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'Trans'forming identities: migrant workers as informal interpreters

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ABSTRACT

Construction sites are often multilingual spaces as high numbers of migrants are employed in the industry. Bilingual workers are used as informal interpreters to enable people to work together. However, little is known about who these workers are and why they take on this language work. This paper presents the stories of three informal interpreters who help facilitate communication on international construction projects. These stories, that come from a wider ethnographic research project, demonstrate how the individual's identity is significant for why they take on this unpaid labour and how identity shapes how they perform it. This study suggests that some workers invest in their language skills, driven by their imagined communities as permanent or transnational migrants. Consequently, they are more engaged with the informal interpretation tasks than bilinguals who do not invest in their language skills and intend to return to their country of origin. This research suggests that formalising language work would help retain communication skills in the industry and may encourage investment in the informal interpreter function. This paper contributes to the theoretical discussion on investment and imagined communities by demonstrating how applying these terms generates new insights in research on migrants at work.

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Introduction: the multilingual landscape of construction sites

Internationally, the construction industry (CI) attracts a significant proportion of its workers from other countries, particularly on urban projects in more developed countries. These workers may be itinerant or permanent migrants and fill a skills gap (Chan & Dainty, 2007; Harvey & Behling, 2008). In the UK CI, for example, in 2019 around 1 in 10 workers were migrants and in London, up to 50% of the onsite workforce are migrants (Winterbotham et al., 2020). Many of these workers speak little or no English, which is frequently the only working language of the management (ONS, 2018; Oswald et al., 2019). Elsewhere, 73.8% of employees working in construction in Singapore were migrants (Hamid & Tutt, 2019, p. 4), and 27.3% of the US construction workforce were of Latino ethnicity

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(Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). This diverse nature of the construction workforce has attracted attention for many reasons. One significant issue is communication onsite between workers who do not share a common language. Communication difficulties have implications for safety, productivity, and relations. Notably, interlingual communication on construction sites has been cited as one of the causes of the higher accident rates observable among migrant construction workers (Loosemore & Lee, 2002; Tutt et al., 2011). For example, in countries such as the UK, US, Singapore and Australia, non-English-speaking background workers are at higher risk of accidents than their local English-speaking counterparts (Loosemore & Lee, 2002; Oswald et al., 2015; Sherratt, 2016). While other factors, such as working conditions and cultural differences (Hallowell & Yugar-Arias, 2016; Meardi et al., 2012; Oswald et al., 2018), also play a part, communication is significant and is the focus of this study. What is more, language barriers can inhibit integration in the workforce and are recognised as a factor that contributes to the vulnerability of migrant construction workers (Inghilleri, 2016; TUC, 2008).

Nonetheless, only a few studies in construction have investigated interlingual communication specifically (Including Hare et al., 2012; Kahlin et al., 2022; Kraft, 2020; Loosemore & Lee, 2002; O'Byrne, 2013; Oswald et al., 2019; Tutt et al., 2012). Together these studies provide an understanding of the complications of interlingual communication and document ways in which this is managed. One strategy involves using bilingual workers to facilitate communication between speakers of different languages. These bilingual workers, referred to here as informal interpreters, transfer spoken messages from one language into another, particularly in inductions, trainings, and briefings. They may also do written translations and other communication tasks. Little is known about these bilingual workers, as their communication work has only been studied closely in recent research by Oswald et al. (2019), Kraft (2020) and Kahlin et al. (2022), despite the fact that this position, and its importance for productivity, safety and site culture, is recognised in various studies internationally (including Dainty et al., 2007; Fitzgerald, 2006; Loosemore & Lee, 2002; Lyu et al., 2018; Oswald et al., 2019; Phua et al., 2010; Tutt et al., 2013b). Specifically, little is known about who these informal interpreters are, or why they do this language work, which are therefore the questions addressed in this study. The rationale for why someone takes on this work is explored because the reason for doing the language work cannot be explained by financial rewards or prestige, for example, as the position is largely invisible and informal. There are significant differences in how the task is carried out by informal interpreters, partly because they are not trained for it. For instance, informal interpreters have varied levels of competence in the languages used and the language tasks they do can vary from only interpreting in key moments to frequently interpreting, mediating, and translating. Furthermore, from the informal interpreters' perspectives, their intrinsic motivation for doing this work has been studied little. This study proposes that understanding informal interpreters' identities helps comprehend a salient reason for undertaking this language work and hence, individual performance of the language work. Addressing these research interests is therefore a worthwhile endeavour for the implications on the future managing of this work practice.

Theoretical basis: an identity and language approach

An identity and language theoretical framework is mobilised to understand this particular group of migrant construction workers. The term identity as used here refers to 'how

people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future' (Norton, 1997, p. 410). That is, identities are understood to be affected by the world around the individual and can change across their lifetime. Identities are also understood to be shaped by the individual's visions for the future, not only by the past and the present (including Dagenais, 2003; Kanno, 2003; Norton & Toohey, 2011). This post-structuralist identity and language approach, that stems from the field of second language acquisition, helps understand the current and imagined identities of informal interpreters.

