

# INTERPRETERS' PROFESSIONALISM AND IDENTITY WORK IN AGENCIES: A DISCURSIVE PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

The present article explores how professionalism is redefined by agency managers through a set of corporate rules and protocols, which ultimately affect interpreters' understanding of their professional identity. It draws upon the body of literature on identity work and the concept of professionalism in sociological studies. Findings based on ethnographic fieldwork show that while management can have an influence on work practices, it does not necessarily undermine the discretion of interpreters or conflict with their professional activities. The majority of the managerial procedures are formulated in order to clarify role boundaries and increase inter-professional recognition, thus having the potential to enhance the professional status of public service interpreting (PSI) by building the very institutional infrastructure that this profession genuinely needs.

**KEYWORDS:** Professionalism, public service interpreting, interpreting agencies, identity work.

## RESUMEN\*

Este artículo estudia cómo los gerentes de las agencias de interpretación redefinen la profesionalidad a través de un conjunto de normas y protocolos corporativos, que afectan a la visión que tienen los intérpretes de su identidad profesional. Recurre a la literatura sobre el concepto de la identidad y la profesionalidad en estudios sociológicos. Los resultados derivados de investigaciones etnográficas demuestran que, aunque la gerencia puede influenciar la práctica profesional de los intérpretes, no socava necesariamente la discreción de los mismos, ni está reñida con su actividad profesional. La mayoría de los procedimientos gerenciales está formulada para aclarar los límites del papel del intérprete y aumentar el reconocimiento inter-profesional, de ahí que estos procedimientos tengan el potencial para realzar el estatus profesional de la ISP, construyendo la misma infraestructura institucional que esta profesión verdaderamente requiere.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** profesionalidad; interpretación en los servicios públicos (ISP); agencias de interpretación; trabajo de identidad.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Recent professionalization of public service interpreting (PSI) in the UK has suffered tremendous setbacks due to the austerity-led privatisation of interpreting work and subsequently contractors' failure to deliver quality services. Particularly in the legal interpreting field, the major supplier CAPITA contracted by Ministry of Justice (MoJ) was criticised of replacing professional workforce with lay persons and cutting interpreters' pay (PI4J). Over the past six years, professional interpreters have enacted various forms of resistance against contractualism, including forming unions, launching campaigns, increasing press exposure and formally engaging with state institutions (NAO; PAC). Despite the on-going boycott by practitioners and the painstaking negotiations with policy makers, MoJ continues to partner with private agency and the quality of interpreting has not been substantially improved. According to an independent market review report (MoJ) on the quality arrangements under the Framework Agreement, 70% (N= 570) of standard language interpreters felt dissatisfied with "the current procedures in terms of the evaluation of skills and experience required for face-to-face interpreters". The report also points out that there are no training programmes offered by this agency, and over half of the interpreters working for this agency do not possess acceptable qualifications.

In the academic literature, although in-depth empirical research on everyday realities of interpreting work and provision remains largely lacking, the heightened tension between interpreters and language services has long since been recorded (e.g. Harrington; Ozolins). A Swedish case study (Norström, Fioretos and Gustafsson) on the working conditions of community interpreters shows that professionalism was undermined by worsening salary structures, low social status and poor employment support. In particular, the deregulation of the market leads to competition between many agencies, forcing down prices and compromising quality. Tipton considers the rise of agencies represents the accelerating pace of corporatisation. The adoption of 'tiered system' in agency-led framework disrupts the then institutional order and prevents professional associations from functioning properly. In general, it seems that prior studies tend to emphasise more on the unstoppable dominance of managerialism and less on the instances of resistance by interpreters. Managers seem to be cast as the 'opponents' of interpreters, who are by and large portrayed as passive recipients of the hegemonic changes *done* to their profession. Moreover, the foregrounded antagonistic relationship between the two seems to suggest that there is a clear-cut, irreparable divide between the ideal of professionalism and managerial practice. With scarce evidence authenticating the local reactions to the neo-liberal agenda, it is difficult to achieve a profound and comprehensive understanding of the change in professional work and its impact on the status and autonomy of interpreters.

