

## **Interpretation: the added value of a profession.**

### **Speech**

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your warm welcome. I am very pleased to be here today taking part in the DG Interpretation's annual conference.

Before I start, let me say a word about myself, as probably none of you has heard of me before. My name is Belén Llopis Pérez. I come from Alcoy, a very small town in the south-east of Spain. I am currently studying a master's degree in Interpreting at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh. When I was a little girl, what I liked the most was writing stories. And that is why, today, I would like to share one with you that shows the magic and worthiness of interpreters' work:

Once upon a time there was a young couple with two children who lived across the sea in the South side of the world. As parents, what they wanted was for their children to have a great future. After considering the pros and cons, both parents decided that the best they could do was to travel across the sea, all the way north, so that their children could have a better life. They embarked on a journey towards their future and that of their children, risking their lives in a flimsy dinghy. Luckily, after several days at the sea, they made it to their destination. However, when they reached the sea shore, people would talk to them in a language they had never heard before, and so the insecurity and fear started to buzz in their heads.

Right after they reached the shore, they were taken to a refugee camp and, after waiting for a long time, they saw a small group of people approaching them. One of them started to talk and suddenly, after that person finished uttering some incomprehensible words, someone else talked in their own language. All the couple could remember was 'I am the *interpreter*, I am here to *help* you communicate, I am here as an *impartial* party, I will interpret *everything* you say, and anything you say will be *confidential*'. At that time, those words meant the world for this family who had lived a nightmare before they docked in that unknown land.

Let me stop here. Even though this is a fiction story, it represents the current situation of many families who chose to migrate due to the precarious conditions they have in their own countries. As a child I could have never pictured this story, a situation of which many people these days might not be fully aware. My aim by telling you this is to highlight how important the role of interpreters is for people, regardless of their status and role in society; whether they are MPs, average citizens or people who put their lives in danger so that their loved ones would have a better future.

I know that, especially in the refugee camp in the story, there might not be enough time to explain the role of an interpreter or maybe the interpreters are not trained people, but people who

come from the same country and, thus, speak the same language. But what I want to point out is that interpreters are the engine of cultural, economic and political intercourses. Actually, the greatest example can be found here, today, in the heart of European institutions. Without interpreters, last September, the agreement to set a trust fund for Africa to support the stability of its regions and assist migrants and refugees would not have been possible, and this is just one example.

However, sometimes people cannot conceive the image of an interpreter beyond the European institution's booths. In fact, some people do not even know what an interpreter is. As I said, I come from a small town and when I told my grandmother I wanted to become an interpreter she replied 'so... you want to be an actress?' For those who at least broadly understand what means to be an interpreter, the first thing that might come into their minds are interpreters working for international bodies such as the EU or the UN, but not much more than that. I believe this issue has its roots in most training programs syllabus. They mostly aim to prepare young future interpreters for these international institutions. But that is only the tip of the iceberg because, at the end of the day, the role of an interpreter in a refugee camp, for instance, is just as important as that of an interpreter in a booth.

Besides, with my story I also wanted to raise the question of what it means to have access to a certain language. Usually, language is seen as the core problem interpreters have to cope with. But this, again, is only the tip of the iceberg. Let me show you another example. If you tell a friend that you are an interpreter they will ask you 'why do you study that if in the future machines will replace humans?' From that perspective, it is language what makes communication difficult, when communication is much broader than that. We should not perceive language itself as the main problem, this would merely come from a simplistic view of communication and language, because actually language is not only about words, it is also about history, fears, intentions, feelings, expertise, emotions... and a robot would only go as far as giving directions or provide information.

If we dig deeper, the European Commission itself conceives the fact of understanding and being understood through an interpreter or a translation as a human right which ensures equality among individuals. This is how the European Commission (2011:21) puts it:

*"Access to translation and interpreting in public service settings is a natural, human right to be guaranteed. Failure to enforce it may endanger the life and the well-being of millions of people while perpetuating a social landscape where everyone is not equal."*

(European Commission, 2011:21)

Having said all of this, who would put their future in hands of a machine interpreter? I do not think any of you, who are present here, would. That is why, today, I would like to call the attention of all the university members, all the European commissioners, all my fellow students and, of course, all the interpreters in their booths. I would like to encourage them to fight so that our profession can spread to all the fields where our labour is needed; to share the purpose of our role with others who do not know about it yet so that, whenever they have to hire somebody for interpreting, they rely on a professional interpreter; and to be open-minded on how important our role is far beyond interpreting in a booth.

I hope that one day interpretation as a whole will be considered a profession in all its fields so that, maybe, those children who came from a remote land seeking for a better life will be able to become interpreters and that they will be able to choose any option: from interpreting for European institutions to interpreting in a refugee camp – although I hope there will not be that need in the future –, and that, instead of being replaced by technology, they will be able to use it as a tool for a better interpretation.

Thank you very much for your attention and I hope this words have truly meant something to all of you.

### **Bibliography**

European Commission, (2011). Special Interest Group on Translation and Interpreting for the Public Services: Final report. Brussels: European Commission, Directorate-General for Interpretation.