This language and identity approach is used to avoid stereotyping informal interpreters and seeing their identity as static. Analysis through this lens instead reveals the complexity and fluidity of the workers' identities and the relation between identity processes and language practices. Identities are considered to be interactional accomplishments because they are enacted through the linguistic and social practices of individuals within the constraints of particular societies. It is well recognised that identities are adjusted through the experience of migration, particularly in the case of permanent migration (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001). So, the worker's status as a permanent migrant or not is one factor that may affect the identity of an informal interpreter. The question of identity (re)construction in migration is particularly relevant in relation to workers who carry out language work, as 'language practices are very much implicated in these identification processes'. The nature of migration for construction work is often temporary or pendulum migration (Tutt et al., 2013a), especially in the EU context. One consequence of this is that migrants who are not permanent have more personal choice and individual agency in terms of the extent of their engagement with host communities and their languages than for migrants seeking to stay permanently, partly because of less legal constraints and partly due to their need to build a social network and gain stable employment. Therefore, challenges and changes to their identities may not always be substantial (Kinginger, 2013) or obvious. Viewed from this perspective, we can understand how identity change, related to language practices, can sometimes be an active choice rather than a necessity or an obligation for migrant construction workers. The nature of migration, as well as employment commonly alongside other migrants from the same country, means that these workers often do not need to use the local language or to integrate into the local culture. The position of the informal interpreter is not a formally defined one because it does not have a related job title or description, and neither are there consistent societal or organisational expectations that someone will take this work on. Consequently, these migration and language use factors create significant differences in how the workers engage with the language function and therefore how the language work is performed.

Different performances of the language work can therefore be better understood by examining the worker's identity by using the concepts of investment and imagined community.

The concepts of investment and imagined community are used to comprehend who these informal interpreters are and why they carry out language work.

The term imagined communities is used, as it is in the work of Norton (2001) and Kanno (2003), to refer to those communities language learners wish to become or see themselves becoming members of. Specifically, the target language community is

> a community of the imagination, a desired community that offers possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future. An imagined community assumes an imagined identity, and a learner's investment in the target language can be understood within this context' (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 415).

This use of the term 'imagined communities' also builds on the original work of Anderson (1991) who conceived how humans feel a sense of shared community and sameness with people they do not know. He theorised that nations are imagined communities because many citizens in the same nation will never meet and yet the nation is a community in their mind. From this premise, Norton applied the term in the field of second language acquisition (2001) to conceptualise the communities that people aspire to become part of when they learn a language. Norton (2013, p. 8) maintains that 'a focus on imagined communities in language learning enables us to explore how learners' affiliation with such communities might affect their learning trajectories.' In this research, as most of the informal interpreters were not lifelong bilinguals but rather were learning the language in their own time and through using it in the workplace, the concepts of investment and imagined community have a similar relevance, indeed the link between language skills and economic mobility for migrant construction workers has already been made in the literature (Kraft, 2019; Tutt et al., 2013a).

The concept 'investment', as explained by Norton (Peirce, 1995), is best understood in relation to Bourdieu et al.'s (1977) economic metaphors, particularly cultural capital. Bourdieu et al. (1977) use the term 'cultural capital' to refer to the social assets of an individual, such as education and style of speech and dress. They argue that some forms of cultural capital have a higher exchange value than others. With this understanding, Norton suggests that individuals invest in a second language supposing that 'they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital' (Peirce, 1995, p. 17). What is more, language competence can function as symbolic capital, such as by increasing social status and permitting access to valued language communities (Dagenais, 2003). Using narrative inquiry, this paper relates the trajectories of three migrant workers who invest in their imagined future identities through the language work. The story of one of the informal interpreters whose imagined identity does not require this language investment is included to show the contrast.

Methods and rationale

This research is qualitative because of the exploratory nature of the research questions. The research questions addressed by the wider study were: 1. Who are the informal interpreters and why do they perform this task, and 2: What language work do informal interpreters do and how? Only research question 1 is explored in this paper (see Fellows et al. (2023) for a discussion of question 2). Particularly, ethnography is used to explore social experiences and how reality is produced through interaction (O'Reilly, 2008). Specificities of the CI (construction industry) present challenges for data collection, including the transient workforce and the industry's fragmented structure (Oswald & Dainty, 2020). Such challenges were compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic; however, the methodology was adapted to overcome these difficulties. Instead of the intended in-depth observation periods with recordings, more of the data came from informal interviews which

were carried out online. This resulted in a study that combined more traditional ethnographic methods of observation, interviewing and material data collection, with digital ethnography (Murthy, 2008; Pink et al., 2015). Digital ethnography can encompass a range of technological aspects such as taking fieldnotes on a smartphone (Murthy, 2008, p. 837) and in this case recruiting participants through online networks and forums and conducting online interviews. Due to this change in methods, it was not possible to achieve the anticipated project perspective or detailed linguistic insight. Nevertheless, it was possible to interview participants located in different countries, and many of them on different projects. The interviews were supported by shorter observations and material data, such as photographs and copies of induction forms. As little is known about the topic, using a combination of methods helped to create a more rounded understanding and determine what questions needed to be asked in the interviews. Combining methods also increases the validity of the research (Kawulich, 2005). An ethnographic approach was optimal because of the situated and complex nature of the communication.