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One way to address this gap is to consider how sociological professionalism intersects with the present-day professionalism in ambiguous public domains (Noordegraaf). Prevailing sociological models of professionalisation (such as Babbage *et al.*) tends to neglect the role of organisations as characteristic vectors in such professionalisation processes. There is a strong call in organisation and management studies to look beyond ‘pure’ professionalism characterised by a “peculiar type of occupational control” (Johnson 45), and to “revisit theories of professionalism, which did not fully anticipate the shift of professional work to the context of large organizations” (Suddaby, Copper and Greenwood 357). It is therefore important to recognise the rise of organisation, in our case language services, as a potential locus for staging professional projects and redefining occupational boundaries (Muzio and Kirkpatrick). Moreover, professionals are generally able to cope well with the challenges arising from being employed by large corporations (Ackroyd) despite certain degree of their discretion is subjected to budgetary, behavioural and ideological controls. In contrast with the alleged colonising power of business logic, legal practitioners (Ackroyd and Muzio), medical doctors (Dent *et al.*) and university academics (Anderson) all strategically adopted different approaches to management schemes. All these debates provide valuable references for mapping out the current changes in the organising of interpreting work.

Drawing from the ethnographic case study of a language service start-up established by interpreter-turned-managers, this study explores the changing status of professional interpreters in the UK against a backdrop of public sector outsourcing of interpreting service to for-profit providers. The aim is to identify the discursive reconstruction of professionalism and autonomy, as practiced by participants in their space ‘*Insight*’, and document their day-to-day work processes in which discursive resources are mobilised to reconcile the conflicting logic. Built on the notion of ‘identity work’ —the forming, maintaining, repairing and revising of individual and group conceptions (Sveningsson and Alvesson 1165), this study aims to identify how these ‘hybrid’ managers draw on the discursive reconstruction of professionalism to make sense of their collective identities and achieve a particular social order. Taking a discursive perspective of organising process, professionalism is viewed as discursive resources that aim to “manage and motivate individuals in a broad set of occupational contexts beyond the traditional professions” (Muzio *et al.* 703). Subsequently, by revealing the evolving meaning of professionalism and its all the more ‘hybrid’ nature, this paper wishes to bring to life the impact of structural change upon service provision in a manner that perhaps better captures the reality of interpreters’ work practices.

## 2. THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF PROFESSIONALISM

The notion of ‘professionalism’ is becoming increasingly versatile and controversial as the status of traditional professions are being challenged by various forces of institutional, economic and organisational change (e.g. Reed; Muzio *et al.*). Perceiving it from ‘Trait approach’, professionalism is the symbol of technical



rationality (Schön) —an essential feature of few occupational groups characterised by their mastery of esoteric knowledge (Abbott; Freidson, *Professionalism Reborn: Theory, Prophecy and Policy.*), such as doctors and lawyers. In this approach, a critical element inherent to professionalization is the control of a codified body of knowledge. Without a delineable ownership of knowledge and systematised training of practitioners in its application, the occupational jurisdiction and status are unlikely to be recognised by the lay public (Abbott). Therefore, the inaccessibility of professional knowledge to the uninitiated is recognised as a defining feature of such an ideal-typical professionalism (Freidson, *Professionalism: The Third Logic.*). Known as experts with moral authorities, they subsequently enjoy a higher social standing as a result of extensive education and licensing.

Functionalist approach (Parson *The Social System*; Goode), on the other hand, is epitomised in the form of social trustee professionalism (Brint) that underlines the importance of social responsibilities shared by professionals. In the words of Parson (53): “a full-fledged profession must have some institutional means of making sure that such competence will be put to socially responsible uses.” These include, among others, the service provision by trained practitioners, affective neutrality, institutional altruism and unwavering integrity. The apparent flaws in trait models and functional orthodoxy invite criticism in the 1970s and gives rise to the “power approach” (Hughes; Johnson; Larson; Macdonald). It centres on the power dynamics in the journey of professionalisation, including changes in the relationship between producers and consumers (Johnson), organised autonomy against external forces and interference (Freidson *Professionalism: The Third Logic.*), strategic actions of claiming knowledge monopoly and social closure (Larson; Witz). Professionalism in this context is seen as “government of autonomous conduct” (Fournier) in that professionals are entitled to control standards and self-regulate practices through professional associations.

Influenced by the rapid development of technology and expansion of global information, the past decades have witnessed dramatic changes in employment arrangements and the organisation of work. New contractual relations characterised by fixed-term, flexible, contingent and mobile jobs are incrementally offered in service-centred industries (Schoemaker). Organisations have promptly responded to this trend and adapted themselves into network organisations (Castells) or virtual work environments (Fiol and O’Connor). Meanwhile, newer professions emerging from large companies do not always require the knowledge predetermined by the professional bodies. Instead, ‘modern’ professionals are more valued by their ability to respond to market demands and business priorities. As a result, the coexistence and hybridization of different logics tend to generate a mixture of managerial, organisational, and commercialised forms of professionalism beyond the traditional collegial professionalism (Muzio *et al.*)

