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Reframing Interpreter's Identity in an English as a Lingua Franca World: An Autoethnographic Exploration

Zhourong Shen [1] , *Bin Gao* [2*]

[1] *School of Interpreting and Translation, Beijing International Studies University, Beijing 100024, China*
[2] *School of English and International Studies, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing 100089, China*

ABSTRACT

In the context of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), interpreters increasingly work with clients with higher levels of English proficiency. Interpreters often find themselves remaining silent during conversations, sometimes dealing with non-interpreting tasks. This oxymoron of 'silent interpreter' creates a self-perceived identity crisis for interpreters. Little attention has been given to how interpreters navigate this challenge. This autoethnographic study examines the first author's experience as both an interpreter and researcher during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games through a narrative inquiry approach. The findings reveal that ELF is perceived as an imminent threat to professional identity. Assuming non-interpreting roles generates frustration and a sense of misalignment with the roles prescribed by conventional code of ethics. However, this identity crisis is reconciled by recognizing the value embedded in these expanded responsibilities, which draw on the linguistic and executive abilities developed through professional interpreting training. Reframing interpreter's identity requires embracing a broader spectrum of tasks beyond the conventional role of linguistic transfer, including cultural mediation, communication facilitation, and language consultation. This reframing of professional identity not only helps the reconciliation with the self-perceived identity crisis, but could also empower interpreters at large to adapt to new realities brought by ELF. The research contributes to the discussion of role, identity and ethics in interpreting theory, practice and education.

Keywords: Interpreter's Identity; Interpreter's Role; Identity Crisis; Beijing 2022 Olympics; English as a Lingua Franca; Autoethnography

1. Introduction

The unprecedented global spread of English as a lingua franca (ELF) is a phenomenon that poses challenges to the age-old craft of interpreting[1]. ELF is generally regarded as the common language of choice, among speakers who come from different linguacultural backgrounds[2]. Although often discussed as a linguistic strategy[3,4], ELF is also a phenomenon that reflects a growing number of multilinguals. It adds complexity to the identity of these multilingual professionals[5], particularly for interpreters who work across languages and cultures. Interpreters are finding themselves operating in a world in which interlocutors are more proficient in English.

Recognizing the scarcity of empirical research on identity construction in ELF communications, Sung[6] points out the importance of investigating the relationship between identity and ELF in Asian contexts. The impact of ELF on China's interpreting community is acutely experienced by interpreters, but it is still unclear how ELF affects interpreters' professional identity. Interpreters now work with clients who are highly bilingual or even multilingual, possessing a high level of education. Some have obtained degrees in English-speaking countries. Clients today are less reliant on interpreters compared to their predecessors who lacked English proficiency. Consequently, both freelance and in-house interpreters increasingly find themselves assigned with non-interpreting responsibilities, despite being officially designated as interpreters. It is important to acknowledge that interpreters' actual professional activities may differ from their idealized working self. Interpreters may face a challenge in preserving their professional identity due to the disjunction between their self-conception and the shifting of their professional roles as a result of ELF.

Professional identity can be defined as the perception of oneself as a professional and is closely related to the knowledge and skills one has, the work one does, and the work-related significant others[7]. As the significant others in interpreting in relation to interpreters, clients determine the work experience of interpreters. The accumulation of work experience and feedback from working relations form identity, which is part of ongoing discursive processes in social interaction[8,9]. In the case of interpreters, their identity is formed and reformed through their interactions with stakeholders before, during and after interpreting activities.

A sociological approach to identity is concerned with how people negotiate the social world around them, how they learn social roles through personal experience, and by negotiating their own position in relation to them assume identities[10]. The lack of a robust, clear-cut identity could lead to an erosion of the professional self and impact on professional salience and effectiveness[11]. Experiences of "silent interpreting" are already affecting interpreters in practice, and are undermining their self-perception as competent bilinguals. Such circumstances present opportunities for analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself, which, according to Erikson[12], means the occurrence of an identity crisis.

The concept of interpreter's identity crisis was first put forward by Hale[13], who points out that interpreters face many pressures in their work, including the institutional, professional and interpersonal influence, as well as the ambivalence about the their role. In an ELF world, the identity crisis that arises from engaging in non-interpreting roles prompts the question of whether interpreters continue to anchor themselves as intercultural linguistic professionals, irrespective of the services they offer. Therefore, this study aims to understand how interpreters' professional identity is reshaped and redefined during their professional engagements, in which their clients are no longer monolingual speakers.