The notes and material data collected from observations help comprehend the work of the informal interpreter, such as by identifying what communication needs there are, the different types of communication used, and the relationships between different linguistic groups, for example. Informal interviews were conducted with 40 different participants; the reason for the interviews being informal is so that the interviewee takes the lead (Copland et al., 2015, p. 34) and the researcher learns from the participants' own perspective (O'Reilly, 2008).

Data collection and analysis

An ethnographic approach was used for the wider study, with observational notes, photographs and documents collected during fieldwork on three construction sites in London. Forty informal interviews were conducted, some on those three sites in London and some online, between May 2019 and September 2020. The selection criterion for interviewees was having experience with multilingual communication onsite. Access to research sites in London was gained through personal contacts whereas the participants in online interviews were accessed through two websites, one a forum for construction professionals and one for linguists. See Table 1 for details about the participants. An issue that arose during transcription was the best way to present the data because, as Bucholtz (2000) argues, the transcribers' decisions shape how the speakers are understood by the readers. On the one hand, it seems preferable to transcribe as faithfully to the original as possible, to include features such as pauses, laughs, self-corrections and instances of translanguaging. However, on the other hand, as Reyes explains, this creates concerns about the impression of the participants that the transcripts convey, 'given the dominant discourse about the importance of language proficiency' (Gibb et al., 2019, p. 185). This is a dilemma also acknowledged by Goodwin (1994, p. 607) who states that in transcription practices 'politics of representation emerge as a practical problem'. Ultimately, the transcription is verbatim in so far as all words are transcribed and grammar is added to make sentences for readability. However, some other notations are included because how participants formed their answers to the questions is of interest. For instance, in the following quote: 'But there's jokes and jokes eh, there's jokes that are really to put you down or to- to make a gap between classes or then there's jokes just to bring you

Table 1. The pseudonym given to the participant, their sex, position hired for when the experiences discussed occurred, whether they were individual participants or part of a set of interviews on a project that was visited, the languages the participants have in their repertoire, and if they acted as an interpreter onsite and in what capacity.

Participant	Male/ female	Job position	Construction project?	Languages in repertoire	Interpreter?
Aleksander	M	Contracts manager	1	Bulgarian, English	Untrained informal
Daniel	M	Site supervisor	1	Romanian, English	Untrained informal
Lei	M	Project manager	1	Chinese, English	No
Matei	M	Supervisor	1	Romanian, English	Untrained informal
Andrei	M	Site supervisor	1	Romanian, English	Untrained informal
Stefan	M	Assistant site manager	2	Romanian, English	Untrained informal
Marius	M	Site manager	2	Romanian, English	Untrained informal
Ivan	M	Supervisor	2	Bulgarian, English	Untrained informal
Jack	M	Project manager	2	English	No
Sean	M	Assistant site manager	2	English	No
Paul	M	Site manager	N/A	Romanian, English	Untrained informal
David	M	Project manager	N/A	English	No
Hannah	F	Senior site manager	N/A	English	No
Fernando	M	Labourer > office assistant	N/A	Spanish, English	Trained informal
Lanfen	F	Interpreter	N/A	Chinese, English	Untrained professional
Amir	M	Architect	N/A	Arabic, French, English	Trained professional
Elena	F	Superintendent	N/A	English, Spanish, Catalan	Trained professional
Amal	F	Interpreter	N/A	Arabic, French, English	Trained professional
Greg	M	Interpreter	N/A	Japanese, English	Trained professional
Karl	M	Interpreter	N/A	German, English, French	Trained professional
Farah	F	Interpreter	N/A	Arabic, English	Trained professional
Olga	F	Interpreter/ consultant	N/A	Russian, Kazakh, English	Trained professional
Ulla	F	Interpreter	N/A	Finnish, English	Untrained professional
Demitri	M	Project manager	N/A	Greek, English	Untrained informal
Johnathan	M	Interpreter	N/A	German, English	Untrained professional
João	M	Labourer > supervisor	N/A	Portuguese, English, Italian, French	Untrained informal
Magda	F	Project secretary	N/A	English, Portuguese	Untrained professional
Ahmet	M	Interpreter	N/A	Turkish, English	Professional
Ali	M	Interpreter	N/A	Kazakh, Russian, English	Trained professional
Sofia	F	University professor	N/A	Romanian, English	No
Michail	M	Interpreter	N/A	Russian, English	Trained professional

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued.

Participant	Male/ female	Job position	Construction project?	Languages in repertoire	Interpreter?
Zane	M	Interpreter	N/A	Swahili, English	Untrained professional
Jen	F	Safety manager	N/A	English	No
Anna	F	Interpreter	N/A	Russian, English	Trained professional
Sara	F	Interpreter	N/A	Spanish, English	Trained professional
Toby	M	Innovations manager	N/A	English	No
Jake	M	Works supervisor	3	English	No
Constantin	M	Construction manager	3	Romanian, English	Untrained informal

in', the 'eh' allows the reader to access the tone of the participant's speech, which was highlighting/warning at this point, and the '-' shows a pause where this point was a little difficult for the participant to explain, its seemed that this was not because of language but because of the sensitive nature of the topic at this point in the interview.

