

# INTERPRETERS

## - a source of innovations driven by meaning

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### ABSTRACT

There are a number of ways of “thinking new”, the “Google” way –ideas oriented– and the “Interpreting” way –meaning oriented – among others. In this article, we describe one valuable part in the emergence of new meanings, the source of external experts, or, the so-called interpreters. The interpreters’ contribution to the “Interpreting” way depends on their characteristics, the conversational process where their insights are exchanged with others and - the company and its capability to absorb and transform these insights. This research is focused on the first: the characteristics.

To answer this, we first review one of the most important features of an interpreter, namely the ability to be critical, second, we conduct one in-depth case study of a large multinational company that has convened seven interpreters to develop new emerging meanings for a special product in their portfolio.

The paper connects to different types of critical thinking/stance from both the educational and philosophical field, but also to theory from psychology. It concludes that conversations and discussions are eased if the interpreters possess certain abilities besides knowledge. Thus, for the process of interpreting, knowledge, per se is not enough. Instead it needs to be mediated by individual behaviour. A behaviour that is closer to criticism than to creativity.

## INTRODUCTION - Two ways of thinking “new”

### Thinking new “The Google Way” - ideas oriented

At Google, it was fine to spend 20 % of the working time on something else than normal “duties”. Employees were deliberately encouraged to dedicate time to a special interest and keep the brain busy with other things than everyday work. The reason for this is that Google had realized that to keep new thinking going in the company, employees needed to be exposed to new contexts and thereby develop new ways of thinking (Steiber, 2012). This is, indeed, a good way to keep divergent thinking going. And, indeed, the thought of exposing oneself to new, unknown things to grow new ideas is not new (Granovetter, 1982; Hargadon, 2003; Brown, 2008; Martin, 2009).

But, this thinking holds a certain weakness. Namely, the idea of the ideas! Or, in other words, the narrow focus on ideas and the absence of discussions on the underlying meaning of these ideas. When we say meaning we mean the reason for “why” we use a product. The purpose of it. The answer to why a product is meaningful to a human. A discussion on meaning, as we see it, incorporates the identification of the current meaning of a product or business, but also, what a new, different meaning could be.

This discussion seems silent and absent in companies. Even in research it is not a well discussed field. Meaning, it seems, is not a well-investigated area of research, nor a visible part of companies’ agendas. Instead, companies, normally, strive to find new ideas to fit within their current mind-set and business model. Ideas are most welcome, but, with no (or scarce) reflection of where they come from, the underlying values they build on, the meaning behind. Companies, rarely, invest time in thinking about the meaning behind a product – and whether this meaning makes sense to current and potential new customers. Instead, new ideas emerge, within existing frames, in the same old paradigm, within the same mind-set. Ideas evolve as solutions to problems, leading to variations of products but still with the same existing, sometimes, outdated, meaning.

There are ways to  learn and innovate meanings though. In this article we will present a valuable source to the development of new meanings, the so called the interpreters.

### Thinking new “The Interpreters Way” - meaning oriented

When the willingness of change within a company goes beyond merely finding new ideas and solutions to existing problems, innovation of meaning might be a valuable way to think new. But, differently than this problem-solving approach, new meanings do not come only from exposing oneself to new, unknown fields. It does not build on sudden ideas or creativity; its origin goes much deeper. Meanings evolve within people and their reflections with others. They develop over time and find a place inside a human that is deliberately exposing herself to new constructs.

This said, meanings do not have to stay the same. They are not fixed but constantly changing (Öberg, 2012; Verganti and Öberg, 2013). As people change and develop – the way they give meaning to things also changes. This continuous move of meaning is not a reason to avoid it. The opposite, companies can leverage this constant change by reflecting on the current meaning of their products and then, proposing new meanings to come. Meaning, therefore, can be changed, innovated.

In this article, we will describe one valuable part in the emergence of new meanings, the source of external experts, or, the so called interpreters. These can be described as external people that a company invite to discuss themes, spanning a wider range than their own product focus (as for example the socio-cultural realm we live in). By exposing itself to different insights, a company might later propose new meanings of their products or services, beyond what users could express or imagine. We will enrich the picture of the interpreter throughout the article. But first we will briefly mention a few similar theoretical standpoints.

The idea of external input is not new. A concept that looks close is the notion of the "interlocutors" or alloy people (Lester et Al., 1998). These are people with a certain skill to transfer external signals from the market to the company. They are good in networking, absorbing and transferring. Still, the distance between the event observed by the external interlocutor and the receiving top manager in the company looks significant. Information or signals, pass from the "market", via the interlocutor and further to the manager and finally to a top executive. A signal, it seems, passes several "filters" and risks to be watered out, to lose its colour, and turn to a pale and weak signal. An interpreter, as we will see, interacts more directly with the employees and contributes by giving her flavour and feel, her insight, directly in a discussion with the top executives. Another theoretical framework, close to the interpreter, is the "intermediates", people within companies that cross borders (Hargadon and Sutton, 1997). This perspective, as well, stresses the ability of internals to give insights and discuss over "the borders" in an organization. Both the above mentioned frameworks point to the importance of external input but - in the frame of a discussion among mainly internal sources.

To conclude, existing literature seems weak in answering the question of this study, namely: How does the collaboration between external expertise and internal competences work when interested in interpretations of new meanings. To answer this, we made one in-depth case study of a large multinational company that has convened several interpreters to develop new emerging meanings for a special product in their portfolio.

