# *CAN A TEACHER BE AN INTERPRETER? A QUESTION OF IDENTITY*

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***Abstract:*** *It is a truism the fact each teacher knows that students should be seen as a different identity and, as a consequence, we have to adapt different teaching techniques, methods and strategies. Yet, what if a foreign language teacher needs to become an interpreter because in this case, among the first lessons in consecutive interpreting, one learns that the personal pronoun "I" does not reflect any identity being used as a mere tool for the interpreter who becomes all of the sudden a 'pres-play' device for interpretation.*

*The present paper deals with the identity aspects causing troubles to a teacher while trying to become an interpreter. In order to find the answer to the question of identity, we will appeal to cultural studies and a trans-disciplinary perspective for the theoretical background of psychology on the on hand and of translation/ interpreting theories on the other hand.*

*Statistically, teachers of foreign languages do not become professional interpreters and that is what the present paper studies: the reasons why only few teachers choose to practice professional interpreting.*

***Keywords***: *identity, consecutive interpretation, teaching.*

## Introduction

Discourses about communication usually start by making reference to the so-much celebrated diagram made by Roman Jakobson (Addresser -> Context/Message/Code -> Addressee). This paper follows the tradition by adding the remark that communication is an unmanageable impel and need in nature to open dialogues with whatever lies outside the limits of any distinct (id)entity, to relate ITSELF *recte* SELF - teacher to the OTHER - interpreter (Irimia, 2005: 11). Therefore, it appears reasonable that communication as exchange between different identities is understood and defended in terms of "self" and "other". What English teachers are trained to become, behave like and believe is that a speaking and writing student creates a work which is the expression of his own self and our challenge is to make them be more and more creative by understanding that nothing tells the truth about human life, the author is 'dead', the work does not speak about anything outside its own boundaries, the truth in communication is not subject to the truth function of science, or of life, for that matter. But what makes us different, what is identity and why is it so important? The answer to this question is a very short incursion in the theoretical background of this paper.

## The purpose of the study

According to the fact that the formation of an English teacher is generally a philological one, the present study wants to prove how a teacher's identity is

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dramatically shifted when trying to become a consecutive interpreter. I have chosen consecutive interpretation in this paper because simultaneous interpreting is a pair work activity and requires some technical training in order to achieve it.

**Stages of research in the field**

Identity represents an important direction in cultural studies. Covering fields such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, biology and literature, identity has evolved and grown fundamental to current cultural studies discourse. In the 1970s, anthropologists and sociologists were mainly concerned with the formation of the "me" exploring the modalities in which interpersonal interactions shape an individual's sense of self. But more recent research in the field of identity created a shift in this perspective. Instead of focusing on the individual's self, the scholars pay attention to group agency and political action. Consequently, identity studies have been transferred to the site of the collective.

Identities were seen up to the age of cultural studies as features of individuals or groups of individuals ignoring the fact that the individual will not preserve the same identity under different circumstances, Identities depend on events and may change and recombine so as to fit new circumstances every now and then.

Each person has a particular reaction to the many sources of direct or indirect experience that compose the social environment. One may say for sure that the phenomenal world rarely corresponds to the familiar physical environment of the individual. The social environment is subject to several influences that convey the so-called collage of life because all individuals strive to bring their own order in such diversity.

"Life in society", belonging to late modern society, challenges the self with several demands and impediments. All these could be more easily studied if some of the modern dilemmas were well understood.

Identities are not only constructed, but also maintained and negotiated by means of the *discourse*. And the discourse may be defined in various ways. *The discourse* may refer to the regular use of language as a social practice, the shaping of new meanings, a system of cognitions, beliefs and notions, a set of ideas from a culture shaping the perception of the world, the institutionalization of language use, so on and so forth. The same subject may generate different types of conflicting or competing discourses. Reality may appear different depending on the perspective, i.e. on the discourse adhered to. As a result, the discourse becomes a composite process of dynamically-conveyed meanings, a manner of conceptualizing and understanding the world around us. A particular type of self-identity is brought to the surface through social interaction, however not a relatively finite product, but rather as a product manufactured and remodelled through several discursive approaches involving the individual. Discourses provide various alternatives or perspectives to what the individual is or may become.

With regard to consecutive interpretation, Roderick Jones argued that re-expressing what somebody else considers is indeed impossible because one cannot repeat a speech word for word, but having a structured analysis of the ideas expressed by the speaker may help understanding the "speaker's line of reasoning". Jones continues by appreciating that "the three basic stages of a consecutive interpreter's work are *understanding*, *analyzing*, and *re-expressing*" (Jones, 2002:10). The influence of the identity issue emerges in the process of "re-expressing" because, in this stage, one can perceive the formation of a teacher who tends to have an opinion and almost



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involuntarily, he/ she expresses out loud. A teacher's critical thinking, although very well controlled, is easy to be noticed whereas a professional interpreter is invisible at this level. For an interpreter, accuracy replaces communication in the sense of dialogue. Let us imagine a teacher interpreting the discourse of a lampooning TV journalist. It is obvious that the interpretation will be an interpretation in both ways, not only an oral translation on the spot, but also a translation of the ideas rendered in a very personal style which can be incongruous to what the TV journalist said. A teacher has the luxury of having a dialogue with his/ her students, but an interpreter has only the possibility of reproducing an abridged form of the discourse which generally is seen as a flaw in consecutive interpretation.

