A Study on the Professional Identity Crisis of Contemporary Interpreters in China

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ABSTRACT

The interpreting professionalization faces a variety of challenges in China, such as the increasing number of interpreters, rising societal English proficiency, and advancements in artificial intelligence, leading to crises in interpreters' professional identity. Existing studies predominantly focus on interpreters' roles in interpreting activities from a third-party perspective. Research on interpreters' professional identity from their own perspective remain insufficient. This study aims to understand the impact of challenges to the interpreting profession on the professional identity of interpreters.

Employing ethnographic methods, the research studies 50 practicing professional interpreters in the Chinese interpreting market during 2023–2024. Interviews totaling 623,181 Chinese characters are coded under constructivist grounded theory. A narrative analysis is conducted followed by a multimodal analysis of interpreters' social media activities. Surveys are processed using statistical tools to explore correlations between challenges in the industry and interpreters' perceptions of professional identity crisis. The data were interpreted with reference to identity theory and symbolic interactionism.

Three research questions were addressed: (1) How do interpreters acquire their professional identity? (2) What identity crises interpreters face throughout their career? (3) How can interpreters cope with these crises and uphold their professional identity?

Shen Zhourong, abstract of Ph.D. thesis in English and Simplified Chinese, i–iv

The study finds that students are heavily motivated by their imagination of the profession, which is co-constructed by media, family and friends, professional education and role models. The acquirement of professional identity requires interpreters to go through three stages, including academic advancement, rigorous practice, and profession entry. The arduous path to identity affirmation is also the first identity crisis interpreters face. Overcoming psychological setbacks and frustration, and affirming their interpreting and interpreter competence signify resolution of this stage's crisis.

Along the line of individual development, interpreters face the crisis of a lack of belonging. It undermines interpreters' commitment to their professional community, affecting their long-term identity affirmation and sustainment. The third crisis is achieving a stable professional identity. In the social field, interpreters first face the crisis of declining professional returns. Second, interpreters face the crisis brought by rising societal English proficiency and advancements in artificial intelligence. Third, interpreters face the crisis of changes in public perception, which deems that they are going to be replaced by technology.

This study proposes solutions tailored to three phases of interpreters' professional identity development. Media outlets should accurately portray interpreting to foster a correct public understanding, while interpreter education programs should cultivate realistic career expectations among students. Professional associations should play a stronger role in regulating the industry, protecting interpreters' rights, promoting public awareness, and providing dispute arbitration. Associations should also offer community-building opportunities and professional certification to enhance interpreters' identity affirmation, sense of belonging, and identity stability.

This study represents the first attempt to examine the professional identity crisis of contemporary interpreters in China. Theoretically, it introduces identity theory and symbolic interactionism and constructs a framework for interpreters' professional identity, identifying interpreting and interpreter competence as its core. Practically, it unveils interpreter's

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professional identity crises and offers solutions to address these issues, providing recommendations to both regulators and educators in interpreting profession.

KEYWORDS: identity crisis, interpreter, interpreting education, interpreting professionalization, professional identity

Completion of thesis

Place: University of International Business and Economics, China

Year: 2025

Supervisor: Professor Gao Bin

Original language: Chinese

中国当代口译员职业身份危机研究

摘要

中国口译职业化进程正面临包括从业人数激增、社会英语水平普遍提升、人工智能技术快速发展等多重挑战，这些因素共同导致译员产生职业身份危机。现有研究多从外部视角探讨译员在口译活动中的角色与功能，缺乏从译员主体视角出发探究其职业身份认同的研究。本研究旨在揭示口译职业面临的挑战对译员职业身份认同的影响。

研究采用民族志方法，在 2023-2024 年间对中国口译市场的 50 名职业译员进行追踪研究。研究在建构主义扎根理论的指导下，对总计 623,181 字的访谈文本进行编码分析和叙事分析，对译员的社交媒体行为开展多模态分析，运用统计工具分析问卷，探究行业挑战与职业身份危机的相关性，以身份同一性理论和符号互动论为支撑阐释研究结果。

研究主要解决三个问题：(1) 译员如何建构职业身份？(2) 译员职业生涯面临哪些身份危机？(3) 如何应对危机并维护职业身份？

研究发现，学生群体的从业动机主要源于媒体、亲友、专业教育及职业榜样共同构建的职业想象。个体需要经历学历提升、刻苦训练和入行三个阶段获得职业身份。艰难的身份确认历程也构成了个体需要面对的首个身份危机。克服心理落差和挫败感。完成对自身口译和译员能力的肯定标志着译员成功克服本阶段的身份危机。在个体发展维度，译员面临的第二个身份危机是缺乏归属感，缺乏归属感会导致译员对职业共同体产生怀疑，影响个体对译员职业身份的长期认同与存续。第三，译员需要应对取得职业身份稳态的危机。在社会场域中，译员群体首先面临着职业回报降低所带来的身份危机，其次面临社会英语能力提升与 AI 技术发展的冲击，还需应对公众"技术替代"叙述所带来社会认知危机。

研究针对译员职业身份发展的三阶段提出了解决方案。媒体应客观呈现口译职业的全貌以正确塑造公众认知，教育机构需培养学生建立合理的职业预期。行业协会应强化

行业规范、维护从业者权益、改善社会认知并提供争议调解机制，同时通过构建职业社群和完善的认证体系增强译员的身份认同、归属感及身份稳态。

本文是对中国当代口译员职业身份危机研究的首次尝试。理论方面，首次将身份同一性理论和符号互动论引入对口译员身份危机的解读。构建了译员职业身份构成图，指出口译能力和译员能力是译员职业身份构成的核心。实践方面，研究发现了译员面临的职业身份危机并提出了解决方案。研究也为规范中国口译行业和改进口译教学提出了相关建议。

关键词：身份危机；口译员；口译教学；口译职业化；职业身份