All of the interview transcripts were analysed thematically using NVivo. The codes focused on in the analysis presented in this article are: career trajectory, language skills and promotion, mediation, and language learning. These are the personal aspects identified as significant in terms of the identity of informal interpreters and how they perform the language work. Four of the interview transcripts were then analysed using narrative inquiry to understand the nuances of the data and zoom in on the migration and language stories of these participants (Barkhuizen, 2020; Kramp, 2004). It is three of these transcripts that form the basis of the analysis presented here. Short stories found in the data and biographical stories have been configured from the data of these three participants, whose experiences particularly highlight the 'trans'forming identity narrative. As well as analysing the content of these interview transcripts, the structure of the participants' answers and the language they use has been analysed. This analysis made it possible to retain characteristics of the interviews, which were in-depth and story-like in nature. This narrative analysis works well with the use of the language and identity analytical approach in order to make sense of this dataset. Stories are used as a window into participants' identity construction (Barkhuizen, 2011, 2017; Barkhuizen, 2020; Kramp, 2004). Some of the short stories are from within the data and some configured from the data to make a coherent story that is chronological. Furthermore, the process of narrative knowledging was key to creating some of the findings. Barkhuizen describes narrative knowledging as 'the meaning-making, learning, or knowledge construction that takes place during the narrative research activities of (co)constructing narratives, analysing narratives, reporting the findings, and reading/watching/listening to research reports' (Barkhuizen, 2011, p. 395). Working with narratives makes it easier to see the macro, meso and micro scales that emerge in the analysis, such as how economic, social and personal factors influence informal interpreters, not only the immediate site context and interactions. Barkhuizen (2011, p. 399) argues that 'in telling stories, participants are performing themselves; they are doing their identities', which is what makes this analysis method interesting for the research questions addressed. Narratives are the stories narrators tell about their life experiences and, according to Kramp, stories help to make life meaningful and 'assist us to envision our future' (Kramp, 2004, p. 107).

Informal interpreters' identities: findings

The data was analysed using the language and identity approach outlined above. The notion of imagined communities posits a potential reason why informal interpreters, such as those whose stories are presented below, take on this language work. In doing so they invest in an imagined community, perhaps that of a permanent employee and/or permanent local language-speaking migrant.

Andrei's story

Andrei is a Romanian site supervisor working in the UK, he is an example of an informal interpreter for whom language work is an additional necessary task and not personally significant. His answers are illustrative of the way most of the informal interpreters on projects engaged with the interviews. In the interview, he gave short answers, for example answering the opening questions with just one sentence, rather than an extended biographical answer. Partially, this may have been influenced by the circumstances of the interview, which took place at his job site during work hours, in contrast to participants who were interviewed online and from their own homes. However, it also seems that this participant, as well as several others, gave shorter answers because for them their construction worker identity is forefront, and they were not interested in sharing their experiences with languages. Furthermore, he identifies strongly with people from the same country, perhaps implying that his experience as an immigrant has not made him feel either local or international, as happened with other participants. As found by Kinginger (2004), especially with temporary migration, identity changes may not be substantial. This can be seen in his defensive comments when he was asked whether information that he passed on also included written material: 'I'll be there, translate everything … but I know my guys try, they all try, even though they are like middle aged they try … for me it's not an issue'. He uses the possessive pronoun 'my' to speak about fellow Romanians, that he supervised in his team. During this first half of the interview the participant was not following the lead of the questions, he seemed to have a preconceived idea of the interview. This can be seen in the following exchange, for example:

> Interviewer: ok and what about in previous projects, did you have any mixed teams?
>
> Andrei: oh oh yes, yes yes yes yes. My previous job in Tottenham stadium was very mixed yeah people from Africa, English, yeah but yeah (Me: and …) it was a big a bit of an issue with in between the colleagues, but was nothing racist or we tries to understand each other, but well us Romanians usually teach people Romanian (both laugh) so you expecting an African guy to start saying things in Romanian, like good things not bad things, and you're like what (both laugh).

Nevertheless, he strongly links language skills and good employment opportunities, 'so you can be very experienced but if you don't know the language you will find it hard to find jobs, really good jobs', this demonstrates how language competence can function as symbolic capital (Dagenais, 2003). Nonetheless, for him investing in his bilingual identity is not personally important, he does not emphasise his skills in this or reflect on communication much. When asked for examples of his communication work, he said 'if it's English it's English, if it's Romanian it's Romanian', suggesting that for him the languages are separate and uninteresting, as he gives a short and simple answer.

The stories below are chosen because they illustrate different ways of carrying out the language work and show how it can look when the work is recognised. They also show examples of how migrants upskill. At the time of the interview, Andrei's migration trajectory would probably be classed as pendulum migration. In contrast, in the participants' stories below it can be seen that they have more investment in their new location. The interview schedule was the same, however, how the participants engaged with the interview was very different, as can be seen below.

João's story

João, a Portuguese man in his forties, responds to the first open question, 'tell me a bit about yourself and the work that you do', with an extensive narrative about his life and the trajectory of his work life. The storytelling nature of his response suggests that what he has to tell me is important to him, to how he sees his own identity; clear for example in the quote 'it's funny for me to tell you this, I'm proud of the situation'. Through the story-making the participant constructs his identity as a skilled and entrepreneurial migrant. This conceptualisation of his self and justification for his work are solidified through the telling of the story.