### **Structure of the article**

After introducing the subject of the interpreters and pointing to a field less studied we will continue the article by describing the interpreters and their connection to innovations driven by meaning. We will do this from different theoretical angles. At this point, we will also explain what an "Interpreters Lab" is and its part in this study. We will also shed light on one of the most important features of an interpreter, namely the ability to be critical. Next, the empirical material of the study will be presented in the form of stories, and give some glimpses of how interpreters act, their personalities and abilities. We conclude by discussing the material in the light of the theoretical frameworks presented, its implications and finally, the conclusion we have drawn.

### **A THEORETICAL REVIEW ON INTERPRETERS**

This third section of the paper will relate to the interpreters in several ways from a theoretical point of view. First as a source of innovations driven by meaning. Second

as related to the characteristics constituting their personal profile - describing different personalities. Lastly, the interpreters will be discussed as connected to possessing a critical ability.

### **Giving meaning to things**

New meanings of products do not come only from exposing oneself to new, unknown fields. A meaning does not build on sudden ideas or creativity; its origin goes much deeper. New meanings take shape and evolve within people and their reflections with others. It can be described as something that makes humans strive further. If life experiences are pushing us forward “from behind”, meaning is what pulls us forward, from “the front” (Frankl, 1995). Meanings therefore, spur from every person’s own values, emotions, experiences and wishes. Interpreters, as all humans, therefore give their own personal meaning of things. By sharing these in a common discussion, meanings of several humans entangle, they influence each other and inspire to new thinking constructs, new meanings.

Certainly, finding the “right” set of interpreters can be a problem in interpreters-based innovation. Collaboration with interpreters requires going through a detailed process of selection and briefing before the moment of sharing insights with a company. In our study, the sharing of the insights happened in a meeting (the Interpreters lab, described below) organized by the company where experts from various fields (the so called external interpreters) discussed their insights with the company. These experts have a common characteristic: they all look at the same user experience or phenomena, namely the one the company is trying to understand or explore, although from different perspectives. They have undertaken research on the subject, explicitly or implicitly, and therefore they can act as “interpreters” to each other, providing a new and critical perspective. This type of meeting could be seen as a valuable opportunity to learn for all participants, both for the company and the external interpreters. It offers a chance to remove the blindfold we all have by sharing insights and knowledge about existing and future scenarios.

### **Mapping the Interpreters - two elements to consider**

As previously discussed, using external experts to widen ones perspectives is not a new invention. Companies are aware of going outside of the “company walls” to be inspired (Chesborough, 2003). Yet, the connection between external experts and meaning making, and innovations driven by meaning, is less visible. Indeed, there are studies that have demonstrated that companies willing to do innovation of meaning need to step back from users and their products. These companies need to take a broader perspective and try to understand changes in society, culture and technology to propose a new meaning - later transformed into a specific product, retail experience or else like (Verganti, 2009).

Still, both individuals and organizations, over time develop a frame through which they interpret what people do. They slowly build statements about what people search for that are assumed to be true and therefore automatically conclude what is a “good” product or experience. People develop their strategies and products based on these silent assumptions, almost like they would be unquestionable myths. At the beginning, these assumptions may work, but they may also act as filters that hinder the capability to capture changes in the context.

To challenge these myths, companies may choose to collaborate with external parties as for example interpreters that need to be selected carefully.

As previously stated, this article focuses on interpreters and their contribution to "thinking new". This contribution depends on (1) the characteristics of the interpreters, (2) the conversational process in which these interpreters exchange interpretations among them and with a company's innovation team (Souto, 2014), and (3) the capability of the innovation team to embody these conversations and make sense of them (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990).

The empirical material collected on both the conversational processes and the innovation team's embodiment is still not mature enough to allow robust research findings. Instead, the study of the personal characteristics of the interpreters represents a more mature phase of this research. Therefore, the article focuses on this first dimension. Our exploration is meant to understand how to select good, helpful interpreters. In particular, we consider two elements that constitute the personal characteristics of the interpreters and that might affect their effectiveness in the interpretation process: expertise and critical abilities.

The first element, expertise, is connected to the skills and knowledge of an interpreter about the way people give meaning to products. We assume that expertise is essential in the process of interpretation, as knowledge has been repeatedly pointed as a central factor in innovation processes (Leonard and Sensiper, 1998; Stacey, 2001). Interpreters may have build their expertise by conducting explicit anthropological research on products' meanings, which translate into a more explicit and codified knowledge about meanings, or by simply being immersed in the life contexts of users, which implies a more implicit and tacit knowledge on meanings (Nonaka, 1995). Whichever the case, an important question is to understand to which extent and how the previous experience of an interpreter can bring a rich and deep perspective on the conversation about meaning, or rather can hinder an open and constructive reflection.

Studies on innovation indeed show that knowledge may be an important predictor of effectiveness when addressing the search for solutions. Market knowledge in fact enables to better understand customers' needs (i.e. existing meanings), and technical knowledge enables to find new solutions (MacCormack and Verganti, 2003). But what does happen when the purpose is to change the meaning of things, to search for new meaning? We assume that knowledge alone is not enough, and sometimes can even keep interpreters stuck in old interpretations. Unless this knowledge is coupled with a significant critical ability: to balance one's own assumptions and the perspective of others, and being capable of organizing insights provided by others in novel ways. If knowledge may be the fuel that feeds a conversation on meanings, we need to couple it with an engine that makes the interpreters conversation effectively move towards the search for new spaces. This engine is made of another other element: a critical ability.

We will therefore now give extra attention to why a critical ability is relevant in innovation of meanings, and how we explore it by investigating the cognitive behaviour of the interpreters.