This is especially the case in the public sector that combines bureaucratic and professional control (Clarke and Newman). In this context, the nature of professionalism is invariably contested. Built on their observations of globalizing law firms in the legal practice field, Faulconbridge and Muzio (20) argue that ‘organizational professionalism’ is formed through the professional project mobilised



and secured by the “support of appropriate organizational systems, structures and procedures” and ultimately in the interests of professionals. Evetts further distinguishes ‘organisational professionalism’ from ‘occupational professionalism’ based on the source of control. The former relies on *externalised* forms of regulation and is characterised by the standardisation of work procedures to achieve a managerial outcome. In contrast, the latter prioritises *internal* control deriving from professional peers and incorporates collegial authority. Expert professionalism (Brint) perhaps better captures the dynamism in emerging, yet less-regulated, occupational groups. In this context, actors depend more upon on the “relatively less restrained consumer markets and corporate power” (ibid. 124) to flourish. One case in point is management consultants as “marketized experts” (Furusten 265). This group digresses from the traditional pathway of professionalization to the building of ‘commercialised professionalism’. This implies that being accepted by the consumers is a key form of authorisation for prospective professionals, thereby highlighting the interdependence of business practice and professional service.

Noordegraaf (771) uses the term ‘situated professionalism’ to embody his understanding of similar contexts. He elucidates the inevitable intersection of occupational control and organisational logics in the knowledge society. Whilst it is challenging to retain strict professional autonomy, organisational considerations of costs, budgets and clients do not necessarily restrict professional development. The role of managers and professionals are no longer clear-cut but rather overlapping. In public sector, professionals’ frequent attempts at resisting commercialism have even led to the emergence of ‘hybrid managers’, a role aimed at combining managerial and professional logics and fostering one’s commitment to managerialism (Currie and Croft). Studies in health care domain suggest that while some prefer to adopt managerial, marketized discourse to govern professional work (Doolin), others remain ambivalent or strategically blend or navigate around the competing conventions. This seems to indicate that the two logics are not always confrontational and the organisational identities can provide the basis for meaning negotiation.

### 3. ORGANISATIONAL IDENTITY, IDENTITY WORK AND DISCOURSE

Although organisational identity was initially defined in terms of its key characteristics of distinctiveness, endurance and centrality (Albert and Whetten), ensuing studies have yet to agree on whether such an identity claim is guided by a singular “social actor” (Whetten and Mackey) or shared by members’ collective interpretations of their “organisational selves”. In the former case, an organisation’s prescriptive role in guiding individual’s behaviour and coordinating inter-organisational relationship is emphasised (Corley *et al.*). It also attaches great importance to an organisation’s legitimacy, status and reputation in relation to other entities in a social sphere. As such, the identity of an organisation features a sense-giving process: “a set of institutional claims that explicitly articulates who the organization is and what it represents” (Gioia *et al.* 5). The social constructionist perspective (Dutton *et al.*),



on the other hand, foregrounds a sense-making process as members actively seek meanings for the proposed organisations (Weick). When challenges emerge, they can constantly revise and negotiate these constructions in order to secure support of constituents or distance themselves from other institutional players in the field. In either view, identity is perceived as an evolving product subject to ongoing formation and revision rather than something static or ahistorical.

One of the key concepts that addresses the identity shaping process is 'identity work' (Sveningsson and Alvesson), similar to other terms such as 'identity construction' or 'identity project'. It refers to the ways in which individuals continuously engage in maintaining or repairing the 'constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness' (1165). From a management point of view, 'identity work' represents a less obtrusive and increasingly intentional medium of organisational control, or "identity regulation" defined by Alvesson and Willmott (622). The authors pointed out that it is by nature a discursive framework fleshed out by socially established norms and practices, with the aim to influence organisational members' self-definition and commitment. Particularly in knowledge-intensive firms, managers generally adopt four mechanisms to achieve regulation (Alvesson), namely, 'constructing an appealing organisational identity' through rhetorically boosting members' pride and image management; 'cultural control' that promotes ideology and ethos; 'normalisation' focusing on setting performance and behavioural criteria, and 'subjectification' that enables individuals to shape themselves around a specific self-defined standard.