João highlights how he had to start his working life early because his parents got divorced, 'so I went to professional courses instead of going to university', he counterposes these options in a way that highlights how he could have, and might have liked to, go to university, but he did not because he had to start working. From this background, he builds a narrative that forefronts his ingenuity and 'go for it' attitude as key to his success and continues to differentiate himself from what we might consider to be a stereotypical male migrant construction worker identity, from a 'rough man'. Throughout his short stories, he goes into detail about wages and other factors of his improving life conditions, which contrast with the description of the beginning of his work life. He invested in his communication skills with the aim of improving his social and economic circumstances. As identified by Allan (2016, p. 49), who discusses immigrants and employability, 'rather than surviving, one cultivates one's human capital by investing in the self through potentially value-producing activities'. João's trajectory, as a migrant who pursues opportunities across countries, seems to be animated by stories: a rumour about the earning potential in construction jobs abroad prompted him to migrate, and he related his tall tales about his relevant experience for a job to a Leonardo Di Caprio film. Within this response he directly signals stories 'So the funny thing that I want to tell you about the story Morwenna … '.

He dramatises his experiences by making analogies with epic moments in films; to describe the job he applied for as a blasting machinist, which he feigned having experience in, he said 'so just imagine the fireman in the movies', he then emphasises the danger of the work – 'it can kill you', and his youth and inexperience, 'I was this young kid.' When the employer realised that João did not have experience as a blasting machinist he moved him and João ended up carrying scaffolding all day, he claims: 'I was like a mummy, a zombie', saying 'it was like my military experience', he uses the rhetorical device of simile to exaggerate his endeavours. Directly following this explanation, he states how 'instead of me going to grab the hose … I passed directly to responsible of everybody.' He then draws attention to the crux of this short story (Barkhuizen, 2017)

by asking the rhetorical question 'why?', answering: 'because I knew how to communicate in the language that was needed.' Again, he uses rhetorical devices to make the story he his telling more exciting, which is important for validating his identity investment related to the work as interpreter, which he knows is of interest to me, his audience.

He continues to contextualise the scene, to ensure that the impact of his up-skilling and facilitating the communication is understood. To achieve this effect, he uses the present tense and addresses the audience as 'you', saying 'you're a big team of Portuguese, nobody speaks Italian, in the beginning of the day you arrive in the dock … '. He gets involved in his storytelling, impersonating his boss saying, 'what the fuck are you doing?', but immediately apologises for swearing, again highlighting his awareness of his audience. As he tells the story his audience is forefront in his mind – in this case me, the researcher interested in languages. He signals 'and then it came the part that I think you're gonna like, the part that you're covering', and proceeds to detail his experience learning Italian through reading the morning papers. This reveals the co-constructed nature of this version of his personal story.

By painting himself as a skinny computer nerd previously and dramatising this manual labour experience he distances himself from an identity as a tough, macho, construction worker. He says, 'it was the first time I've been exposed to this industrial rough man.' Always pragmatically following the best opportunity, it was usually a financially motivated decision. Consequently, he goes in and out of the CI, tempted back to his interest in media and work as a graphic designer. For example, after describing a construction job where he says he spent 3 h on the road and twelve hours doing physical labour every day he decided to study, but after a year the job prospects in his home country were not good so he went back into itinerant construction employment. This back and forth between studying and working in construction demonstrates that he was not invested in a future in construction, but when his efforts at moving into other fields were not successful then his language skills gave him another avenue to pursue. When discussing construction jobs, he repeatedly asserts that it was not his trade: 'it was not my trade, like I told you Morwenna I was graphic designer'. João invests in his language skills expecting that the social and economic resources he can develop will increase the value of his cultural capital and social power, as Early and Norton (2012) claim about the language learners in their study. This, in turn, 'will expand the identity options available to learners, and their access to diverse communities' (Early & Norton, 2012, p. 198). João says that he was never interested in the CI and was not strong, in this way he is probably not typical of an informal interpreter onsite and other people might be more reluctant to spend their time interpreting.

The mini stories throughout the interview make sense of an event and explain it to me. One account illustrates how some Ukrainian workers wouldn't accept instructions from João because he was the youngest and these men were working in lesser qualified jobs, despite being qualified, because they could not speak the local language. He explains that confrontations arose ''cause I'm young and they have their ego'. This highlights another way in which his identity is transformed through interaction and language, because of the interpreting he has a position of authority that he wouldn't otherwise have at his age.

