Does a specific "interpreter midlife crisis" exist? And if it does, what is it? How does our perception of ourselves and of our profession change over the course of a career and why? And is it for better or for worse? These are topics beginners don’t usually anticipate, and seasoned interpreters may have no time to think about.

There are several entry barriers to being a language interpreter. I am not speaking about the obvious prerequisites such as analytical skills and command of foreign languages. Aspirants lacking these drop out at the training stage and look for something else commensurate with their preferences and personality. It’s only natural.

The first real barrier may be encountered a few years after successful graduation – it is the perception of your interpreting “self” as a mere word-repeating machine. Some beginners may eventually find it boring to repeat other people’s words and thoughts, especially if they know the topic well and could easily suggest their own solutions to the matter being discussed. The question “Where is the creativity in all that?” is the first major entry barrier.

But indeed, where is the creativity in repeating other people’s ideas? The answer is more difficult than it may seem. We can start with the proposition that a professional interpreter should feel relatively comfortable to be in a “service occupation” and actively enjoy doing it. Service in this context is not serfdom or servitude. Although some may think of interpreters as “the help”, their opinion and interpreters’ self-perception occur in two different realms altogether.

The very nature of a service occupation attracts a certain psychological type, one that is acutely aware that making things happen is as pleasurable and enjoyable as creating something new. Yes, we may not design new cities, engineer high-speed cars or come up with new economic theories, but without us those who actually do all these things would possibly not be able to do them at all. We thoroughly enjoy working with those people, and learn from them by osmosis. In that sense, we are creators by proxy who understand and appreciate our role as facilitators. Don’t you enjoy how people from completely different countries and backgrounds can communicate, learn something new and do something together? Call us a “universal lubricant” that makes things run smoothly.

Besides, is the interpreting profession really devoid of creativity? Only the completely noncreative would think so. We do not repeat words; we create the image of a person, that person’s “linguistic personality” in the target language. We use the elements of the target language, taking into account differences between languages, ways of thinking and cultural conditioning, to recreate how that person would speak if he or she were a native speaker. A very creative task indeed, especially considering the constraints and limitations imposed on us by the requirement to be accurate and
precise. Sometimes, it feels like you are trying to put a square peg in a round hole. Finding common human elements across cultures and connecting them becomes our expertise. It’s not dull at all, especially when you add the exhilaration of finding the right word, expression or intonation in a fraction of a second.

But even exciting things may lose their novelty and become boring. Same people, same subjects, same situations - they take their toll and often lead to the desire to recover the thrill elsewhere. Enter the diva, a well-known character in many professions. The diva possesses a histrionic or narcissistic personality and is full of himself, or simply bored. Providing a service is not a priority because peacock feathers are much more attractive; why are the feathers there in the first place? In the mind of the diva, the interpreter is an omnipotent God compared to these mere mortals who cannot communicate without him! This phenomenon is usually the result of compensation: childhood pain, unresolved issues, belittlement by authority figures make one grow muscles, puff out the chest and play god. But it’s a self-defeating game not leading to real creativity, simply an expression of neurosis. And for those who enjoy power, we invoke the words of Lao-Tzu: “The highest type of ruler is one of whose existence the people are barely aware.”

Which brings us to another point: the interrelationship between the professional and the personal. While a computer programmer’s code is not likely to depend heavily on his/her psychological characteristics, interpretation is all about personality. Our human and professional personae are intimately intertwined. In that sense, our “self” does not completely belong to us - our psychological apparatus is our tool of professional expression. Interpreting skill alone does not make an interpreter; what matters is how you interact with clients and colleagues. Just as a psychologist “lends” his self to a client so the client can use it to build his own self; the interpreter “lends” his linguistic skills and has to make sure that what he offers is not contaminated by personal issues. Identifying these personal issues and working on them becomes a professional task. Finding what you should or should not reveal to clients and setting correct boundaries become a professional requirement – it is a part of creating your “interpreter persona” that merges the personal and the professional.

This requires personal psychological work. Some are surprised by reactions of clients or comments from colleagues, or by not being rehired for an assignment. They may be unaware that they have encountered aspects of themselves that impede their professional development and need to be worked on. This is where our own personality can slow professional growth. Analysis and self-analysis in our profession are not dissimilar to the “personal therapy in training” that psychology students undergo to reveal their own conditioning before they can begin counseling others. We do not, however, have the benefit of working with an actual counselor and have to discover things on our own. Sometimes we may even make sad discoveries, for example, that it was lack of proper communication in our family during childhood that led us to our profession by creating a subconscious desire to help people communicate. Sometimes there are positive discoveries, such as reaffirming how much we enjoy interpreting.

The personal and the professional develop together over the entire course of our career. Personal insight facilitates professional development and vise versa. A midlife crisis, therefore, may lead to reevaluation of one’s personal as well as professional life, well beyond the usual depiction of it as a sense of urgency due to our time on earth running out.

When these issues are resolved, the real paradigm shift, however, is from neurosis to enjoyment, from conditioning to relaxation, from pain to awareness. It happens in midlife when we discover the negative forces that have been driving us forward in both personal and professional life, and convert them into positive creative flow.

The interpretation profession, therefore, can become a powerful form of psychotherapy and a
technique for personal growth because – just like psychotherapists - we are a step removed from the situation and do not emotionally react to it. We simply observe the actions and words of others as well as our own, which creates a safe space to note and analyze. Thus we become able to process our own issues and reactions more objectively. It is in itself a form of self-psychotherapy, a mirror in which we see our own reflection. As we are able to detect more and more personal conditioning, our style and “form” of interpretation change.

If a crisis is needed to achieve this, bring it on because there is always calm after the storm and through crises we grow.

Happy interpreting!

I would like to thank Luigi Luccarelli for his help in editing this piece.

Further reading: “The mirror is originally clean” : Simultaneous interpreting as a form of dynamic meditation

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