hesitating intonation, akin to those of interrogative sentences should be avoided when the speaker is not asking a question. It may distress the listener and make him doubt the interpreter’s skills. If the interpreter is unsure and finds out they have said something incorrect, they can always correct themselves. But if they do not have the correct version, there is no need to put hesitation into their speech. It is neither helpful, nor constructive. Often, this is a question of confidence. Many interpreters interpret perfectly, but they feel insecure and this insecurity then permeates their performance. Hesitation or lack of certainty should not be present in the voice of an interpreter.

With intonation an interpreter may also convey slight shades of meaning and the intention of the speaker. The speaker may be speaking sarcastically, indicating

disapproval with their voice or telling a joke. It is important to be able to identify the intention of the speaker (Müglová, 2009, 126) by recognizing these different ways of intonation in the source language and analyzing the spoken text. Is the speaker serious? Are they joking? Are they conveying anger or disappointment? All that may translate into intonation. During very emotional speeches it is advisable to introduce those emotions into one's interpretation in moderation, but not in their entirety, in order to maintain a certain professional distance from the content of the speech.

Vocal tics are another common problem trainees struggle with. They are best identified in tandem as they are done unwittingly and the interpreter themselves might never really hear them in their own speech. Therefore, they should record themselves and analyze the recording later, or their teacher should point out every vocal tic they tend to use. A gesture to signalize all the "uhs" and "ehs" and other unnecessary sounds they make may eventually do the trick.

Tempo is another important aspect in of an interpreter's identity to focus on. Though highly dependent on the original speaker, the pace of interpreting should be more or less consistent, quick enough to avoid unnecessary pauses and silences, but also slow enough to let the information sink in. Understandably, this changes with the speaker, but if possible, it is best to try and speak at the same pace the whole time. Excessive silences might reflect badly on the interpreter, even though they may just stem from the speaker's hesitation or slow delivery. In this case, filler words and expressions with no actual informational value may be useful (such as "And next, I would like to say something about...").

The issues of vocal performance may seem trivial and one might say that no interpreter in their right mind would ever commit any of these errors. But the truth is these imperfections, and not only the ones in this chapter, happen subconsciously and quite often the trainees are not aware of them. That is why it is crucial to either enlist the help of a mentor and to record oneself whilst interpreting for later analysis. Creating the "new identity" or "alter ego" is about actively and consciously perfecting one's oral delivery and oratory skills.

3 Language and text structure

As the phonetical aspect of language was focused on in the previous chapter, this chapter mainly focuses on the the vocabulary and the syntactical aspect of spoken text.

There are several common problems trainees may struggle with. Register is one of them. Time strain and split attention may cause the interpreter to forget the correct term or the suitable word and in order not to lose valuable time or omit important information they use the closest expression available. An interpreter has to always bear in mind what the intention of the speaker is and what register is being used in the source language. They have to make it their best effort to use the same register in the target language. The best way to do so is to always have a glossary at hand while interpreting and to read actively and expand one's active vocabulary

including in their mother tongue. Andrew Gillies further suggests for interpreters to write in their active languages and to create and learn speeches (2013, 83). Imagining oneself in the position of a politician or ambassador also helps identifying with the language and style they use. Nolan suggests to use intonation to give words their proper coloring in order to keep the same register (2005, 127).

It is also important to be proficient in using idioms, fixed expressions and phrases. At this point, it is worth mentioning that in many contexts and types of speeches (such as political ones) specific language is used. Therefore, an interpreter should study these speeches and their style and include different phrases and expressions into their active vocabulary.

Many trainees struggle with overusing certain expressions and words. It may be in order to fill in gaps, connect sentences or due to lack of synonyms. This may mean that the trainee relies too much on linking sentences with “and,” “also,” “next” and so on. Linking words are often the ones that need the most work. While interpreting a specific topic, an interpreter can find themselves using the same word over and over again, unable to think of its synonym. To avoid excessive repetition of certain words interpreters must have a glossary, expand their active vocabulary and analyze their interpretation.