He recognises that acquiring these language skills and facilitating communication in these construction contexts is significant both for himself and for the construction

projects, saying 'I think it's very important, that's why I want to help you with whatever information you need.' He stresses that he always found a gap, a need for someone with his interpretation skills in construction companies, in various countries. He acknowledges that these gaps were what allowed him to 'climb quicker the hierarchy.' Yet after several such experiences he started looking for bilingual work in other sectors. He is aware of his position in a neoliberal globalised economy and works to ensure his mobility within it: 'I started to look for more of these kinds of jobs, … the call centre industry, they need a lot of bilingual, trilingual people, 'cause they might be outsourcing maybe in a cheap country … '

He gives an example of a job he secured because of already having had onsite informal interpreting experience. As well as emphasising the prestige of the project, he expresses: 'I was one of them you know, I could speak their language.' He describes how he was the only Portuguese employee who had a good relationship with the Italians. Here the crossing of boundaries between named languages, translating, seems to contribute to a 'trans'-formation of his identity; both his professional one because he climbs to a position of responsibility and his personal one as part of the Italian group of workers. In the following sentence the use of the word 'emerge' is also evocative of reconstructing or transforming into a different performed self: 'I'm very grateful to this gift to speak different languages and to be easy me to emerge in different languages.' The same thing happened in Italy, Holland, Portugal and the UK. He already spoke English, which was used as the universal language in Holland, so he was bilingual before working in the industry and began to learn Italian and French on the jobs. The connection between language and identity means that as he learnt and used different languages his identity shifted, through the process of mixing or switching languages (Nkadimeng & Makalela, 2015), due to his migratory trajectory (Benson et al., 2013; Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001).

It is significant that he feels that his language skills were recognised, which may contribute to him being motivated to work on these skills. He says that he thinks that this communication is important in the construction companies 'else I wouldn't be appreciated, or they wouldn't give me good conditions to develop my work, if it wasn't that important.' In some of his experiences, the translation aspect of his job was included in his contract and in some it was not.

In his narration, João provides an account of the effect of not being able to integrate through language. Describing his experience in Holland he says:

> I arrived and it's always err you see in the small details- when you're on the street you're immigrant … you arrive there and I have better interaction I have … more anti-stress situations or . .. normal dynamics because I can communicate. But the person who doesn't know how to communicate will feel alienated, doesn't know how to communicate, maybe doesn't know the language. So, it's two different things Morwenna, knowing how to communicate and knowing the language.

As an immigrant, he felt that he was an outsider, but he succeeded in alleviating the stress and alienation of this aspect of immigration through his interactions. Again, he underlines the difference between language skills and communication skills, showing that it was the combination of these that he was able to take advantage of. The alienation he describes is perhaps the alternative to the path of identity transformation that he takes through interpreting. He invests in an imagined identity and community, as migration changes his first

language identity. He voices his awareness of the relationship between language and group identity –

> 'cause there's always the paradigma of the joking with the languages – being an outsider, being an insider, an immigrant. But there's jokes and jokes eh, there's jokes that are really to put you down or to – to make a gap between classes or then there's jokes just to bring you in.

He recounts how his communication skills allowed him to create good working relationships. He believes that these relationships improved the culture onsite and were his key to future jobs. Yet only on the more high-profile job, on the biggest pipeline in Portugal, was the language work part of his contract.

He proceeds to give an anecdote about being with a man who got in a fight because of not being able to communicate well, and João stepped in to broker the tensions. He says:

> many situations like this happen in industry also because … many people were not from there, so they were thinking about their family, thinking about their life, problems their family problems and they're just to take the money 'cause if something happens outside of their comfort zone it's err it's like a trigger, they're very … picky to make big confusions.

In this quote, we can see how, while he is able to reduce his stress through communicating, according to him, this was not the norm in the industry. He suggests that this stress can often lead to tense situations, and that he would mediate when such frictions did erupt. João considers mediation an important part of the language work, saying: 'a lot of situations like that, put the tensions lower, we're working in dangerous environments with dangerous tools, anything can go from zero to one hundred in a matter of seconds'.

His separation of the language and communication skills is helpful for understanding how he utilised his language and interpersonal skills in his work as an informal interpreter. He says that he is

> talking about maybe a broader type of definition of communication (Me: mmhhmm) so it's not about the language, to speak the language, but to be able to communicate. … you have to come with that empathy so yeah communication is empathy.

The narrative presented here aligns with Brown et al.'s description of sensemaking narratives. In their study of a project team the authors found that the narratives participants told were significant to themselves because they 'reduced participants' uncertainty regarding their history and capabilities' and 'permitted people to attach themselves to "desirable" ends, think well of themselves in moral terms, supported their needs for autonomy and control, and promoted feelings of self-worth' (Brown et al., 2008, p. 1053). Indeed, this is true of several of the participants in this study, as will be discussed further. From an individual perspective, then, such narratives can function effectively as coping mechanisms. Yet it is paramount to recognise that said mechanisms contribute to reproducing a system that exploits individuals' skills and weak positions in terms of employment.

Fernando's story

Fernando is of Mexican descent. He never had the opportunity to go to school to learn English so taught it to himself through reading and translating books and watching TV.

He explains that as an immigrant he did not have many opportunities so although he had to work and not study, he wanted 'to do better in life', which is why he started pursuing languages, investing in those skills, motivated by an imagined future identity and community. He explains:

> all of the English and the imperfect English that I - that I speak it comes with me just talking, learning, reading, educating myself because umm - that brings different issues. Immigration for Mexicans in the United States it's very, extremely, difficult to - to - to regularize status, so (Me: yep) by being Mexican descendant my opportunities to do something else were- were really little. Minimum. So I have to decide whether I work or I study. And I don't have anyone to support me you know. So I have to work, I have to work, but at the same time I wanted to- to be able to do better in life, so I start learning the language you know. As I said, just watching TV, reading, translating books, you know my- my process was really slow but- but it also gave me the skill.

