

RUNCIEMAN, ALAN JAMES (2018) *THE IDENTITY OF THE PROFESSIONAL INTERPRETER. HOW PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES ARE CONSTRUCTED IN THE CLASSROOM*. SINGAPORE, SPRINGER, 184, ISBN: 978-981-10-7822-4, ISBN: 978-981-10-7823-1 (EBOOK), [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.1007/978-981-10-7823-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-7823-1)

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The study of professional identities has been very productive within Interpreting Studies in the last decades, usually linked to aspects related to role boundaries (Grbic 2010; Hsieh 2007; Merlini 2009; Morris 2010) and even ethics (Baixauli 2017; Li et al. 2016; Nakane 2009; Pym 2012; Rudvin 2007; Snellman 2016). Particularly focusing on dialogue and public service interpreting, there has been an increasing concern amongst both scholars and professionals motivated by new communication needs provoked by recent demographic and social changes (Angelelli 2010; Hale 2005). However, professional identities have also been explored for translators and interpreters in general (Badalotti 2010; Bahadir 2010; Coracini 2006; Ferreira-Alves 2011; Katan 2009; Meylaerts 2010; Monzó Nebot 2009; Neather 2012; Pajarín Canales 2017; Sela-Sheffy 2014; Setton/Linanliang 2009; Torto 2008; Voinova/Shlesinger 2013; Yoo/Jeong 2017; Zwischenberger 2017). Also very popular are those studies focused on audiovisual translation (Kapsaskis 2011; Pérez González 2017), another field which, together with public service interpreting, is characterized by underprofessionalization and amateur interpreting.

*The Identity of the Professional Interpreter* is a monograph that, instead of focusing on the identity of practicing professionals, pays attention to how higher education students understand the profession of interpreter. This is done by means of a case study framed within the Department of Interpretation and Translation at the University of Bologna, Italy, and following a methodological approach based on micro narratives. This study presents similarities with others, such as Voinova's (2013), who qualitatively analyses materials (weekly reports and end-of-year assignments) written by five cohorts of students of a community interpreting course at Bar-Ilan University in search of self-presentations, or Skaaden's (2017), who focuses on an experiential-dialogic e-learning experience exploring the discourse of students about interpretation professional knowledge in text-only chat meetings of 45 to 60 minutes. However, Runcieman opts for an ethnographic approach and analyses micro narratives of first year interpretation students which occurred during a set of semi-structured individual and group interviews.

Runcieman's monograph is, as he declares, based on his PhD dissertation and, thus, presents the fruits of a thorough piece of research matured and developed along five years. As the author includes a short biography or auto-ethnography, as he calls it, readers are informed that he is a native speaker of English who moved to Italy more than 25 years ago and worked as an English language teacher from then on for a private school first and later for university language centers. Eventually, Runcieman won a position at the Department for Interpreters and Translators at the University of Bologna and completed his PhD at King's College University in London. This self-presentation provides us with information about a participant researcher and also allows us to better understand his motivation for

the research, particularly for the perceptions of students in their way of becoming interpreters.

The monograph offers a table of contents, a list of figures and a list of tables. It is structured into twelve chapters and more than 130 short subchapters (the book contains 184 pages) followed by a list of references. The author's schematic style results in a comfortable, clear and fast reading experience, and the inclusion of lists and tables makes the document very easy to navigate.

In the first chapter, Runcieman summarizes his piece of research and the reader learns about the object of his study (professional identities), and its setting (the University of Bologna). The author's main aim is "to explore how [higher education] institutions attempt to construct the characterising attributes, skills and the social role of a professional figure for students, and how students in turn interpret these constructs to develop their own sense of self and place in the social world" (p. 1), and he achieves it. He does so by means of an ethnographic methodology, embodied as a year-long case study studying a group of first-year B.A. students through a series of semi-structured individual and group interviews and detailed observations in the field. The data obtained is analyzed from a small story research approach to find out how students construct the identity of the professional interpreter as they interact with dominant discourses present in curricula and teaching practices. As Runcieman states, "by adopting this lens we can also explore how this dialogue with the institution influences the students' own social identities [and] how they position themselves in the social world in terms of what they perceive themselves as being capable of doing and capable of being in their future professional lives" (p. 3).

The second chapter deals with interpreting as a profession. First, a historical overview of the role of the interpreter in society is offered, to later present current professional debates, such as the differences between community and conference interpreters, with a main focus on identity development. The chapter finishes with an overview of the development of Interpreting Studies in general and in Italy in particular.