To gain insights into the firsthand experience of interpreter in the field, this autoethnographic study took advantage of the first author's role as both a practicing interpreter and researcher. The first author served as the chief interpreter inside the closed loop in the Yanqing Olympic/Paralympic Village from Jan 21st to March 18th, 2022 for the entire period of the Beijing 2022 Olympics and Paralympics and kept a journal. Beijing 2022 adopted a closed-loop policy as a Covid-19 prevention strategy. All accredited personnel can only move within the bubble without contact with the outside world. While conferences are simultaneously interpreted remotely, each venue is responsible for its own on-site encounters. The village hosts residents from 87 countries and English is the working language for all participants. The workforce, including the venue director, in the village also speaks English, though with vastly different proficiency. It constitutes an ideal environment to examine the effect of ELF on interpreter's professional identity. A narrative inquiry is conducted over key excerpts of the two-month-long

journal, which offers longitudinal and context-specific perspective for delving into the intricacies of the interpreter's professional identity in an ELF environment.

2. Theoretical Underpinning

2.1. ELF and Interpreter's Identity

The popularization of English in China has been going on since the reform and opening up in 1978[14], and has been taken to new heights upon major events such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics[15,16]. However, studies on the impact of ELF in the Chinese context are scarce. Existing research focus primarily on culture[17], ideology[18] and pedagogy[19]. There is a lacuna of research on identity as the monolingual society does not give rise to the issue in the past. The overall improvement of English proficiency of Chinese nationals and their declining dependence on interpreters who have long been their linguistic mediator bring to the fore the question of interpreter identity. A pervasive rhetoric among interpreters is the concern for professional prospects as they struggle to make sense of themselves in an ELF world, leading to a diminishing sense of professional identity.

Interpreter's identity primarily hinges on their ability of linguistic conversion between two or more languages, and they take pride in their knowledge of foreign cultures. Linguistic identity, as a form of social identity, is most commonly realized through an individual's self-definition derived from membership in a linguistic group. Individuals with a strong linguistic identity hold the language in higher esteem than any other language[20]. Their social position was mainly characterized by their dual cultural identity before a distinct professional identity emerged[21]. The professionalization and the emergence of new dynamics of interpreting have complicated interpreters' job as well as their identity. Interpreters' working conditions are now adversely affected by ELF, with consequences for performance quality and job satisfaction[1,22,23]. These changes raise questions of what interpreters perceive as professional standards in these settings and how they experience and perceive such changing circumstances[1,24].

These questions were partly addressed by Chang and Wu as they find that conference interpreters acknowledge fewer audience now rely on interpreting as they have become more sophisticated and highly educated[25]. And their

expectations of interpreters and their performance are more refined than the relevant industry standards[26]. Deteriorating working conditions are also reflected by the interlocutors' increased ability and initiative to speak English themselves, rather than communicate through interpreters. Mastering linguistic skills in English becomes a symbolic resource that is heavily endowed with social value—something that is not equally available to all persons[27]. This is particularly evident in Chinese society as being able to speak good English is often a sign of professionalism and status. Interlocutors sometimes even take pride in not needing interpreters. Interpreters felt the adverse effects of the spread of ELF on market conditions, a decline in status and an impoverishment of communication in international encounters[28]. In addition to less reliance from clients, Chinese interpreters are also faced with diminishing employment opportunities, and an increasing assumption of non-traditional responsibilities.

A profound identity crisis is unfolding driven by ambivalent and uncomfortable feelings of insecurity and split loyalties partly resulting from the contradictory expectations, demands and needs of the various agents in the interpreted encounter[29]. Calling ELF a defining moment, Hewson[30] underlines the dangers that the spread of ELF represents both for the translation profession and market. Researchers have called for an expanded scope of responsibilities in translation and interpreting to adapt to this change, such as the acquisition of editing skills and mediation[31,32]. Nevertheless, these new responsibilities appear to be imposed on interpreters against their predominant professional motivation of linguistic conversion. Interpreters are grappling with their identities as they find themselves gradually losing their established status and pride. The identity crisis emanating from performing non-interpreting roles raises the question of whether interpreters can still see themselves as interpreters regardless of the services they provide.