For 16 years, Fernando worked in public health in California on prevention intervention programmes targeted at the Hispanic community. He did his first interpreting course and lots of translation on this job. He then moved to Georgia and noticed the need for trained interpreters there. He took another interpreter training course and became a certified medical interpreter. He now runs his own language business. While this business was getting started, he got a job as a construction labourer on a power plant to support himself. Like with João, he did not identify as a construction worker, he said 'my original trade wasn't exactly as an interpreter, I was entering as a labourer. And it was a challenge for me because I – I've never done any physical work in my life you know.'

He explains how he changed position and negotiated his identity on the construction project through his language skills:

> so when I was working as a labourer, one of the foreman's hear me talking you know with other people and tryna catch me and say 'hey you seem like you had a little bit of education', so just to make the story short, I was umm hooked with the superintendent. The superintendent was needing an assistant and they - they put me in the office not as an interpreter yet but as an office assistant (Me: ok). Through that that's when I start gaining trust with them. And I told them you know 'I'm an interpreter', and so they start trying me as an interpreter. Later on I was hiring, I was doing different types of trainings for them in Spanish and English you know, I was basically doing most of the hiring and firing work and a lot of the training you know, that they have to do. I was doing them, including interpreting at the safety meetings during the mornings.

He explains how, as they started building trust, he told the company that he was an interpreter, and they started to use him as such. His duties ended up being varied and including a lot of responsibility. He had to take the OSHA (Occupation Safety and Health Administration) trainings so that he could teach others, yet he was never given the opportunity to take the class and test that was specifically for trainers. He underlines how this work was all unofficial and 'somebody else had the title and I was doing the job basically.' This aligns with the finding of Oswald et al. (2019, p. 6) that the informal interpreters had too much responsibility because they received more training so that they could explain them in the other language and 'consequently they could influence significantly how tasks were carried out.'

Fernando's story resonates with Kraft's findings about an informal interpreter she studied in construction. She stated that 'language learning offers him an agency to

control his own trajectory' (Kraft, 2020, p. 8). In Fernando's life, more widely languages have certainly allowed him to negotiate a new identity, and within his construction experience languages allowed him to move on from the labouring work that he struggles with. Nevertheless, he is constrained by the construction company who does not value the interpreting work and exploit his skills in this without sufficient compensation or recognition of his work. As Kraft concluded about the trajectory of a language broker, 'the idea of language as option, however, entails that the responsibility for ensuring communication in the workplace is partly or fully removed from the employer and instead becomes the responsibility of the worker who wants to strengthen her/his employability through investments and skilling by and of the self (Allan, 2016: Macleod, 1996)' Kraft, 2020, p. 4).

When discussing how communication was usually dealt with, as the company had come across Fernando's communication skills by chance, he explained that before he interpreted there was a guy helping but that he was summarising a lot of the information instead of interpreting it, 'he wasn't really communicating what the safety manager was trying to communicate.' Yet it is likely that Fernando was the only person fully aware of this as other people on the project couldn't understand both languages well. From his administration work with the company Fernando developed insights into their language policy, essentially language was not considered during recruitment. The resulting situation was then dealt with by identifying the bilingual workers onsite and putting them in positions where they could show others what to do and 'communicate with both sides.'

Fernando says that being in the office he got the chance to point out to the construction managers the difference that communication barriers can have on cost and safety. He considers that the communication difficulties 'play a big role' in why the construction projects were so backed up. He also notes witnessing the fear created by not understanding what others are saying, which also applied to the safety manager but eased as he saw the positive effect of having someone facilitate the communication. The company kept him on like this for several projects, until he decided to dedicate himself to running his own language business. When asked whether he knew if anyone had replaced him in this new bilingual office position created for him, he said 'I really don't know if they appreciate the value of an interpreter', hence bilinguals like him move on.

Informal interpreters' identities: discussion

These narratives illustrate how the informal interpreters' use of language, to bridge the linguistic and social gap between workers, may cause a 'trans'formation of their own professional and personal identity, but often will not. It seems that often it is this difference that determines, to an extent, why these migrant workers take on a language role and how they perform it.

Beyond the above narratives, one conversation with workers onsite was particularly illustrative of the different attitudes towards language learning and reasons behind them. Three workers stopped to talk to the researcher and the gatekeeper, a supervisor. One of the workers was the team's supervisor and spoke English fluently, one of the workers knew some English, and one of them couldn't speak any. The supervisor told the researcher how he barely spoke English when he came to the UK four years ago but had learnt it here. He said he made an effort because he wants to build a career here which is his motivation because he wants to live here long term. He noted that

learning English had been difficult because he was always working with foreigners and his wife is Romanian. Yet, for this informal interpreter, interpreting aligned with his personal life goals, it was not simply a work task. He was happy to do this. He said that many of his co-workers did not plan to stay. He then asked one of the guys next to him whether he wanted to stay, in Romanian, and interpreted the response to us. Apparently, this worker does not want to stay, he likes his home and just wants to make money and go back there. It was clear that this worker did not understand the rest of the conversation and did not want to be part of it, he stood with his arms crossed and eyes downcast. This is a clear example of how a migrant's imagined community might affect their learning trajectory as well as their working one (Norton, 2013).