### **A key ability - taking a critical stance**

When we use the expression "critical ability" we refer to the act of taking a step back from one way of seeing or understanding something and trying to look at a situation

differently. This includes all senses, as seeing with new eyes, encouraging new feelings to evolve, developing new thoughts in the strive to enrich one's understanding of something. It does not necessarily mean to be negative, but rather to deliberately open one's mind to alternative interpretations. It is about not taking things for granted, not just accepting how the situation seemed or was portrayed but questioning or evaluating such claims before deciding or acting (Mingers, 2000). The ability of being critical can be discussed in various ways. In this article we describe two major themes: The more open ended perspectives of taking a Critical Stance and the relatively more structured approach of Critical Thinking.

### Taking a Critical Stance - a few ways to relate to it

In its extreme version, being critical could be described as a search for and questioning of power and special interests in society. This approach can be described as in the scientific approach of Critical theory (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000) where people's contexts and meaning making is left aside in favour of narrow and positivistic problem solving. Here, societal, ethical and political reflections are left out and business and technology contexts are instead underlined. Other critical approaches are more philosophical. The notion of "Fusion of horizons" (Gadamer, 1960/2004) gives importance to an understanding of the world of others. The idea is to understand the horizon (or reference points) of another and thereby revise and update your own horizon over time (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000). Gadamer's concept links to the one of Ricoeur, who describes something similar in how different interpretations benefit from colliding and confronting each other (Kristensson Uggla, 2002). Yet another way to take a critical position can be found within Critical literacy. In this field of literacy research, focus is turned towards a "problematizing", meaning that the focus is on the problem and its complexity (Mc Laughlin and De Voogd, 2004). Instead of accepting an essentialist view, one should raise questions and seek alternative explanations as a way of more fully acknowledging and understanding the complexity of the situation. Thus, in Critical Literacy, being critical is seen as a need to question rather than passively accept the information we encounter.

### Critical thinking – the opposite of interpreting

Another approach of being critical can be found within the field of Critical thinking. Instead of focusing on injustice and power (abuse) as in critical theory, and instead of an open ended and philosophical approach as in for example the Fusion of Horizons by Gadamer, this stream of research is seen as analytic and advocates a well structured, efficient and systematic approach to prove whether a fact is correct (true) or not within a given framework or context (Bailin, 1987). The approach has for example been applied to teaching and learning skills to foster higher order abilities of thinking" (Glaser, 1984; Facione, 1990) and to balance student's "uncritical and subjective knowledge" (Kurfiss, 1988). As opposed to the ability of a critical stance, the aim is to isolate problems from context, build accuracy and take out "errors" in one owns thinking. As a consequence, conclusions are drawn on logic and reason, leaving out biased views. Critical thinking is frequently compared to problem solving, and is therefore, by definition, an important part of the process of problem solving (Ennis, 1991). In this way, the Critical thinking discourse is withdrawing all types of personal opinions, feelings and ideas. Focus is on solving problems – not on

generating alternative explanations. Critical thinking therefore, is not about interpreting.

Psychological researchers typically distinguish individuals' behaviours according to five domains: personality, cognitive abilities, social attitudes, psychological interests, and psychopathology- see Lubinski, 2000 for further details). In our investigation we focused on the first three. Personality is defined as the combination of stable physical and mental characteristics that give the individual his or her unique inner identity – inner-self-concept, “what makes you you” (Choi, Proce and Vinokur, 2003). Cognitive ability looks at different forms of self-expression, i.e. how a person expresses herself toward the external world). Both these latter elements looks very valuable when addressing the meaning oriented “thinking new” approach. The cognitive abilities unveil how people look at the environment for information, how they organise and interpret this information, and how they use these interpretations for guiding their actions (Hayes & Allinson, 1998) and envisioning future scenarios. Social abilities may have a significant impact on how interpreters share information among them and with the innovation team and how they are able to spur a critical conversation (Souto, 2014).

One last consideration: you may have been noticing that we do not focus on creativity as one of the relevant traits of the interpreters, notwithstanding it has been praised as the major innovation source in the last decade, especially by movements as Design Thinking. Our reflection above on critical abilities sheds light on why we leave creativity off this study. New interpretations, differently than new solutions, ask for a critical abilities, rather than creative abilities. The latter, especially in the forms that has been celebrated in the design thinking stream (where people are asked to forget old thinking by applying a “naïve mind” as a way to solve problems, and being critical is condemned during the popular method of brainstorming), goes exactly in the opposite direction than critical stances and reinterpretation.

## METHODOLOGY – Our toolbox

### **Exploratory Case Study**

Due to the limited research in the field, our study is explorative in its nature. Besides, considering the importance of ensuring an in depth analysis of the phenomenon the most appropriate methodology appeared to be the case study analysis, since it allows studying complex phenomena, embedded in their context, to collect detailed and rich data and is longitudinal by default (Easton, 1998; Yin, 2003). A single case was appropriate to obtain an in-depth account of the hints behind the identification and selection of interpreters.

### **Selection of the case**

We have studied a company within consumer goods who has experienced falling sales in the past years in a segment targeted to young consumers. They wanted to understand the meaning of their current offer and products and possibly how to propose a new, different meaning in their range of products.