The third chapter contains the theoretical background of this study, which is based on Bourdieusian theories about professional development, to finish with an attempt of definition of the interpreting profession today. This last section, in my opinion, could have been further developed to include more recent references, such as Gentile (2013, 2016, 2017).

Chapter 4 is one of the most complete and interesting ones in Runcieman's monograph. It consists of a revision of the literature related to his methodology and revises concepts related to narrative research, identity, and discourse and interaction. About narrative, Runcieman states that it is "as a way by which people make sense of their lives, and [...] individuals' narratives are an essential means for (re)constructing and interpreting experience" (p. 29). It is in this chapter that the concept of small story is presented and described as stories which emerge during talk-in-interaction. They are often co-constructed with others who have shared knowledge, and take the shape of the fragmentary and contingent telling of events, and present reflections about past, present and future events. Indeed, Runcieman analyzes the small stories about the interpreting profession that appear in individual and group interviews with students as well as in some casual encounters outside the interview setting.

The concept of identity is also developed in Chapter 4, where a distinction between self and social identities is made. The following sections describe how talk-in-interaction and discourse constitute the object of analysis of this study. Runcieman uses the narrative positioning analysis suggested by Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008), which is structured in three levels: “the talk-in-interaction (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008), how the narrative emerges in turn by turn talk and how the characters are positioned in relation to each other in the ‘narrative event’; the second is concerned with the actual telling, how the participants interact and co-construct the narrative in the ‘narrative-telling event’; and the third looks to how the first two levels come together in relation to wider socio-cultural contexts and Discourses circulating in society” (p. 41).

The literature revision of Chapter 4 is completed in Chapter 5, where Runcieman approaches ethnography as a research method. Ethnography is introduced, criticized, and contrasted with the concept of ethnographic perspective. The author claims that he adopts an ethnographic perspective in his study in that his approach is less comprehensive and aims at analyzing aspects of everyday life and cultural practices of a group of students.

Chapter 6 leaves behind the theoretical framework of this study to focus on the empirical research and, particularly, its methodology. With the description of the research plan, readers learn that data collection took place in 2012 and 2013. The project was presented to first year interpretation students with English as their main language of study as seeking “to investigate the students’ changing views towards their studies, with a view to proposing potential changes to the institution’s curricula” (p. 51). Participant students were required to commit to two sessions of one-to-one interviews and two sessions of group interviews over the academic year 2012-13. A total of 5 students took part in the study.

The setting was prepared to avoid formal interrogative situations and foster, instead, a comfortable environment enabling participation, communication and the co-construction of roles and meaning. Interviews were unstructured and following the model of ethnographic interview suggested by Spradely (1979), where the researcher departs from ignorance and starts without hypotheses. The first interviews were more exploratory than the second ones. Some topics which emerged during the first interviews were salvaged and offered to the interviewees for further exploration. Interviews were conducted in English, which was not the mother tongue of any of the interviewees. This implied, as the author comments, that students viewed their English native speaker interviewer as an English teacher or as a foreign researcher, probably influencing their answers.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and field notes were used to complete the information, that included the following details:

- “1. The date, time and place of observation
2. Recorded facts, details of what occurred at the site
3. Personal responses to the fact of recording field notes, thoughts and impressions
4. Attention to specific words, phrases, summaries of conversations
5. Questions about the people or behaviour at the site for further investigation
6. Page numbers to keep all observations in chronological order” (p. 58).

The discourse of the interviewees was divided into stories or narrative episodes and examined following a mixed approach comprising a categorical and a holistic content analysis (Lieblich *et al.* 1998). This fits the object of analysis, small stories, which are often fragmentary, unfinished and co-constructed by more than one narrator. The author is particularly interested in emotionally charged discourse and, thus, pays attention to “difficult episodes” (p. 64), emotive appeals to the interviewer, adverbs and verbs, repetitions and the chronological structure of the story.

It is also in Chapter 6 that readers discover the interest of the researcher to use narrative positioning (Bamberg 1997) as a framework to analyze his data. In particular, Runcieman bases his methodology on Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008), who used narrative positioning analysis to explore identity work, and develops his own method of analysis structured in three levels. Level 1 deals with the positioning of characters in the narrative event (“Where is the narrative situated and how does it develop? How are the characters portrayed and relationally positioned?”); level 2 tackles positioning in the narrative-telling event (“How was the narrative occasioned in the surrounding talk and why was it told? How do the participants position themselves in the interactive telling and how does the narrative develop in that interaction?”), and level 3, which connects levels 1 and 2 to salient discourses (“How do levels one and two relate to individual stances towards Discourses? How are these stances common to other positioning across the whole data, which might suggest collective positioning processes in relation to certain Discourses?”) (p. 68-69).