If identity work can be essentially viewed as a discursive activity, then actors' ability to leverage the available discursive resources can arguably determine the success of such an undertaking (Coupland and Brown). Statements, expressions, norms and models as resources are not only able to "systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault 49), but also provide practice-derived, cultural-cognitive references for actors to decide future actions (Fairclough) and make sense of their institutional environment (Phillips *et al.*). In light with this thought, a number of discourse-based studies have suggested that professionalism can function as a sample of resources employed by managers within occupational discourse (Doolin). In contrast with the sociological model of professionalism reviewed earlier (i.e. trait approach and power approach), managers and professionals are not so much enemies as partners (Reay and Hinings), and their discourses are simultaneously articulated as one would appropriate the other's discourse into their work practice (Thomas and Hewitt).

To sum up, the proposed conceptual framework helps to place this study within the socio-organisational debate on the evolving discourse of professionalism and its role in reshaping professional identities and accountabilities in the context of neoliberalist reforms and new logics of organising work. In interpreting studies, while some efforts have been made to assess the negative impact of privatisation, there is a lack of research on how interpreters specifically *receive* the change and cope with difficult situations. The conflicting institutional logics requires a more critical and sophisticated understanding of professionalization, thus a direction towards the actual discursive practices of 'hybrid managers' in the workplaces might



be a useful way to address the gap. On the contrary, a neglect of local oppositions in varied forms, in particular with the help of discursive strategies might further weaken interpreters' professional autonomy and lead to a misrepresentation of their everyday realities of work processes.

#### 4. METHODS AND MATERIALS

To study the discursive practices of professionalism in an organisational context, this paper analyses an empirical case where interpreting service is organised by a local social enterprise *Insight*<sup>1</sup>. *Insight* was founded in 2009 in UK. Small as it appears to be, this organisation has around 200 interpreters on its books. The current management team involves four senior advisors who all have prior (managing) interpreting experience. The Executive Director (known as "Director") is the top decision maker who oversees the daily operations of the business. Actors who have certain management roles also include the Head of External Relations, the Administrator and the Training Officer. For analytical purposes, they are consistently grouped into the "managers" cohort, to be differentiated from the other several interpreters (known as "members") who are only offered limited hours to work in the office when they are available.

In 2013 when the study began, this group of 'interpreter managers' were already known in the region for their quality assurance measures as "it is the only one checking qualifications and arranging interviews when recruiting interpreters" [cited from one interpreter's comment]. However, they are far from being the major players in the market. In early 2009, a new contract came into effect which allows for one private agency *SG* to provide the overwhelming majority of work to the regional court service and public prosecution authorities. This aroused huge dissatisfaction from local interpreters who condemned *SG* for using unqualified interpreters and only pay 36 pounds for a day's work inclusive of travel expenses. In this sense, the founding of *Insight* in only after a few months' time can be seen as a vehement response to *SG*'s irresponsible decisions.

The fieldwork lasts approximately a year, including 4-month regular observation within the business site and following engagement with the participants in various ways. The initial contact with *Insight* began with my query stating my background, affiliated institution and concerns about the industrial practice of PSI, whilst explicitly asking the possibility of sharing organisational resources for research purpose. A positive reply was not long after obtained from the Director, who was found to be the gatekeeper and able to grant such access into the business venue where day-to-day interpreting work is organised. In response to the Director's request, I agreed to reciprocally assist *Insight* in developing a training programme for

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<sup>1</sup> *G* and *Insight* are pseudonyms used to replace the real names of the agencies involved. Same rules apply to all the names of the local companies, associations, areas and streets and documents.



interpreters at a later stage. At the prospect of conducting participant observation, I further reassured the Director of complete confidentiality of their in-house data and explained the ethical clearance procedure that I went through with the university. The consent forms specifying research purposes and anonymity considerations were signed by relevant parties before fieldwork started.

The rare opportunity of being a real insider allows me to observe the nuts and bolts of the actual organising processes of interpreting work in a ‘naturally-occurring’ setting. Following the principle of ‘thick description’ (Geertz), a series of ethnographic fieldwork methods including participant observation, informal talk, archival materials and vignettes (Brewer, Hammersley and Atkinson) and semi-structured interviews were adopted. Field notes were taken manually to record informal interaction, incidents, and the observation of work procedures, ranging from lunch breaks and in-car conversations to chance encounters on the stairs. Further descriptive accounts were noted down after the event, so that what was left out due to the strain of keeping pace with the ongoing communication could be filled in in a timely manner. On occasions formal events such as board meetings, job interviews and training sessions were audio-recorded with complementary notes. Additionally, a research journal was written to record my own reflections. The documentation analysis is also possible owing to the regular access to email conversations between managers and interpreters and to the corporate archives.