Existing literature on interpreter identity primarily addresses concerns related to status, image, and role[33–35], although most studies tend to concentrate on specific interpreting contexts, notably within healthcare, legal, or asylum settings. More recent research on identity has taken a predominantly macro-level approach, exploring the influence of both personal and professional experiences on the identity of Korean interpreters[9,36]. The identity of Chinese interpreters, however, has received little scholarly attention.

The first study touching upon interpreter identity in China was a survey in 2009 as part of a grander design to understand role and status. At that time, the professionalization of interpreting in China was still in its early stages and interpreters enjoy higher status with a down-to-earth attitude to their role and contribution to society[37]. The research calls for future contrastive studies, only to be reciprocated by a handful of studies on broadcasted political events featuring diplomat interpreters due to limited accessibility of interpreting events to researchers[38,39]. Besides, diplomatic settings require interlocutors to speak their national languages for political reasons, offer little insights into the impact of ELF on interpreters' identity. A wider group of interpreters who work in interpreting market of a diverse range of settings and forms remain inaccessible to the research community and are under-researched.

Researchers have become increasingly interested in understanding more about who is doing the mediating than just stopping at the sociocultural dimensions of source and target texts[40]. Previous studies are predominantly based on a third-person perspective that puts interpreters under scrutiny, focusing on their linguistic choices. But identity is about the self-positioning and understanding of one's place in the world, calling for the introspection of interpreters on their professional experiences from a first-person perspective. Therefore, it is crucial to shift the focus from linguistic performance to interpreters' reflective insights into their self-perceptions throughout an extended period of their professional service. Interpreting studies have mainly privileged collective identities of interpreters[41], leaving the in situ individual experience of interpreters underexplored. An effective approach to gain insights into the experiences of interpreters is to delve into their narratives about their professional lives in an ELF background.

2.2. Narrative Inquiry and Interpreter's Story

Narrative, as an epistemological concept that reflects a postmodern concern with the self, identity, and individuality, reveals how we position ourselves and others in the social world, how we wish to be perceived and claim identities[42,43]. Experiences become narratives when we tell them to an audience, and narratives become part of narrative inquiry when they are examined for research purposes or generated to report the findings of an inquiry[44]. The use of narrative inquiry to understand interpreters emerged along the social turn in interpreting studies. Baker[45] sees narratives as the everyday stories we live by, a turn that brings interpreters front stage in the promulgation of their discourse.

Narrative inquiry is principally concerned with the content of people's experiences and their reflections on those experiences. It expounds on what a narrative can tell them about a person's experiences, how they represent past experiences, and how they interpret those experiences in their telling[46]. Narrative inquiry has been increasingly used in interpreting studies to understand interpreters' role, ethics and identity[47–49]. It cannot be separated from temporality, locality and sociality, that is, the time, place and social context in which people's experiences and events unfold. An interpreter's story presents a perspective that focuses on the contextual experience of bilingual/multilingual professionals rather than just on the utterances they produce.

Building on the first author's autoethnography, this paper explores the following research questions to understand the challenged professional identity of interpreters as their clients become more proficient in English:

1. What are the new roles interpreters have to undertake?
2. How do interpreters understand these roles?
3. How do these roles affect interpreter's professional identity?

3. Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a qualitative approach of research that aims to understand cultural experience through the description of personal experience by looking into individuals' lived stories from a sociocultural perspective[50] Among the varies strains of autoethnography, 'analytic autoethnography' requires the researcher to be a complete member of the research target and provide analytic reflexivity over their narrative that transcends themselves[51]. This coincides with what Gile proposes as 'practisearcher' in interpreting studies, allowing the presentation of an insider's examination of interpreting as a social practice rather than a linguistic transfer activity[52,53]. Following a poststructuralist approach, Bahadır looks at interpreters as ethnographers and interpreting researchers as anthropologists, stresses the necessity to take a closer look at the "fieldwork" of the interpreter; the lived experiences show us a path out of endless [semi]theoretical

discussions in a prescriptive vacuum [54]. Being a critical tool for us to look into our thoughts, feelings and identities in times of sociocultural crisis [55], autoethnography provides a methodological foundation for the exploration of interpreters' identity crisis in times of ELF.