The company organized, with some support from the researchers (and authors of this paper) a meeting (called Interpreters Lab, described in section three). It consisted of invited experts from different fields, managers from research and development,

product design and marketing and researchers. It was a one-day meeting built on presentations from the seven interpreters on six themes (predefined by the company according to the issues they wanted to discuss). Interpreters were invited to share their knowledge and insights not only through language but also through metaphors and music and their presentations, covering different themes, were followed by an open discussion. It is important to note that every participant functioned as an interpreter, both the external experts but also the employees with internal perspectives as well as the researchers.

### **Data sources and measurements**

The data on independent (or input) variables of the empirical analysis has been collected in several ways: First, secondary sources were used to access their CV and past experiences. Second, we used the Big Five Inventory (BFI, see Appendix) to model the personality of the interpreters. In addition, we as researchers were present in the Interpreter Lab to study and evaluate the interpreters' critical ability. In particular we explore the critical ability by looking at the individual behaviours of the interpreters and how this behaviour affects the conversations among them and with the innovation team of a firm (i.e. the focus was on studying the interpreters' cognitive abilities and social attitudes).

The BFI is a self-report inventory designed to measure the Big Five dimensions. It is a brief multidimensional personality inventory (44 items total), where respondents are asked how well these 44 different adjectives describe them. A reprinted version of the BFI test we sent over to the interpreters, with scoring instructions, is attached as an Appendix. Six of the seven interpreters responded to our request and provided a full response. Thus, the study comprises six people's personality traits.

When it comes to the authors' participation in the discussion, it is relevant to state that we, as researchers, believe that being part of the discussion helped us better understand the development of this approach to innovation. Because, with a focus on innovation connected to the construct of meaning, and as meanings per se take shape and evolve within and between people, staying aside and not participating would hinder our understanding of this type of innovation. This mind-set is inspired by the one of participatory research and the idea that validity comes from understanding/creating rather than observing/predicting. In this perspective we align with the social psychologist Lewin: "If social scientists truly wish to understand certain phenomena, they should try to change them. Creating, not predicting, is the most robust test of validity-actionability", Kurt Lewin in (Kaplan, 1998).

The independent variable (or output) has been the company's "voice" itself. The members of the company that attended the laboratory evaluated the interpreters with the help of an assessment form in two different moments; straight after the meeting and 6 months later. They were asked to assess the interpreters' contribution first as a whole and second according to a number of elements: expertise, organization, presentation, metaphors and engagement - on a scale from 1 to 5. This was done in paper form, individually. Last, the three authors interviewed four of the employees that attended the Lab for a total of around 3 hours of tape-recorded interviews.

### **Triangulation**

The content analysis of the meeting was developed by each author, coding the principal elements (Eisenhardt, 1989). Each interpreter was analysed by at least two researchers. The transcripts and the critical ability patterns were analysed iteratively and separately by the authors.

### **Closing paragraph**

Given the newness of the analysed approach to innovation and the intrinsic limitations of the single case study methodology itself, our aim is not to statistically generalize results, since it is not possible from the exploratory case study analysis (Yin, 2003). However, along the case we found regularities and patterns and it is our intent that the findings will inform and stimulate future theoretical and empirical studies in order to favour the development of innovations of meaning.

### **A FEW GLIMPSES OF THE INTERPRETERS “IN ACTION”**

We will now take a closer look at the seven interpreters in the Interpreters Lab by drawing seven simple portraits. These will give a glimpse of their background and professional life, their personality and their cognitive and social abilities. We have tried to render a simplified picture of their way to relate to the subject and how this was perceived by the employees in the assessment forms they filled in. We have codified the interpreters by the use of Greek Gods and heroes, not relating to gender or certain abilities, to anonymize their material.

#### **Metis – a research perspective**

Metis was one of the first to accept the invitation to the workshop. Being a researcher by profession Metis came to the meeting with both theoretic knowledge in the area (of adolescent development) and empirical experience from the field. Metis looked used to the situation of discussion and reflection, of going beyond the “taken for granted” concepts, for example that teenagers dislike their parents. Instead she showed how many teenagers actually like (and need) parental support. She enhanced her view by bringing a compass, an object to indicate the need of something to “hold on to” while “navigating” your life. To further express her standpoint she played the song “What’s up” with 4 Non Blondes (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NXnxTNIWkc>), a song that provoked a discussion about the search and struggle that many teenagers go through. The music and its lyrics evoked memories of several participants and also laughter. Metis self reported being organized and self-disciplined. She got average points in the assessment forms filled in by the employees, but in the second turn of these, a 6 months later, she was considered as one of the best interpreters. (Metis did not keep a business-oriented mind-set, she did not take her insight to applications, but brought knowledge from her field on an international research level, spanning both Europe and US networks).

#### **Nike – experience driven**

Nike, despite being in her 60s and being the oldest of the interpreters, had a very close and rich picture of the young potential users. With a long experience within sports as an Olympic champion, Nike transferred to the participants the world of extreme sports. Being an athlete and a coach at a centre for young people Nike

described what motivates many young humans today. She explained how important the recognition of friends is, and the willingness to take challenge and learn from others in same group of peers or other, older friends who work as role models. By the voice of Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, and their song “Can’t hold us”, Nike put forward the complexity of the world for teenagers today, and the fact that many care most for their closest reality as in the phrase “Raise those hands, this is our party, We came here to live life like nobody was watching where”. Being incredibly agreeable Nike managed to stimulate several conversations of all the participants in the meeting and she contributed significantly in the creation of the nice atmosphere throughout the meeting. Nike got almost the highest grades from the employees (4,9 of 5) due to her capability of prevision future scenarios, and her personal experience as a validation of the target group. The failures and success stories of the young people Nike had been encountering kept the audience spellbound but also risked to affect the participants in an unbalanced way.