KISS stands for keep it short and simple. It means creating short and meaningful sentences, giving separate chunks of information in order to make the interpretation comprehensible and easy to follow. Though a person may have a tendency to speak in long sentences, their interpreter alter ego must focus on giving concise pieces of information. It sometimes requires splitting the speaker’s sentences into several ones, or analyzing their train of thought and reassembling it into meaningful units. Interpreters must remember that all sentences have to be meaningful and finished.

In terms of textual structure and vocabulary, there are many varied tendencies depending on every individual. Some people may have a tendency to repeat themselves and offer alternatives for their translation, while others may tend to form very long sentences. A trainee needs to have an image in their mind of what the ideal interpretation is and they must work to get closer to this ideal. Observing good public speakers, their pace and their way of structuring sentences and texts is good material for improvement.

4 Believability

The last aspect has to do with an inner mindset of the interpreter. The interpreter has to be confident in what they say. An interpreter has to first believe themselves and only then can the audience believe the interpreter. Lack of confidence or constant self-doubt cannot be part of an interpreter’s identity. The previous aspects – using one’s voice and language proficiency – are closely connected to believability. They can create an air of professionalism and help the interpreter keep the listener’s

attention. Furthermore, when one has excellent control of their voice and their language, they can build confidence more easily.

The interpreter has to convey that they are aware of the situation, they know what is going on and they are in control. As with a translation, an ideal interpretation is the one where the listener forgets they are not listening to the original. Therefore, the interpreter should not give away any signs of hesitation, stress or uncertainty. As an interpreter, you have to make the listener see that you believe in what you say and that you not only understand the situation, but also the context. Having extra information about what is being discussed always helps the interpreter build more confidence and puts them at ease. Not only attitude, but preparation is indispensable.

As already mentioned, an interpreter has to sound interesting and convincing. Overall attitude may even have greater effect on the listener than your actual skill. This is not to say that they can allow themselves to lag behind with your skills, but it means they have to translate their expertise into your work. The listener must feel like they are getting professional interpreting from an expert.

The interpreter is very much like an actor. He or she acts on a stage (in this case their booth) where they present a text which they did not produce but they have to make everyone believe they are actually expressing their own thoughts. They have to catch the audience's attention and make them invested in what is happening.

5 Conclusion

An interpreter is an actor, a politician, a radio presenter. Truly, a jack of all trades. Interpretation is undeniably about language skills and the ability to analyze texts and many of the core skills taught at courses and schools for interpretation. But it is also a game of smoke and mirrors. Therefore, their multi-faceted identity must take into account these "extra skills." Aside from the technical parameters of their work, interpreters must focus on their overall delivery and the experience of their listeners by assuming a new identity of an eloquent, language-proficient, confident individual.

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Summary

Creating an Interpreter's Identity by Deconstructing One's Own

An interpreter's identity is essentially created by their voice. It is the instrument they use and it is what the audience perceives from their work. Every individual has their own specific way of speaking, which forms an inherent part of their identity. An interpreter's way of speaking is a virtual ideal one strives for and an aspiring interpreter needs to fulfill certain expectations. Much like an artist, an interpreter strives to give the ideal performance. Like a radio presenter, an interpreter tries to use their voice to sound persuasive, to communicate interest and knowledge of the topic, while incorporating the intention of the speaker. An interpreter tries to communicate sarcasm, humor or contempt used by the speaker and tries to keep the listener attentive. Whereas a significant part of interpreting studies focuses on the actual skill of interpreting and transferring meaning from one language to another, this paper intends to concentrate on the way this meaning is transferred. In order to interpret on the best possible level, one must identify their strengths, i.e. the aspects of their speech and delivery that are to be kept and developed and those they need to get rid of (tics, bad habits). Step by step an interpreter consciously creates a different way of speaking and assumes a different identity. An aspiring interpreter may be perfectly fluent in the languages used and able to interpret without hesitation, but their delivery might still need some work. Interpreters may struggle with articulation, pauses (Makarová, 2004), they may sometimes rely on colloquialisms, speak too quickly or create never-ending sentences (Jones, 1998), both in terms of structure and intonation. The author draws from his experience of last year's European Master Course in Conference Interpreting (Európsky kurz konferenčného tlmočenia) and addresses the problems and struggles both starting and experienced interpreters might have to deal with in their career.

About the author

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