Joining a handful of research adopting the autoethnographic method in interpreting [56–58], this study took advantage of the first author's vantage position as both an interpreter servicing the Olympics Organizing Committee and a researcher on interpreting to examine how the interpreter repositions their identity. The first author served as the in-house interpreter during the preparation leading up to the Games and already felt the effect of ELF. For the purpose of this study, the first author wrote a 12,376-word journal from January 21st to March 18th, 2022, covering the entire period of the Beijing 2022 Olympics and Paralympics. The journal consists of the interpreter's telling (report of lived experience) and retelling (reflexive narrative) of each interpreted encounter.

The interpretation of the narrative data is suggested to be analyzed over time for instances of "iterativity" [repeated types of storylines] [59,60], and for "patterns" [tendencies in the way issues are viewed and dealt with by individuals] [61], as they are the narrative representation of theoretical abstractions. Thus, sense is mapped out by looking for similarities and then grouping them as members of the same category following a thematic analysis [62], in which themes were categorized and patterns of association were identified. In this way, self-observant autoethnography can rise above the inherent bias of idiographic particularity and address theoretical issues [51].

To identify the iterativity and patterns in the autoethnography, two researchers conducted thematic analysis first through two rounds of thorough reviews to gain a deep understanding of the content. NVivo 14 was employed for the independent coding process to ensure analytic rigor. An internal consistency of 92.19% was achieved. After subsequent evaluation and discussion, codes were refined and appropriately labeled. Three themes were identified in the narrative: the new roles assumed for non-interpreting assignments, the values gained from these tasks, and the language interpreters used to delineate the shift in their mentality. Upon the presentation of the interpreter's narrative in the ensuing section, discussions were made centering on the three themes.

4. The Lived Experience and Its Reflexive Narrative

4.1. Standing by as a Fallback to Interlocutors

January 27th, 2022

A top official of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Samuel(pseudonym), was visiting the village today. I was really excited to interpret for him. I've interpreted for many top officials before of course, but this time it's different since it is the Olympics! Interpreting in such an occasion not only shows my importance to the operation team, but also adds weight to my resume for future interpreting jobs. But I worry how much interpreting I can actually do since the venue director is an English major herself. As I thought, she told me: "you need to stay by my side and pay attention to the conversation, support me if I fall short." She was able to communicate with Samuel in English for most of the time, and I was indeed disappointed for being of no use. However, when they were visiting the Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) Exhibition in the Plaza area, she choked when the volunteer introduced 经络 (jīng luò) in Chinese. She turned to me and said: "I don't know this word." I jumped right in and said: "the meridian." The volunteer went on and introduced Yin, Yang, and Chi and the likes of such, and I started the interpreting. Thank God I had a big reservoir of knowledge. I was glad, on the one hand for being able to interpret something, and on the other hand, for showing the necessity of my presence and value at last. The director asked me to write a summary after the event and recall Samuel's review on the village: "is there anything he said that could conclude this visit"? I responded in a way that was like interpreting. In three seconds, I said: "he said: 'life is good in Yanqing Village' ". This line was quoted by all the news coverage on Samuel's visit and the director was pleased.

Throughout the event, the interpreter grappled with the concern of being perceived merely as "arm candy," as their interpreting services were seldom required. The oxymoron of a "silent interpreter" raises the question: to what extent can one still be considered an interpreter when they rarely engage in interpreting? This diminished role proved frustrating, exacerbating the persistent anxiety of feeling redundant and undervalued in future assignments. The interpreter's only significant moment of participation came when the director began choking—an instance where their linguistic proficiency and extensive knowledge became crucial.

The interpreter ultimately demonstrated their value by providing a synopsis at the event's conclusion, a task frequently requested of interpreters. While summarizing discussions extends beyond the conventional role of interpreting, it necessitates attentively following every conversation as if preparing to interpret. Although the director led the discussion, her focus was not on linguistic accuracy. Others present either had a weaker command of English or were positioned too far to hear as clearly as the interpreter. While the absence of interpreting diminished the interpreter's perceived role, their value was reclaimed through alternative contributions—albeit with frustration. Yet, when an opportunity arises to affirm the necessity of an interpreter's presence, it must be seized to reinforce the profession's continued relevance.