### **Leto – First hand insights driven**

Leto has spent most of her career working on youth brands, conducting first hand research to always be updated on insights and future trends. When she was invited to participate in the meeting she saw it as a unique experience for sharing insights and enriching her knowledge about the existing and the future scenarios on issues he daily deals with in her role as insights director in a worldwide famous multinational company. She brought the voice of a new generation to the table and for doing so, outside of bespoke brand studies, she shared the work they continuously do with their research partners around the world to keep their fingers on the pulse of youth culture. She was really open and honest when sharing their material, which she supported with a number of first hand research or personal anecdotes (Ex. Pictures from one of her latest work-trips to Brazil or her kids friend’s latest pictures on Snapchat). These made the audience not only deeply engage with and listen to the speech but also switched on their curiosity to further question few of the ideas that were presented. Leto was assessed above the average, mainly due to his expertise and engagement during the meeting. The one thing that the employees most appreciated was the portfolio of the first hand examples she shared not only during her speech but along the entire day. She showed very calm and sympathetic, demonstrating a strong emotional stability.

### **Aura – Product driven**

Aura, despite being the youngest invitee (age 25) she showed her confidence and strong personality since the beginning of the meeting. During her studies of business administration she worked as a freelance reporter for several magazines and was awarded several scholarships for her writing prowess. Aura has spent the first three years of her career as a consumer and market knowledge manager at a multinational consumer goods company. She discussed the relationship young people have with their body and played Nirvana’s “Smells like Teen Spirit” as a metaphor to interpreter the main message she wanted to share. She brought a few more multimedia files to support her speech, the viral “Lost Generation” video on Youtube as well as insights from a recent research they had done on Lifestage Models. Despite being quite determined during her talk, she was somewhat absent during the rest of the day. Aura’s overall contribution was perceived below the average; being the metaphors she had chosen the lowest ranked (2.5/5).

### **Eusebeia – A commercial vision**

Eusebeia is senior Marketing Analyst at a multinational food and beverage corporation has extensive experience in both a brand marketing and product innovation. She addressed the issue of bravery and how these young people deal with it into their life contexts. She raised a few questions at the beginning of her speech that she later answered by providing evidence from first hand research they had done where they directly asked young people what they think courage is and how they address it in their daily life. To close her talk, she played a commercial they had recently been launched into the market that wrapped up the main points. Eusebeia's overall contribution was lower than average; being the presentation itself and the metaphors chosen the two elements that got the lowest marks (2.5/5 in both cases). These perception was confirmed in the second assessment round, were all the parameters got on average 1 point less than in the first round. She was kind and honest during her speech but did not participate much during the discussions, being loosely involved the meeting.

### **Demeter – Passion & Purpose driven**

Demeter works for non-profit organizations empowering the growth of youth ventures through training and managerial support. She has a degree in Political Science and has collaborated with a number of organizations in the search of better futures starting from the active participation of young citizens to make this better future happen. She works in close relation with young people in helping them follow their passions and make their ideas come true and the audience could feel this closeness thanks to the first hand experiences on youth ventures she shared. Both during her discussion and throughout the day Demeter participated quite actively in the debates and was really frank in sharing her thoughts. Her main message had to do with community's role among young people and individual's role within communities. She picked a song (Jahcoustix feat. Shaggy – WorldCitizen) and a metaphor to exemplify the message and this helped the audience grasp the core of her intervention. Demeter's contribution was perceived as being really valuable and she got almost the highest scores (4.8/5). Among the parameters measured, her engagement and expertise were the most appreciated ones.

### **Sophrosyne - A data statistical**

Sophrosyne is a camera enthusiast former Londoner and Bostonian with a Bachelor of Arts and a Master of Fine Arts in Media. Today, she works in marketing and advertising for an online social networking and micro blogging service. She looked at the data flow on social media to address the topic she was asked to develop and shared quite impressive statistics on people's behaviour both in terms of presence or participation and content shared on such platforms. In doing so, her approach was more descriptive than interpretive. She also brought the voice of Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, and their song "Same love". In this case, she highlighted the dilemma on stereotypes that the song addresses -"when I was in the third grade I thought that I was gay ... bunch of stereotypes all in my head"- and he presented the stereotypes as

a challenge these young people need to face. Her overall contribution was slightly above the average (3.7) and it dropped by one point in the second turn of the assessment forms filled in 6 months after the meeting. However, her expertise and the organization she worked for got quite high marks meaning her professional curricula was good. She reported to be less open to experience and extrovert than other invitees; indeed she was quite shy during the day.

## ANALYSIS

The study of the seven interpreters and the Interpreter Lab has served as the fundament for the analysis presented below. To ensure a rich understanding of this empirical material we have applied different theoretical lenses. On one dimension, we have related to the “big five” (BFI), one of the classic models of personality. Here, the discussion is connected to the personalities of the interpreters. Another dimension relates to the cognitive abilities and social attitudes of the interpreters. In this case, our reflection concentrates on finding common themes of what characterizes “being critical” in an innovation of meaning context. Our insights are presented in three levels.

- First, connected to the expertise of the interpreter
- Second, related to the bouquet of different personalities in an Interpreter Lab
- Third, explaining how the cognitive and social attitudes link to the “being critical”

The end of this section will also discuss the need for deeper reflections on both theoretical points of departure, and on further analyses of the empirical material.

### **First Insight – Expertise is not enough**

The assessment forms filled in by the company show that the overall contribution of the interpreters is not directly correlated to their expertise and the organization they represent (e.g. see Sophrosyne on Table 1).