Nonetheless, developing language skills and seeking out opportunities to use them is not how all of the informal interpreters come to be in this position. In a discussion in the smoking area onsite with a group of Bulgarian workers, the researcher and the workers talked about how and why one Bulgarian worker came to be wearing the vest that declared he was a 'translator', while the other worker did not, despite being able to engage in the conversation well in English. The 'translator' said how he was carrying out this task because he was mates with the supervisor and the supervisor had asked him to. The other worker then teased him, laughing and saying that no he definitely was not chosen because of language skills, because in that case he would be the 'translator' himself.

In the participants' stories, it can be seen that their experiences of language work were largely positive, these stories are interesting, but the other informal interpreter participants' responses are also important, their near silence on how they feel about the language work is itself revealing, suggesting that it is not important to them. Perhaps these participants are not comfortable voicing critiques about how communication is managed, however, they also didn't engage as much with the interview in terms of positive initiatives and their own experiences with languages.

It has been discussed that interpreting is the means by which the informal interpreters simultaneously bridge the social and linguistic gap between workers. Moreover, for some, it is perhaps also part of a 'trans'formation of their own identity positioning because using their language skills sometimes changes their professional identity, and their personal one as a migrant becomes less prominent as they become more like the local group. Although there are exceptions, this study largely confirms Kraft's statement that 'despite being a workplace need, the responsibility of becoming a broker is left with the individual worker'(Kraft, 2020, p. 2).

These narratives demonstrate how language skills can be important for promotion within the CI but also how informal interpreters may leave the industry to find work where their language skills are recognised. The narratives also suggest that the informal interpreter's identity positioning with regards to the pertinent languages affects the way that they carry out the informal interpretation tasks.

Conclusions

This research has investigated who takes on language work on construction sites. It has been concluded that often this is the supervisor, as found by Phua et al. (2010) and Wasilkiewicz et al. (2016), and that a significant, and previously unexplored reason why these

people become informal interpreters is their own investment in their language skills, which is motivated by their imagined communities.

The investment and imagined communities of informal interpreters are factors which may affect both their identities and how they facilitate communication. Indeed, our analysis suggests that how migrant construction workers who act as informal interpreters carry out the work depends to some degree on their investment in their bilingual identity. Analysing participants' narratives with an identity and language approach has brought out personal complexities related to the individual and their work and migration trajectories that would be lost without this perspective, but which cumulatively reveal important trends. The identities of the interpreters differ, and the performance of language work depends to some extent on whether the individual invests in the informal interpretation work with the hope of career progression and integration into the local community, or whether this is simply an additional task. Those who invest in the informal interpreter position may upskill through this and be promoted within the industry or move on to other sectors.

Having explored who takes on informal language work on construction sites and why they do it, one of the principal findings of this research concerns how the language work varies in relation to the identity of the informal interpreter. Essentially, it has been found that those who informally interpret tend to fall into one of two categories: either their construction identity is more significant to them, or their language skills are. Informal interpreters who invest in their bilingual identity are more likely to seek out opportunities to perform this identity, perhaps performing mediation or translation tasks beyond the minimum necessary as seen in Fernando and João's descriptions of their work.

Not recognising this position means that valuable linguistic skills are lost from the industry and, moreover, that these workers carrying out language work may not be well equipped to do this. Consequently, this research supports the argument of Tutt et al. (2011) that language work should be formalised. Doing so would recognise these workers' valuable linguistic skills and encourage investment in these from the management of construction firms and the individuals carrying out language work. Furthermore, it could help to reduce tensions caused by informal interpreters begrudging their skills being taken advantage of and providing reassurance to others that their message is being transmitted.

This research suggests that language skills can be a significant contributing factor to promotion, meaning that to some extent they are valued and valuable. Nonetheless, there is potentially still an issue for the industry in not explicitly recognising the contribution of these language workers. In this research, those informal interpreters who have up skilled through a conscious language learning effort then left the industry, as seen in the examples of Fernando and João. Effectively, this informal interpreting experience onsite acted as a stepping-stone for them in their careers. In contrast, those who were still doing onsite interpretation were primarily skilled and interested in construction not interpretation, had less developed English language skills, no qualifications in languages or interpretation, and tended to see this part of their work as a stressful necessity and not an interesting challenge, this can be seen in the case of Andrei as well as other participants shown in Table 1. Indeed, Oswald et al. (2019) reported that some bilingual workers were frustrated by having to juggle the language work with their other work which they valued more. They highlight that informal interpreters resenting having to

do communication work affects the standards of the interpreting they do (Oswald et al., 2019). As demonstrated in this study, the workers' investment in the language work affects how they carry it out.

With a better understanding of who the informal interpreters are and why they do the language work, it is possible to incentivise the facilitation of communication by certain bilingual workers. This would align with their imagined futures whilst improving relations onsite and perhaps contributing to a safer and more productive work environment.

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