4.2. Stepping out of the Conventional Role of Linguistic Transfer

February 11th, 2022

Another official of IOC, Barry(pseudonym), was visiting the village today. It was even more sensational than the last IOC visit. People come in herds to watch him but they had to stay at a distance. Some cast jealous looks at me for being by his side. I was asked by the director explicitly this time to write a synopsis, minutes and select quotes for the media. When Barry finished his visit to the TCM exhibition, he was invited to write his best wishes on two Lucky Balls. He gifted the first ball to the exhibition and paused at the second ball: "what should I write"? Those present were eager to engage with Barry. Some said: "to

a successful Beijing 2022". Barry frowned: "The Olympics is not finished yet. I can't write that now". A volunteer suggested that Barry dedicate the ball to his alma mater, only to be rejected by a silent refusal. The situation came to an awkward pause, even the venue director was at a loss on what to say. I stepped forward and said: "why not dedicate this ball to the Yanqing Olympic Village?" Barry agreed. I was thanked later for this act by my superiors.

At first, the interpreter was swept up in vanity and satisfaction at being part of the visit, only to later be overwhelmed by fear and disorientation. Serving as an interpreter for officials grants proximity to power, creating an illusion of importance. Indeed, interpreters frequently appear with high profile events and important names, affiliating them with power[63]. However, the sustainability of this perceived status depends largely on whether their services are required. In this case, the interpreter was needed not for interpreting but for linguistic support. Although linguistic support is also a form of power coming from their bilingual and bicultural experience[64], this shift left the first author conflicted and filled with doubt, as they found themselves reduced to the role of a language secretary. It felt like a professional downgrade, depriving them of career satisfaction and eroding their sense of belonging within the interpreting profession. Frustrating as it was, this was a choice without alternatives—after all, mere presence was preferable to irrelevance.

The "Lucky Ball" situation illustrated this dilemma. When Barry was writing best wishes, everyone present overlooked the most obvious and logical answer. Their motives—whether self-serving or contextually inappropriate—prevented them from recognizing the broader communicative purpose. The first author was the only one who could fully grasp the situation, discern the communicative intent, empathize with interlocutors, and, most crucially, occupy both a physical and figurative position to intervene. Interpreters exist in a paradoxical state of presence and absence: they are part of the event yet remain outside the conversation, assessing interactions as both insiders and outsiders. Prescriptive ethics dictate that interpreters should not speak out of turn, yet in this case, circumstances necessitated their visibility. However, this was less about managing the conversation and more about managing the situation. The interpreter

sought to demonstrate their value—not by adhering strictly to conventional expectations but by justifying their presence in an evolving and situationally fluid role.

4.3. Encountering the New Role of Counsellor

February 21st, 2022

> Seeing I was around as an interpreter on many occasions; the team started to consult me on all things about language and translation. I remember before the village opening, a co-worker asked me: "Could you please see if this notice is well-written? 'Remember to do nucleic acid test. Otherwise you may not be able to participate in the competition'. We don't know much about their ways of speaking. I need your support; could you please weigh in?" Considering the cultural difference, I revised this notice into: "Get tested for COVID to ensure your access to competitions." I am now officially a cultural counsellor! The Participation Certificate of the Winter Olympic Games was open for download; I found that the French word "paralympiques" was spelled as "pvvaralympiques". I alerted the team at once so that they could revise it before more misprints could be downloaded.

Although other staff members spoke fluent English, the first author was still perceived as the primary authority on language, culture, and translation. The draft of this certificate had likely passed through multiple hands before being finalized, yet no one had noticed the spelling mistake. Out of professional habit, the interpreter reviewed the certificate, ultimately preventing the Organizing Committee from appearing unprofessional. This incident reinforced the idea that matters of language, communication, and culture are often best handled by interpreters—even beyond formal interpreting tasks. However, this raised a fundamental question for interpreters: how should they now perceive their role? The metaphor of a tree aptly captures this evolving identity—the interpreter serves as the trunk, while the various supplementary roles branch out from it.

The satisfaction and pride derived from language conversion alone are no longer sufficient to sustain an interpreter's professional survival, particularly in the context of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), which demands a broader skill set. Interpreters can still be interpreters, but their roles now carry additional layers of meaning. Rather than merely making the best of an inconvenient reality, they might be better served by embracing these changes proactively and redefining their professional scope.