This sets expertise apart from classic literature on innovation of solutions, where knowledge is deemed to play a central role (either positively or negatively). This means there are other elements that likely mediate the impact of expertise on the effectiveness of the interpreters, and that companies should look at when selecting a future influential interpreter.

Interpreter	Overall Contribution	Expertise	Organization	Presentation	Metaphores	Engagement
Aura	3.2	3.7	3.3	4.0	2.5	3.7
	1.3	3.0	2.3	3.0	2.3	3.0
Leto	4.3	4.3	4.7	4.3	4.0	4.3
	3.7	4.0	4.3	4.3	3.3	4.0
Metis	3.0	3.5	4.5	4.0	2.5	3.0
	4.0	4.0	4.7	3.7	4.0	4.0
Sophrosyne	3.7	4.0	4.3	3.7	3.0	3.7
	2.7	2.5	4.5	3.0	2.5	2.5
Nike	5.0	5.0	4.7	4.3	5.0	5.0
	5.0	5.0	4.7	4.3	4.7	5.0
Demeter	5.0	5.0	4.7	4.3	4.7	5.0
	4.0	4.3	4.3	3.7	3.3	4.7
Eusebeia	3.0	3.0	4.0	2.5	2.5	3.7
	1.7	3.0	3.3	2.3	2.0	2.3

Assessment  
Straight after the Lab

Assessment  
Six months later

Table 1. Assessment Forms: Innovation Team's average evaluations of the Interpreters two times in live: straight after the Lab and six months later

## Second Insight – the dynamics of personality

With the help of the BFI-test, used to measure the Big five dimensions of different personality traits, we made several observations: On average, the interpreters reported a pattern with slightly higher levels of agreeableness (A) and openness to experience (O) than of extraversion (E), conscientiousness (C) and emotional stability (ES), as opposed to neuroticism (N) (see **Figure 1**). However, the aim of the study is not to come up with a generic profile but rather to identify the core dimensions of those who most contributed according to the company's assessment in comparison to those whose participation was perceived as being less remarkable.



Figure 1. Big Five personality traits of the Interpreters

Nike, Metis, Leto and Demeter were the interpreters that were assessed (on average) as the best interpreters (see Table 1). When looking at their distribution of the five broad dimensions we can see a few similarities among the first three interpreters, while the last interpreter, Demeter, will be discussed later on in the text, as it is considered to be a peculiar case. Next a few notes shortly:

- The first significant distinction regards their high emotional stability (ES), which hints they can cope with stress situations and experience positive emotional states. People with high emotional stability are fairly relaxed, secure and self-confident, as Nike, Metis and Leto showed to be during the meeting.

- Second, the three of them reported to be highly on agreeability (A), meaning they are good in getting along with others. Nike and Leto excelled in this point (5/5), and have actually shown their good nature in the interactions with others not only during the meeting –where they shared examples on different people they had met in a number of situations in their daily work –in the stories shared there was clear evidence of a nice human-interaction-based climate– but also in subsequent conversations both with the company and us as researchers (as for example their participation on the test and their interest in the study being conducted).

- Third, the three of them got slightly higher levels of openness to experience (O) as compared to some of the other interpreters, as Sophrosyne and Aura.

When it comes to Sophrosyne and Aura, whose contribution was considered more vague, their personality patterns do also correspond. Overall, their scores in the various factors are more neutral than in the previous set of interpreters. When compared to the best contributors, Sophrosyne and Aura scored significantly lower on agreeableness (on average 1.71 lower) and emotional stability (on average 1.41 lower), followed by extraversion and openness (on average 0.7 lower for both factors) to close with conscientiousness lessened by 0.7 points (on average).

Demeter's case. She got almost the highest scores on the assessment forms (see Table 1); however, her personality profile is closer to the weakest contributors (Sophrosyne and Aura) than to the rest (Metis, Nike and Leto)(see Figure 1). During the meeting she showed very passionate about her field and generous with her own feelings, being really engaged and communicative in a humble and warm way.

### **Third Insight - the abilities of a critical stance**

The interpreters and their way of being, reacting, contributing and reflecting in the Interpreter Lab contains several elements of a critical character. Many of them do not only deliver what is expected from them but go beyond the official “assignment” and give “a little extra” to their insights. Observing the interpreters we have seen some patterns emerging. We have divided these in the four themes of asking, giving, daring and playing. To capture the dynamics of the Interpreter Lab and the interpreters we have selected the metaphor of a dance floor to describe these themes. A dance floor is a common place where people choose to participate in different ways, some traditionally asking for a dance, a few might give something to others. Dancers could also dare to try unexpected moves and might play with different types of moves and music. If the dance floor symbolizes the scene and the context, the dance itself symbolizes the discussion, the common reflection and the development of new thinking.

First theme is connected to an act of Asking: Exactly as a person who wants to dance with someone is willing to ask for a dance, an interpreter who wants to know more is willing, even eager, to ask other interpreters (or participants) to learn more. A dancer uses the dance to find out more, about the person, exactly as an interpreter uses the Interpreter Lab to deepen her knowledge. She asks “why”, “how” and “tell me more”. The act of asking is an “invitation” to a deeper discussion. Some interpreters, especially Metis and Leto showed a clear and big interest in understanding the underlying ideas of the Interpreters Lab. They did not only contribute by doing their delivery as a speech and payed attention and participated in the discussions, they also asked several questions before the Interprets Lab, in the preparation phase, during the workshop and in later contacts.