This paper focuses on the discursive identity work of these interpreter-turned-managers in their internal discussion on different dimension of professionalism as well as their external engagement with the public sector clients. In analysing the data I used a process of categorisation based on concepts drawn from the proposed framework. Within the identity work I analysed the examples that revealed the contested nature of professionalism and explored how it is framed in the managerialist discourse. The following sections will present the thematic findings and discussion.

## 5. CRAFTING A UNIQUE ORGANISATIONAL TEMPLATE

The invasion of agencies into freelance interpreters’ work life was started a few years before *Insight* was born. Founding members reflected that the available options to change the situation remained rather limited, as “multiple attempts were made to stop the outsourcing scheme but failed”. A number of veteran interpreters “ditched their job” [Mng]<sup>2</sup> and changed career ever since the Service Agreement came into effect in early 2000s. Reflecting on the motivation of setting up *Insight*, the Director described the historical backdrop as “a time of darkness and despair for interpreters”:

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<sup>2</sup> [Mng]=managers; [doc]=documentary sources; [jnl]= research journal; [int]= interpreters.





My heart sank when I learned that SG got the contract. Not long after that they started to change their face and slash the pay. Many of us argued with Brown [the director of SG] and questioned his motives, followed by declining jobs. That made him mad. He threatened us, claiming that he would use new people and abandon us, and he did! [Director]

These remarks help reinforce *Insight's* position as an unwavering oppositional force against the mainstream agencies. By emphasising a shared history and identity with interpreters, it is not hard for managers to discursively create a category of themselves who are sharply different from the majority. Such a context also provides important references to members who strategically framed *Insight* as a feasible solution to the chaotic landscape. To quote the remarks of the Director:

Our intention was to do something that we are all good at from on the ground. We were pushed to the cliffs already, and we can't bear the business fall into the wrong hands of the capitalist company. [A-Director]

This to some extent explains the rationale of *Insight's* organisational statement [doc] "Raising the quality and standard of PSI" and reflects the unique aspiration of *Insight* members in contrast to that of the dominant agencies from the start. As is reflected earlier in the field journal, "their premise and ambition make one feel hard not to develop attachment to them, not to be part of them, as their story is sharply evocative of a *professional ideal* that appeals to so many practitioners today" [jnl, my emphasis].

Built on the conceptualisation of identity work, it can be found that managers concentrate on two major sense-giving tasks in this unique model they experiment with. One is to attach social significance to the organisational template. The idea is to distinguish itself as a "community-interest company" [web] from conventional profit-driven corporations. By foregrounding the social course of PSI in relation to human rights and equality, *Insight* is in a position to go beyond a simple transactional relationship with interpreters and foster a sense of social responsibility and solidarity among the workforce. In the words of a manager,

Fundamentally we are still an agency, but we are a very different one. That's why I refrain from calling us agency managers —the way we do things are so much better than those cowboys. Our starting premise is the non-English speaking clients— removing the language barriers as the one of the root causes of social injustice.

This echoes the sublime values of traditional professions that 'serving for the public good' tends to be prioritised over personal compensation. It thus highlights the social mission set in the founding principles of the organisation. In an 'educational' talk intended for trainee interpreters, the purpose to highlight the consequences of cheaply outsourcing public services to irresponsible agencies is obvious. The interest of service users is highlighted:



A bad interpreter makes things so much worse, and that is the driving force for us, because they need the right access, not just any. The bottom line is, what if what you are provided is ‘rubbish’? [Mng]

One interpreters commented that managers’ often emphatic speech on their mission does help them ‘kind of stand out from the crowd’ [int]. What they feel uncertain is the commercial side of *Insight*, which seems to be less known and rarely shared. A somewhat ‘standard’ set of statements presented to outsiders looks as below:

We have to run the business and make money like everyone else, but it’s what we use our surplus makes us different. Although we set up *Insight*, we don’t own it, because the profits would not go to our pockets; it’s gonna be used to achieve social objectives, which is about raising the standard of PSI. [Mng]

The above quotes suggest no details regarding how exactly the surplus is distributed to accomplish the stated missions are given. Further observations reveal that whilst all interpreter interviewees are aware that *Insight* is a social enterprise, they are not so sure about how they would benefit from the welfare side of the organisation. Even an internal members of *Insight* feels confused about it and considers the ‘hybrid concept’ as “the so-called aura of the ethos”:

I thought that makes a difference because I know what social enterprise is about: the profit turns to something to profit the community; it is based on a certain goal. In theory it is like that. But I don’t actually see that is happening, because we don’t do free training for example. Every training we do we get money for it. So I don’t see how that money is turning toward a special goal.