5. Discussion

Subjectivity, being our sense of ourselves, shows how a person understands their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future[65,66]. The interpreter's identity in the narrative reflects three defining characteristics of subjectivity: the multiple, nonunitary nature of the subject, subjectivity as a site of struggle and subjectivity as changing over time[66]. A summary table of the evolvement of subjectivity over the three themes identified is listed below in **Table 1**.

5.1. Role

Interpreters, while serving as advocates for parties through their linguistic expertise, undoubtedly wield a degree of agency that bolsters their professional identity. An array of studies on interpreter's role refutes the machine-like conduit model by pointing out interpreting happens in a context and interpreters facilitate and mediate a communication[67–69]. Indeed, much of what happens in interpreting context has a place in the collective identity[70]. Interpreter's identity is more likely to be affected by other participants activities[71]. However, when interpreter's interactions with clients are no longer confined to linguistic transfer but extend into non-interpreting roles, interpreters grapple with an identity crisis. This internal struggle is about whether these roles should be considered supplementary responsibilities or an entirely new dimension of their role as an interpreter, as they realize that their professional practice no longer aligns with the conventional code of ethics of interpreting.

Table 1. Evolvement of subjectivity.

	Established Norms	Impact of ELF	Repositioning of Self
Role	conduit	fallback to interlocutor language secretary	linguistic advisor/authority cultural counsellor/expert language services provider
Value	linguistic transfer English proficiency	depreciation of English proficiency diminished career satisfaction erosion of sense of belonging	extensive knowledge executive abilities intercultural sensitivity meticulousness situational awareness empathize with interlocutors
Language	vanity satisfaction Self-importance proximity to power	worry, fear, doubt, insecurity anxiety, disappointment, frustration confliction, disorientation, depression	renegotiation reconciliation reinvention reinvigoration empowerment

The concept that identity is multifaceted and not confined to a single, unitary form is pivotal in comprehending the impact of non-interpreting roles on interpreters. Initially, the interpreter sought to reaffirm their role as an interpreter but instead assumed the role of a language advisor, supporting the venue director as needed. In practice, they functioned as a consultant rather than a conventional interpreter. Recognizing that interpreting was not always the primary expectation, the interpreter adapted to their standby roles, intervening only when circumstances required. Conventional interpreting ethics dictate that interpreters should not interject or independently verify statements when uncertain about the content. However, during Barry's visit, the first author took the initiative to break an awkward pause, navigating the boundaries of their conventional role and prioritizing situational demands.

The decision to take on additional responsibilities raises questions about whether or not conventional code of ethics still applies in today's industry. Ren[72] points out that the interpreting industry is likely to conform to the requests of clients, demanding a somewhat different set of subcomponents of competence and services. Breaking the bounds of conventional ethics, interpreters have come to terms with their actions as they are expected to assume the role of communication experts. As a result, interpreters experience a degree of detachment from their perceptions of what their roles should be, particularly when consulted as language experts in non-interpreting contexts. An expanded description of the code of ethics would allow for more flexibility for interpreters to position themselves.

A reciprocal causality exists between the roles interpreters assume and the shifts in their professional identity. Much of what interpreters do during an event is shaped by the unique expectations and linguistic abilities of their clients, as well as the interpreter's own reading of the situation. The emergence of non-interpreting roles, particularly in an English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) environment, challenges the conventional code of ethics that frames interpreter's positioning of professional identity. However, rather than passively succumbing to these changes, interpreters are actively adapting to new roles while preserving their professional stature. Their evolving self-perception is informed by their recognition of the value they bring to these new functions.

5.2. Value

Identity is in a never-ending struggle over power, something that fills up social context in which subjectivity is produced[65]. Interpreters work across cultural, educational and socio-economic divides where power differentials can be quite salient[73,74]. English proficiency is in itself a symbol of power and value[75]. Interpreters' attempt at proving their value to their English-savvier clients can be understood as a struggle over power. The struggle, however, is not to compete with interlocutors but to justify their presence by offering what Bourdieu calls symbolic capital[76]. Interpreters working in the private market in China do not enjoy diplomatic interpreters' high status that comes with being connected with big names[63], therefore they have to branch out to bring new values into circulation when the value of

interpreting is no longer an active currency. To understand this change, one needs to look into how interpreters engage with social context across time and space.