Second theme is focused on Giving: As a dance includes giving something from yourself and your ways of moving, a valuable interpreter is generous in sharing her personal opinions. She is not afraid to show her real “me”, on the contrary, she is emotionally open and she shares personal experiences. Furthermore, she shows and builds empathy connected to the subject and is clearly passionate about themes that engage her. The theme of giving is clearly visible in Nike’s strong engagement and sharing of personal stories from her own life as an Olympic champion and coach. She contributed by having “lived the experience” (Gadamer 1989/2004) thereby being authentic. Even her style and language felt closely related to the young people in focus for the Interpreter-lab! This personal experience was highly ranked in the assessment forms and gives trustworthiness and authenticity to the insights. Also Leto shared lived experience “from the field”, as a mom of six girls and their boyfriends. She also openly shared real data from her studies.

Third theme connects to an act of Daring: Some dancers might be courageous enough to try something unexpected, or even provocative; they defy and take the risk to be refused, even ridiculed. An example could be a dancer who calls the orchestra to change the music. This goes also for an interpreter who is eager to go deeper in a discussion, beyond the obvious and challenge her self. As a dancer can choose to be brave, an interpreter might take the chance to do the unexpected. She might be giving thoughts and ideas even when it is not “asked” for. An interpreter with a lower level of darefullness would instead not participate more than expected but only at her speech, and not during the common discussions. An example of a daring ability is Metis, who, before the Interpreter Lab, and to the surprise of the organizers, took the chance to question one of the themes. She also helped out with questions not expected from her but from another interpreter.

Fourth theme gives a hint of a playful attitude and could be described as Playing: Good dancers are not perfect but with a great personality (as in the comparison by the novelist Federico Baccamo, between the technically perfect dancer Baryšnikov and his technically imperfect counterpart, Nureyev. The latter is considered “beyond perfection” as he dared to move beyond the expected, playing outside the norm of dancing, (Baccamo, 2013)). They show new moves, trying, testing and playing with tensions, combining the established form with something new, even crazy. It is a fun try. As the dance group Bounce, leaving the conventional dance floor for city squares, the “expert” dancing for a common dancing crowd (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVJVRywgmYM>). Good interpreters, it seems, do the same. They have fun in trying, stretching existing concepts by the use of metaphors or stories to explain what they feel inside. They propose something in the hope to create a reaction. Several, but not all, interpreters moved beyond their everyday

language by bringing an object or metaphor to the Interpreters Lab. Nike showed movies, Eusebeia used commercials from his company, Leto, even though not as a planned metaphor, related to a famous article in a world known magazine with a somewhat provocative message. Metis brought a powerful metaphor, not perceived very well in the first round of the assessment but that grew in importance over time and scored very high six months later.

The four themes presented above have emerged through iterations between the researchers and the empirical material. The aim has been to shed light of the critical ability of interpreters and therefore, literature related to the act of “being critical” have been studied. As described in earlier sections, several theoretical frameworks have served as an inspiration. One theoretical framework that shows similarities to our themes is the one of Lewison (Lewison et al 2008) and their discussion about abilities of a critical stance:

- Consciously engaging, not only responding but paying attention to language (as in our proposed theme of Giving)
- Entertaining alternate ways of being – trying alternatives, risk taking, creating tension, multimodality (as in our proposed theme of Playing)
- Taking responsibility to inquire – asking and questioning beliefs, moving beyond (as in our theme of Asking)
- Being Reflective – aware of the risk to maintain status quo, dialogue to “outgrow” ourselves (as in our theme of Daring)

There are also similarities to other theoretical discussions so as the “Lived experience”, the “Fusions of Horizons” (Gadamer 1960/2004) and the “Metaphors we live by” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980/2003). Also the frameworks by Mingers (2000) (and the aspects of rethoric, tradition, authority and objectivity) as the one by Alvesson Sköldbberg (presenting nine themes of a critical stance) could be related to our findings (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000). A construct that did not align with the presented themes, though, is the approach of the critical thinking discourse, as it advocates an objective and “cleared mind”. As this research is connected to meaning, that comes from personal interpretation, the structured and from subjective thinking abandoned approach of critical thinking sets an opposite direction of our research.

Both the personality patterns discussed and the four themes presented above are early proposals of what means to have and use a critical ability in a process related to innovating meanings. For example, there are a couple of issues that have not been addressed in the current study that could help to have a more holistic understanding of the data and thus strengthen the results. The first regards the difference between of the evaluations given to a certain interpreter by the various members of the innovation team (i.e. variability of the data). This connects to the absorptive capacity of meaning and arises an intriguing question: Why are some interpreters –their contribution– tricky to “absorb”? The second refers to how the perceived contribution changes in the long run –six months later as compared to straight after the meeting–. Considering the assessment forms we can conclude that what stays there is not the information itself but the personal things that touch one’s heart and evoke certain feelings, meaning a good metaphor is not the best metaphor but a powerful metaphor (see Metis on Table 1).

Further research directions aiming to bring robustness to what stayed above will be shared in the conclusion.

## CONCLUSION

We introduced this paper by describing two ways of “thinking new”, the “Google” way, ideas oriented, versus the “Interpreting” Way, meaning oriented. We stated that when meaning and innovation concerned, we seem to lack robust theories on how meanings evolve between sources external to a company and the internal sources of the same.

The aim of this study has been to explain one valuable phase of the process of innovating meanings of products, namely the interpreters. The interpreters’ contribution to the “Interpreting” Way depends on their characteristics, the conversational process where their insights are exchanged and the capability of the innovation team to absorb and transfer these insights. The research has focused on the first: the characteristics.