Economically speaking, an hour of consecutive interpreting is better paid than a teaching hour and this might represent a reason for teachers to be inclined towards changing their career in this field, but a serious preparation is needed starting from monolingual speeches where "the interpreter" states only the main ideas of the discourse, to memory exercises and note taking techniques. In this respect, Jones argued that: "Sometimes … consecutive exercises may be done monolingually, again to stress …that there is more to the exercise than the problem of translation from one language to another." (Jones, 2002: 38).

**Tools of research and analysis**

In order to check weather a teacher experienced consecutive interpretation and if he/ she did so, what were the "effects" of that/ those experience(s), I had to produce a questionnaire where I could gather the necessary information as to make a statistics serving as an answer to the question in the title of the present study.

Therefore, I conceived a rather short True or False questionnaire keeping in mind my experience both in teaching and consecutive interpretation. Although I managed practicing consecutive interpretation, I realized that becoming a professional interpreter needs much more than being proficient in a foreign language and for a philologist is created a gap in the process of shifting identities with the speaker.

I have chosen the outline of True / False questionnaire after several failed attempts to receive written answers to elaborate questions. Filling a form on a template is easy to do and more reliable. In editing questions where I had to receive answers, only three of the fourteen teachers handed the papers with their answers and consequently a statistics would have been impossible to achieve.

Number of highschool teacher participants: 14
The statements below are for research purpose only and any information attained will remain confidential. Please complete the following table, indicating whether the statements are True or False.
Ages: 28-52
Current level of teaching experience: 7-23 years
Sex: 12 Females and 2 Males
Major: English Language and Literature, Applied English: 14

| No. | True | False | Statement |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2. | 80% | 20% | Once I had the occasion of practicing consecutive interpretation, I have thought about changing my career from a teacher into a professional interpreter. |
| 1. | 100% | 0% | After graduating from university, I have faced the experience of practicing consecutive interpretation. |



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| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 3. | 75% | 25% | Consecutive interpretation requires more spontaneity than teaching or translating. |
| 4. | 87% | 13% | While interpreting I had difficulties in shifting identities. |
| 5. | 83% | 17% | Consecutive interpretation makes me feel anxious and have difficulties in focusing. |
| 6. | 100% | 0% | The interpreting setting is totally different from the classroom. |
| 7. | 98% | 2% | Although I was familiar with the topic, I realized I had too many omissions. |
| 8. | 100% | 0% | The requirement to divide focusing among listening, understanding, recall or note taking while interpreting makes me feel very confused. |
| 9. | 100% | 0% | Instead of paying attention to the speech I am concerned with not making mistakes during the interpretation process |
| 10. | 100% | 0% | I become anxious when the English speakers have strong accents and a fast pace in speaking. |
| 11. | 100% | 0% | I get worried when I interpret unfamiliar subjects. |
| 12. | 98% | 2% | I start to be troubled if the English sentences to be interpreted are too long or complicated and I give up rendering them. |
| 13. | 87% | 13% | I become overwhelmed when I have to interpret dates, figures, exact measurements or quantities. |
| 14. | 100% | 0% | The magnitude of concentration necessary during interpreting makes me feel beleaguered and tired. |
| 15. | 100% | 0% | It embarrasses me to reproduce things that I disagree with so, I avoid telling them. |
| 16. | 75% | 25% | I feel tenser when I don't understand every word the speaker says. |
| 17. | 100% | 0% | Some contradictory thoughts run through my mind and bother me during interpretation. |
| 18. | 100% | 0% | Your psychological motivation (not financial!) for studying literature is quite strong whereas interpreting is weak. |
| 19. | 98% | 2% | While interpreting I feel rather monitored on my accuracy than listened to what I say. |
| 20. | 100% | 0% | I tend to add information when I |



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totally agree with the speaker.

## Conclusions

Consecutive interpretation is a form of representation and a presentment, yet it is challenging and "combines the social pleasure of helping people communicate with the intellectual pleasure of dealing with ideas and language" (Jones, 2002: 130). Through the eyes of a teacher, consecutive interpretation is borrowed and also lent to illusion rather than clarity *(traduttore, traditore*) through dialogue, in a dynamics that mixes the total vassalage of a cause; it catches in the middle the deceiving field of multiple strategies and of compromises. Consequently, it has a propensity towards particular and unclassifiable. I would kaleidoscopically present consecutive interpretation as an inventory of different facts and anonymity which is, by and large, in contradiction with the formation of a teacher.

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