Different but no less important, the other sense-giving task is to align the organisational vision with the missions of professionalisation. Managers hold the belief that *Insight* was founded to lead and unite the occupational group to resist corporatisation. As such, identity work requires a careful design of the organisational vision—a collectively construed action plan that can remove the existing economic and social status barriers and advance their professional project. Figure 1 shows how managers’ discursive action points (right column) are neatly matched with the identified problems field (left column) in the field. Notably, they interpreted the political environment (“lack of leadership” and “direction”) and economic austerity (“use procurement strategy to save money”) as top-level factors that gives rise to the subordinate issues at the provision level, such as substandard interpreting service and anti-professional development sentiments.

The above ‘identity vows’ also reveal managers’ renewed plan for staging the comeback after years of arduous yet unsuccessful attempts. For them, *Insight* provides an under-explored repertoire of resources at their discretion. This form of opposition has rarely been employed in previous attempts:

A few years ago you might remember when the court contract is awarded, there were some professional interpreters saying “No, I’m not going to work for this”.



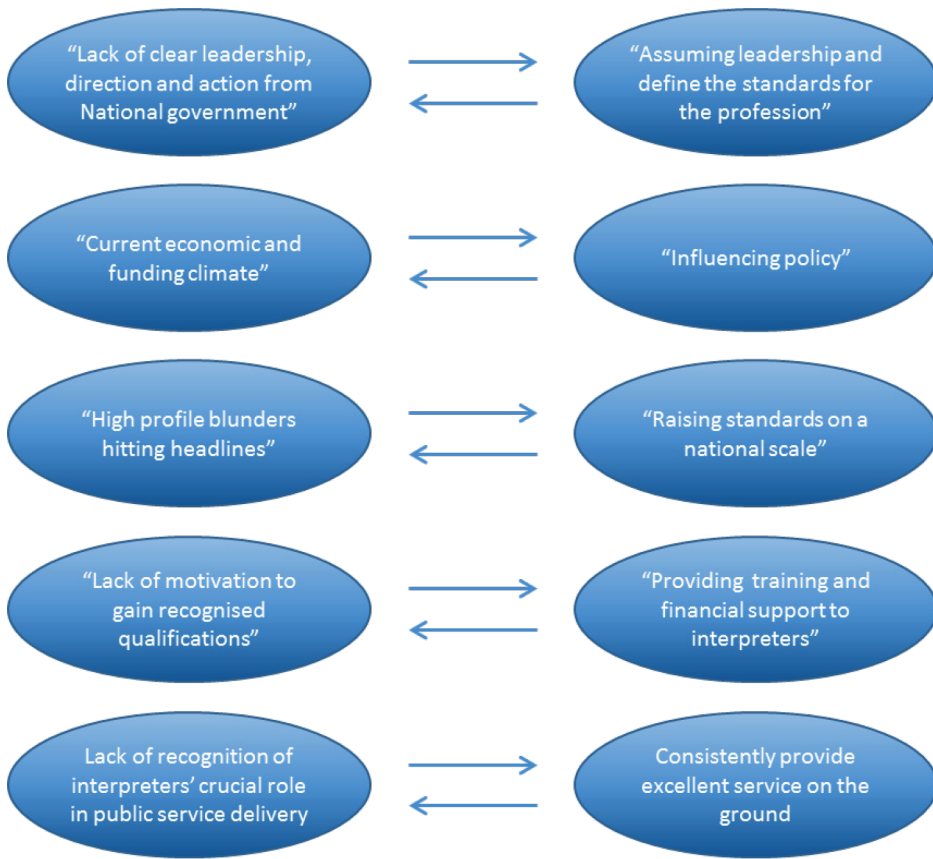


Figure 1: The Alignment of the Professional Project and the Organisational Vision<sup>3</sup>.

But the unfortunate thing is, if you don't want to do it, someone else will do it, because they [peer agencies] don't care about the qualification and experience. So if they take someone else, he or she would think, “Oh, great! I don't need qualification now and I can do it!” The boycott, if you like, has no way out. [Director]

It quickly becomes apparent that under-resourced interpreter-managers do not have much choice in the irregular price-cutting competitions. The initiative to create an organisation with a hybrid identity, though lacking heavyweight sponsors and institutional resources, opens up a new possibility for actors to articulate their protest. *Insight* is reserved as a relatively safe and private space to test ideas and

<sup>3</sup> This illustration is developed based on the coded data.



strategise for future plans, allowing interpreters to carefully “pick a battle worth fighting” in an unfavourable environment.

