Would you mind if your child wanted to become an interpreter?

I recently volunteered to give a presentation on the profession of translation and interpreting as a parent helper for a community worker series at my son's primary school in suburban Sydney. To make my presentation entertaining for little kids, I showed them how to interpret simultaneously between English and Korean. The children were just fascinated by instant language conversions and kept asking me to show them more. While I was delighted by the enthusiastic responses from the kids, one question occurred to me afterwards: how many parents in Australia would be happy if their child wanted to become a translator or interpreter?

Let's consider the following two real stories: in the 1990s, an Anglo-Canadian boy who wanted to become an interpreter had to give up his dream because his parents wanted their son to pursue a “better” profession. On the other side of the planet, a Korean girl with the same dream was warned by her parents that she was “too ordinary” to become an interpreter; her parents believed only extraordinary people could make an interpreter. The former is my husband's story, and the latter is mine.

Why is there such a contrast in terms of parental reactions to children who wish to become an interpreter? One way of examining this question is to consider the relationship between the status of language workers and the status of a second language in a society. In Korea, English is highly valued as a commodity, and this
phenomenon is known as *yeongeo yeolpung* or “English fever”. Due to a high level of prestige attached to English, English-Korean interpreters are admired as master English speakers who are often glamourized in Korean media. Popular images of interpreters are cosmopolitan multilinguals working at international conferences for high-ranking officials or business tycoons as circulated in local media.

On the other hand, the societal valorization of translators and interpreters in Australia and other Anglophone countries remains very low. Translators and interpreters are associated with low-paid casual work that offers little chance for career progression. The low profile of the profession in Australia is strongly related to the societal recognition of languages other than English (LOTE). Despite Australia’s purported pride in multiculturalism, LOTEs have always remained on the periphery in its symbolic and practical values. While LOTEs are gradually gaining recognition particularly among middle-class parents primarily for instrumental purposes, their status as the “other” languages spoken by “other” people – immigrant Australians from non-Anglophone backgrounds – suggests that the status of language workers is perhaps determined by the status of LOTEs as well as the people and communities who they serve. Examining the status of language workers is, therefore, a good prism through which to understand the sociolinguistics of bilingualism.

If you are still not convinced, ask yourself this question: would you be happy if your child wanted to become an interpreter?

**Further Reading**

To learn more about English fever and the experiences of interpreters in South Korea, check out this article:

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