The interpreter, initially a silent presence at the event, gained recognition for providing the most newsworthy quote from Samuel. This ability aligns with the interpreter's advantage hypothesis, which suggests that the task-specific cognitive skills developed by professional interpreters generalize to more efficient linguistic and executive abilities in non-interpreting tasks[77]. The venue director took note of this skill and later requested the interpreter to perform the same task during Barry's visit. The interpreter further justified their presence by resolving an awkward situation: when Barry rejected all suggestions for the Lucky Ball inscription, it was because the interlocutors failed to align with his perspective. Thanks to their professional training and experience, the interpreter was able to bridge this gap, selecting the most obvious and contextually appropriate response. Their ability to zoom in and out of the communicative event—understanding both the speaker's perspective and the audience's expectations—allowed them to deliver the *mot juste* for the moment. However, in an ELF context, the interpreter's *mot juste* extends beyond mere word choice, encompassing broader roles in language services, communication support, and cultural mediation. Increasingly, the value derived from interpreting expertise is gaining traction in non-interpreting contexts.

The struggle over the interpreter's professional value continues beyond formal interpreting events. A co-worker's request for consultation on translating a daily COVID-19 test reminder further affirmed the interpreter's role as a language and cultural expert. Interpreters can perceive intercultural noise and see it as a natural element to be overcome in the course of interpreter-mediated events[78], and they view multilingualism and multiculturalism as realities that must be adapted to by assisting the parties in managing them, because they have the ability and the potential to do so[79]. The expertise and intercultural sensitivity honed through interpreting prove valuable both within and beyond traditional interpreting tasks, demonstrating the relevance of interpreting as a form of text mediation even in the absence of immediate oral interaction.

Recognizing that their interpreting expertise could generate institutional value, the interpreter took proactive steps without explicit instruction. Upon identifying a spelling error in the final version of the Winter Olympic Games Participation Certificate, they alerted the Organizing Committee before more faulty copies could be distributed. Some might view an interpreter's tendency to scrutinize multilingual documents for errors as an "obnoxious" professional habit, yet such meticulousness—instilled through years of training and practice—is highly valued by institutions. By leveraging their expertise to enhance institutional credibility, the interpreter secured their relevance in an evolving professional landscape. An interpreter who assumes the roles of a multifunctional language service provider beyond those of an interpreter would not only survive but also prevail through accumulated social, economic, and symbolic capital in the market, provided they are satisfactorily rated by their clients[72]. This negotiation of value reflects a broader struggle over professional agency and identity, ultimately expanding the definition of what it means to be an interpreter.

5.3. Language

The reframing of identity can also be observed in the language used to delineate this journey. Language is worth what those who speak it are worth[76]. Speakers' language use is a form of agency that foregrounds their embeddedness in the field of their practice, representing their beliefs of their positionality in the social structures[80]. A clear pattern emerged in the narrative of the interpreter is the passage from insecurity to reconciliation and finally, reinvigoration. These linguistic landmarks provide an avenue for interpreting of the interpreter's experiences with the identity crisis and how he understands the possibilities in the future.

The interpreter's sociocultural experience of ELF can be divided into two stages. The first stage, marked by insecurity, negotiation, and reconciliation, was characterized by persistent feelings of depression. The second stage, by contrast, was defined by reinvigoration. In this context, ELF is narrowly understood as an imminent threat to the stability of the interpreter's professional identity. Their initial response to this perceived loss was dominated by insecurity and isolation, as they harbored "concerns" and "worries" about being mere "arm candy" even before their first interpreting assignment. The anxiety induced by ELF had already surfaced before the Olympics, making this insecurity a prolonged

state of mind. Fearing an impending "identity demise," the interpreter struggled to sustain a professional identity that seemed increasingly at risk.