## 6. SOCIALISING INTERPRETERS INTO ORGANISATIONAL STANDARDS

As mentioned earlier, a key aspect of organising work that makes *Insight* unique is their recruitment procedure. It is not handled as it would be at comparable mainstream interpreting agencies, which collect candidates' CVs online and file copies of certificates, at best followed by a brief phone chat with the candidate. Each interpreter with *Insight*, however, has to go through a 1.5-hour assessment (sometimes longer) comprising interviews and interpreting assessments. Applicants' qualities beyond language proficiency are carefully scrutinised. Managers are always looking at the “full package” rather than a single aspect of the interpreting competencies. There is a strong emphasis on *person-organisation-fit* in a sense that one's personality, work attitudes and values should satisfy what *Insight* requires. A typical interview usually starts with the interviewer's explanations:

We have set our own standards, so I am going to put everything I have seen today against our standards and make a decision on whether you [applicants] meet the standards or not. [Mng]

This suggests that those who are linguistically competent but do not suit the organisational culture are likely to be excluded. Of central importance is that “people get into this profession with the right frame of mind” [Director]. Often, candidates making a poor impression in this round appear to stand little chance of being selected, no matter how well they perform in the following assessment. The goal to find like-minded people is even more obvious in the following speech in reply to a candidate:

So we are also checking if you are someone we like to work with, because if you are very inflexible, how would you work with other people? So there are various things we are looking at... If you are very closed-minded about what you are supposed to do, then you are not trainable. [Director]

Here, being open-minded suggests the kind of personality which *Insight* deems important. Being “trainable” however, reflects managers' anticipation of new entrants' obedience to their rules. This can also be traced from the following comments:

The test itself is not an end, as we look at it as an overall performance. But you need to have the attitude to look at that. Unfortunately this country hasn't taken interpreting so seriously, specialized area should only let specialized interpreters go. It should be like that, but no! [Mng]



Indeed, “interpreters must take their work seriously in order to earn the title of ‘professional’” [Mng] —This principle is instructed to all shortlisted interviewees regardless of whether they are invited to work for *Insight* or not. Adding multiple layers to screen qualified interpreters is therefore an organisational mechanism to act against substandard interpreting. Managers have particular concerns about lay interpreters:

What I find most difficult, is when you have someone who is not too sure, a bit hesitant about certain meaning, and he thinks that it is okay or at least actually better than someone who says the complete wrong thing. That is a very dangerous act. [Director, my emphasis]

This problem is also recognised by most interpreters who were interviewed:

I just think there is a lot of ignorance, bring your mother along or your daughter and she could interpret —that’s what people think. Even when I say I’m an interpreter, they don’t even believe I study for this, they just think “yeah you speak many languages”. [B-Int-9]

In the observations of training sessions, interpreters’ identification with organisational identity is consciously reinforced. Trainees are expected to be all ears when they are ‘told’ how to do the job correctly. In some extreme cases, such authority can upgrade to a confrontational level where disagreement from the candidate is not ‘welcomed’ at all. In one interview where a manager raises issues about the importance of note-taking skill:

Manager: To be honest with you, I am not honestly interested in what you said about conference interpreting; we don’t do that... Your idea of consecutive interpreting it is not applicable in a PSI situation.

Candidate: Sorry, can I disagree with you? Because we had some courses and we learned that UN or EU interpreters, and they can’t just rely on their memory. Although they have experience... (interrupted)

Manager: No! You, I find the more you talk, the more trouble you get into, which worries me when you are out to do interpreting if you get into this kind of situation. Taking note is a good technique especially for those who cannot retain all of the information, but it’s not mandatory... and you disagree with us when we have interpreted for years! [jnl]

This incident represents a characteristic *Insight* standard guiding the selection and socialisation process of “true” professionals. Although the candidate is capable of two languages, the fact that she does not match with the ethos phases her out from working with *Insight*.

Work ethics is another area that are *managed* carefully by *Insight*. Managers have specified a set of specific rules regulating professional work on top of interpreters’ general code of conduct. Routinely, new interpreters will be instructed to read thoroughly a separate “Code of Ethics Handbook” included in their induction packages [doc]. For example, existing corporate policies regarding confidentiality



include a telephone protocol that reminds interpreters to set their mobile phone withheld when making a call prior to the appointment [doc]. In addition, booking operators are told not to assign tasks to interpreters who might have prior contact with the client or the client's network.