This study looks at personality and cognitive abilities as possible drivers to support the process of interpreters’ selection. It arises that conversations and discussions are eased if the interpreters possess certain abilities besides knowledge. Thus, for the process of interpreting knowledge per se is not enough but only when mediated by individual behaviour. A behaviour closer to criticism than to creativity.

The personality traits that seem to be key for the interpreters perceived as the best contributors are mainly the high emotional stability together with high levels of agreeableness and openness. Besides, the way they mirrored their critical abilities, meaning their capability to take a critical stance, can be described in the four themes of asking, giving, daring and playing.

The implication is that to move beyond existing meaning, managers should carefully look not only at the institutional context of an interpreter, but even more at how she behaves as an individual as a way to explore her critical attitude. In addition, before and during a meeting of interpreters many contrasting, insights emerge. Executives need to take care of and encourage this variety of perspectives.

### **A last observation, the need of deeper reflections**

In the study of the interpreters the focus has been oriented towards the external experts and their ability to be critical. But, the internal interpreters also have an important role. In this case of the consumer goods industry, during a meeting with the innovation team after the Interpreter Lab, we observed how an employee proved very valuable in the development of a new meaning for the products of the company. This circumstance points out the importance of the internal interpreters. Here, interesting new studies and a deeper reflection would be valuable.

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## APPENDIX - BIG FIVE INVENTORY (BFI)

The Big-Five framework enjoys considerable support and has become the most widely used and extensively researched model of personality (John & Srivastava, 2001). The Big-Five framework is a hierarchical model of personality traits with five broad factors -extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism (the opposite of emotional stability), and openness to experience-, which represent personality at the broadest level of abstraction. The Big-Five framework suggests that most individual differences in human personality can be classified into five broad, empirically derived domains. Several rating instruments have been developed to measure the Big-Five dimensions -44-item Big-Five Inventory, 60-item NEO Five Factor Inventory or 100-Trait Descriptive Adjectives among the most established-. For the current study, interpreters were administered an online version of the Big-Five Personality Inventory based on John & Srivastava (2001). The Big Five Inventory (BFI) is a self-report inventory designed to measure the Big Five dimensions. It is a multidimensional personality inventory, where respondents are asked how well 44 different adjectives describe them. Each trait is scored from one to five with higher scores indicating that the trait describes the individual better. Next a copy of the BFI, with the scoring instructions.

### The Big Five Inventory (BFI) - John, O. P., & Srivastava, S. (1999)

Here are a number of characteristics that may or may not apply to you. For example, do you agree that you are someone who likes to spend time with others? Please write a number next to each statement to indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with that statement.

Disagree strongly (1) - Dissagree a little (2) - Neither agree nor disagree (3) - Agree a little (4) - Agree strongly (5)

I see Myself as Someone Who...

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1. Is talkative                            | <input type="checkbox"/> 23. Tends to be lazy                              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2. Tends to find fault with others         | <input type="checkbox"/> 24. Is emotionally stable, not easily upset       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3. Does a thorough job                     | <input type="checkbox"/> 25. Is inventive                                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4. Is depressed, blue                      | <input type="checkbox"/> 26. Has an assertive personality                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 5. Is original, comes up with new ideas    | <input type="checkbox"/> 27. Can be cold and aloof                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 6. Is reserved                             | <input type="checkbox"/> 28. Perseveres until the task is finished         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 7. Is helpful and unselfish with others    | <input type="checkbox"/> 29. Can be moody                                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 8. Can be somewhat careless                | <input type="checkbox"/> 30. Values artistic, aesthetic experiences        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 9. Is relaxed, handles stress well         | <input type="checkbox"/> 31. Is sometimes shy, inhibited                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 10. Is curious about many different things | <input type="checkbox"/> 32. Is considerate and kind to almost everyone    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 11. Is full of energy                      | <input type="checkbox"/> 33. Does things efficiently                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 12. Starts quarrels with others            | <input type="checkbox"/> 34. Remains calm in tense situations              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 13. Is a reliable worker                   | <input type="checkbox"/> 35. Prefers work that is routine                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 14. Can be tense                           | <input type="checkbox"/> 36. Is outgoing, sociable                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 15. Is ingenious, a deep thinker           | <input type="checkbox"/> 37. Is sometimes rude to others                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 16. Generates a lot of enthusiasm          | <input type="checkbox"/> 38. Makes plans and follows through with them     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 17. Has a forgiving nature                 | <input type="checkbox"/> 39. Gets nervous easily                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 18. Tends to be disorganized               | <input type="checkbox"/> 40. Likes to reflect, play with ideas             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 19. Worries a lot                          | <input type="checkbox"/> 41. Has few artistic interests                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 20. Has an active imagination              | <input type="checkbox"/> 42. Likes to cooperate with others                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 21. Tends to be quiet                      | <input type="checkbox"/> 43. Is easily distracted                          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 22. Is generally trusting                  | <input type="checkbox"/> 44. Is sophisticated in art, music, or literature |

BFI scale scoring ("R" denotes reverse-scored items):

Extraversion: 1, 6R, 11, 16, 21R, 26, 31R, 36

Agreeableness: 2R, 7, 12R, 17, 22, 27R, 32, 37R, 42

Conscientiousness: 3, 8R, 13, 18R, 23R, 28, 33, 38, 43R

Neuroticism: 4, 9R, 14, 19, 24R, 29, 34R, 39

Openness: 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35R, 40, 41R, 44

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