This inner turmoil manifested through anxiety, mood swings, and restlessness. The interpreter would "jump right in" when needed, yet oscillated between "vanity" and "satisfaction," "fear" and "disorientation," and "confliction" and "doubt." Refusing to succumb to the perceived existential threat, they attempted to negotiate their role within this evolving landscape and maintain their professional value one way or another. This process of bargaining and negotiation is the interpreter's mental effort in justifying their belonging to the interpreting membership [81]. When they "unexpectedly" discovered that their expertise could still be valued through non-interpreting contributions, they reconciled this "choice of no choice" and accepted the shifting professional reality. However, this reconciliation did not equate to contentment. Feelings of depression persisted, as ELF remained an undeniable force reshaping their profession. The interpreter found it "frustrating" and "upsetting" to be relegated to a secretarial role, leading to a profound "loss of satisfaction" that would otherwise have been fulfilled through more traditional interpreting responsibilities. Thus, reconciliation was not a sign of peace of mind but a reluctant adaptation. Ultimately, amid their frustration over losing a distinct interpreter identity, they resolved that "mere presence was preferable to irrelevance."

Yet, the interpreter's response to the identity crisis did not end at reconciliation. Through introspection, they reframed ELF as an opportunity for reinvention. They compared their evolving role to "a tree with a crown," where the interpreter's core identity served as the "trunk" supporting the branches of newly developed, non-interpreting tasks. This reinvigoration extended to their broader outlook on the profession's future. Faced with the "overriding force" of ELF, they recognized that leveraging the interpreter's advantage—by expanding their role into language services—ultimately reinforced their professional identity. Rather than diminishing the interpreter's status, these additional functions introduced greater "substance and connotation" to a profession long confined by prescriptive boundaries. In this shifting landscape, choosing to "take the challenge head-on" was deemed a more empowering path than simply striving to "make the best of a bad situation."

6. Conclusions

This paper analyzes excerpts from an autoethnographic journal documenting the Winter Olympics and Paralympics using a narrative inquiry approach. It examines three central themes—role, value, and language—to explore how interpreters navigate an identity crisis brought by ELF, where the increasing English proficiency of interlocutors reduces the demand for interpreting services. Contrary to what Hoyte-West [82] argued that interpreters do not always view their work as a key component of their professional identity, this study demonstrates a strong connection between the two.

The study acknowledges the tangible impact of ELF on interpreters in China. The changing dynamics of ELF have affected professional norms and ethics in interpreting, further contributing to identity crises. Many interpreters express a loss of professional satisfaction, as their value is shifting to new domains, which is understandable considering the main motivation for choosing this profession was the joy derived from translating and interpreting, and their ideal image in this profession [83]. The resulting identity crisis, therefore, stems from a misalignment between expectation and experience. In an ELF context, interpreters are no longer passive linguistic conduits but rather experts in linguacultural mediation for intercultural communication.

This paper explores the challenges interpreters face in adapting to ELF and its impact on their professional identity. It argues that interpreters must recognize the importance of overcoming insecurity and anxiety, moving toward reconciliation, and ultimately reclaiming their evolving role. Successful adaptation occurs when interpreters recognize that the new values they demonstrate are not separate from interpreting but rather an extension of it. The shock of this value shift can be mitigated by capitalizing on the interpreter's advantage, reinforcing their primary identity. While ELF reduces reliance on interpreters for direct language mediation, the multilingual and multicultural environment that accompanies ELF creates new opportunities for interpreters to expand their roles. Thus, the very definition of "interpreter" must be rediscovered and expanded—not only to help interpreters navigate their identity crisis but also to empower them by demonstrating the continued relevance of their expertise, which remains rooted in interpreting training and practice. The findings invoke the need for rethinking

interpreter training in global contexts. They highlight the possibility of revisiting the conventional code of ethics for interpreting practitioners whose linguistic mediation role often intersects with broader executive and intercultural functions.

The strength and limitation of narrative inquiry lie in its nature. While it is challenging to find authentic interpreting journals with longitudinal depth from such a seminal event, the uniqueness of this data makes broad generalization difficult. Future research could compare the experiences of more interpreters across different settings to confirm this study's broader applicability. As ELF continues to evolve in China, its long-term ramifications must be continuously examined to better understand its impact on the professionalization of interpreters.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, S.Z. and G.B.; methodology, S.Z.; software, S.Z.; validation, S.Z. and G.B.; formal analysis, S.Z.; investigation, S.Z.; resources, S.Z.; data curation, S.Z.; writing—original draft preparation, S.Z.; writing—review and editing, S.Z. and G.B.; visualization, S.Z.; supervision, G.B.; project administration, G.B.; funding acquisition, S.Z. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Autoethnographic data is already presented in the paper.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data.

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