Protocols about how to present oneself to the clients are also printed on interpreters' ID badge. On the front of this badge is an ID photo and name below *Insight's* trademark. Before an assignment starts, interpreters are obliged to recite the "Self-Introduction" text at the back of the badge, which starts with: "My name is \_\_\_\_ from *Insight*" and proceeds with a succinct explanation of the neutral role of interpreters [doc]. The purpose of that, as explained by the Director, is to "make this as a procedure" because "it's important to establish the boundary at the beginning" [Director]. Such initiative formalises the briefing stage where each conversant is supposed to understand respective position in the interpreter-mediated interaction.

A few interpreters naturally think this looks as if they were "representing the agencies that work for" [B-Int-6], which builds into *Insight's* strategy in constructing the professional identity since the trademark of *Insight* and interpreter's photo are visually presented to the public sector staff. This intention of the management has been explicitly stated on other occasions (e.g. the Director speaks to trainee interpreters):

I have to see all the candidates. I have to speak to them. That's why I know all of you and I will recognise you on the street if I see you. I just think it is important to know who is representing our organisation. [A-Director]

## 7. DISCUSSION

This paper illustrates the key role of actual discursive practices in identity work through reshaping the meaning of professionalism. The case of *Insight* suggests that processes of change in interpreters' work practices are multifaceted and contested rather than uniformed in the generalised patterns of deprofessionalisation.

Firstly, the role of hybrid managers has introduced numerous possibilities to accommodate managerial demands with professional imperatives, the principles of which are not always conflicting. Just as Noordegraaf argues that various occupational groups seek to deploy the symbolic power of professionalism through discourse, my case shows that professionalism as discursive resources are strategically employed by managers to create new understandings and endorse new actions. In particular, managers tend to invoke more of the normative values that underpin a functionalist professionalism in the process of identity and boundary construction. There, professional relations centring on collegiality, cooperation, mutual support and trust are largely promoted. One might claim that this is a resurrection of the 'service ethics' or a promising attempt to replicate the elitist model (e.g. doctors, lawyers) of professionalization, yet a closer look at the realities of recruitment process shows a different answer. Managers' motivation to shape professional identity and work practice might as well be interpreted as a means to exercise disciplinary con-



trol and that it “governs professional conduct at a distance” (Fournier 280). In this sense, professionalism can be viewed as an ideological appeal by which interpreters’ self-regulation is only conditional under *Insight’s* leadership.

Secondly, Noordegraaf made the observation that the trend towards the creation of hybridised professionalism is inevitable. This form of professionalism is not just about tightening managerial control over professional work, but also about “attempts to link work to organizational and outside realities” and “establishing socio-symbolic legitimacy in changing times” (780). This is highly applicable in the PSI domain where interpreting expertise constitutes one part of the larger socio-technical system comprising professionals of different sub-fields, policy-makers, service buyers and consumers (Dong and Turner 2016). Service provision is highly disputed as it is confronted with mounting demands with decreasing capacities. In this context, the hybrid version of professionalism is characterised by multiple, mutualistic types of control rather than the dominance of single logic. It is therefore the reflexive control —the “reflexive searches for a professional use of professionalism” (Noordegraaf 780)— that enables *Insight* managers to link the frontline practice, organizational missions and the realities outside *Insight* together. As can be seen in the managers’ “quality/professionalism” discourse, the concept of ‘quality’ is decidedly ambiguous in that the emphasis can be placed more on the pursuit of ‘quality management’ than the ‘quality’ of interpreting performance.

Lastly, connecting identity work characterised by rhetoric tactics and image management with the current professional context, this study adds to the debate on PSI professionalization by suggesting that, with the organisational identity work penetrating into the forming of professional identity, it is likely that agencies modelling on ‘professional service firms’ can enhance, rather than undermine the social standing interpreters strive for but struggle to achieve. The managerial mechanisms of *Insight* constitute a practical treatment to the blurred boundary of PSI and the currently less organized profession. This can be in part attributed to the procurement logic that favours ‘quantity’ over ‘quality’. It gives rise to the influx of commercial agencies that are born to bid for contracts and live on deskilling interpreting tasks. Professional power is accordingly devolved to contracted agencies which introduce a cohort of lay interpreters in an attempt to meet the demand and maximise the profit. As the PSI field has yet to be populated with highly-skilled, ethically acute workforce, what should be prioritized is to set a benchmark to prevent ad-hoc interpreters from compromising the service quality. In this connection, the goal of the professionals —to pursue self-regulation, and that of *Insight*— to construct the very infrastructure that this nascent profession is still lacking —are ultimately converging and mutually enhancing. It follows that autonomy is by all means a relational concept. Certain boundaries need to be established to ensure that autonomy can be rationally exercised.

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