Chapter 7 presents the principal themes and subthemes found in the analysis. As it was stated in the previous chapter, the author carries out both a holistic and a categorical content analysis. In this chapter, it can be read that, for the categorical content analysis, the author focuses on his research interests: the identity of the professional interpreter; the resources required to become a professional interpreter; and student experiences in the institution (i.e. with peers and institutional representatives, such as teachers) (p. 72). Four themes, 12 subthemes in two different levels and four overarching categories are established:

#### TOPICS:

1. The professional interpreter is a language expert.
2. Only students who speak like native-speakers can become interpreters.
  - 2.1. There is not enough time to become like native-speakers in the three-year degree.
  - 2.2. To become like native speakers, students need to live abroad for long periods of time.
3. Students are the best language students because they are in the best institution in Italy.
  - 3.1. Students are always under pressure to study more.
  - 3.2. Students study all the time and have no time to relax.
  - 3.3. Students are highly competitive in the classroom, more than any other students in any other institution.
    - 3.3.1. Competitiveness helps improve language learning.
    - 3.3.2. Competitiveness creates a bad working environment in the classroom.
    - 3.3.3. Competitiveness prepares students for their future careers.

4. The relation between teachers and students in the institution is very different from other Italian higher education institutions.
  - 4.1. Teachers have too much power over students.
  - 4.2. Teachers do not respect students' rights.
  - 4.3. Teachers do not treat students as mature students.
  - 4.4. Teachers are sometimes unprofessional (p. 72-73).

#### CATEGORIES:

1. Reporting teacher talk about the professional interpreter.
2. Talk about language learning.
3. Talk about the character of the interpreter-student in the institution.
4. Talk about teacher-student relations (p. 73).

The author offers a description of the categories and a summary of quantitative data organized in 14 tables.

The following chapters include the analysis of the small stories using the narrative positioning approach. The author aims at drawing connections between local narrative episodes and salient discourses related to the interviewees' construction of their identities as students, on the one hand, and of the identity of the professional interpreter on the other. Instead of organizing the information according to the themes or the categories listed above, Chapter 8 deals with the teacher talk about interpreting, Chapter 9 addresses topics about language levels and interpreting, whereas Chapter 10 tackles the relationships between the students and the institution. In each chapter, the author develops the three levels of analysis he described in Chapter 6, offering and describing examples from the transcription of the interviews.

Chapter 11 contains the conclusions of this piece of research in subsections which follow the same thematic structure as the chapters that presented the analysis. Thus, in the subsection Teacher Talk About Interpreters, the author summarizes the teachers' discourse about interpreters reported by students. The interpreter is presented by teachers as a language expert on the one hand, and a visible agent in the interpreted communicative event on the other, the former image being the dominant one. Teachers also emphasize the prestige of the institution, which makes students reflect upon their own capacities. As students, they feel pressured to achieve the high standards attributed to the institution and reflect on their present life devoted to studying and a future professional life full of stress as interpreters.

The title of the following subchapter is The Professional Interpreter and the Native Speaker, and deals with discourses about linguistic competence as the principal competence needed to become a good interpreter. Students feel time devoted to complete their studies is not enough to acquire both a native-like linguistic competence and the skills and abilities needed to perform as a professional interpreter.

Finally, the subsection Interpreter-Student Identities in the Institution offers insights into the relationship between students and the institution. The first salient topic is a dichotomy between studying and having fun, which seems to divide students into good future interpreters and bad drop outs. Once again, the pressure of studying at a prestigious institution appears as a central concern, as

well as some criticism towards those students who even neglect their physical and mental health if they devote their time only to studying, and who compete with their classmates to become better students (and interpreters).

The last chapter (Chapter 12) includes a concluding summary where the author states that “[t]his book is concerned with how HE institutions train future professionals, and in particular professional interpreters”, and “with how certain Discourses may be out of sync with the professional world, and how HE institutions need to reflect more on how they construct professional figures for their students in order to respond to changes in contemporary society (i.e. the growing importance of the role of community interpreting in the world, and the need to address that interpreter identity in HE degrees)” (p. 167). Runcieman concludes that salient discourses are varied within HE institutions and sometimes even contradictory. On the other hand, students may perceive these discourses differently from what might have been the institution’s original intention, which might impact on their social identity. In this chapter, Runcieman also offers suggestions for changes in curricula and institutions, regarding the methodological approach and for further research.

To sum up, *The Identity of the Professional Interpreter* presents a thorough piece of research carried out in the framework of a PhD dissertation. It offers interesting insights concerning a methodological approach based on the narrative positioning analysis of small stories for the study of students’ perceptions about interpreting training.

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