

INTERPRETATION:

THE ADDED VALUE OF A PROFESSION

Ladies and gentlemen, fellow interpreters, good morning.

“What do you want to do when you grow up?” That’s a question we all have been asked before. It’s the question all children get, many times.

Once upon a time, seventeen years ago, there was a five-year-old girl with a big imagination, living in a house in the countryside, in the outskirts of a city called Badajoz, in south-west Spain. She, as many other kids her age, was already starting to get that question: “What do you want to do when you grow up?”. Her answer, of course, was not always the same, but her most recurrent choice was that she wanted to be an astronaut.

Let’s now flash forward to ten years later. She was then a fifteen-year-old teenager whose vivid imagination had evolved into a creative and very, very curious mind that wanted to do great things. She was getting a little bit more real about the answer to the very infamous question. But, unfortunately, she was not feeling exactly excited about the idea of becoming a doctor, a lawyer, or a teacher. Never did it once occur to her that seven years later, she would have graduated in Madrid as no less than a translator and interpreter, nor that she would be training to be a conference interpreter, dreaming of working... well, in this very place.

That girl, of course, was me.

Why didn’t I even know about the existence of such a beautiful profession? Probably

because, as you may well know, interpreters are often left out of History books. Most people haven't even wondered how great civilizations and empires, like that of the Egyptians, or the Romans, were able to communicate with the natives of the lands they conquered. Most people don't know Cristopher Columbus had an interpreter accompanying him in the journey where he would end up discovering America... Or that, in fact, he would never be useful, as he was an interpreter of Arabic.

However, interpreters have always been there, in the shadows, but undeniably indispensable. Some say it's the second profession to ever exist; I like to think that it is the second most important profession, after that of those who make the decisions. It might sound presumptuous, but here's why I say that: people in the world need to understand each other, and they have needed it since the beginning of time. Without interpreters, that would not be possible. That's the value of our profession.

I believe wars come into existence when peoples don't talk to each other; or, more accurately, when they don't *understand* each other. Words, then, represent the most powerful and most important weapon to end those wars, the only weapon I personally endorse. And by words, I don't mean *just* words, but also the intention behind them, the real *message* steeped in them.

Languages are not only the way a community speaks, but also the way its people think: they're a vehicle for culture, the key to understanding minds. Nowadays, international relations are more important than ever before. Relations between countries, religions, cultures that may or may not share a language have increased astonishingly, and it will, I believe, continue to do so. And with this phenomenon we call globalization, comes the fact that more and more people are learning new languages, many of which are used as a *lingua franca*.

"So", some would wonder, "why is it countries and peoples don't communicate through a *lingua franca*? It would save a lot of money to sack some interpreters, right?". Well...

Yes, it would, but international relations as they are nowadays call for profound understanding, for the transcendence not only of linguistic barriers, but of cultural barriers, too.

Also, there is another phenomenon, one that has emerged as a response to globalization. A phenomenon that is born from it, but that constitutes a direct confrontation to it: diversification, as I like to call it. We've seen it in the world of international organizations: the biggest and most important organization is currently the United Nations, where every country in the world is represented; however, after this expression of globalization, smaller communities have united in smaller organizations. In fact, right now we are at the headquarters of one of them.

This dynamic can be observed as well in another context: countries and nations have reacted to globalization by trying to *protect* their own unique features, their individual identities, the things that define them. And what is something that defines us, something that identifies us? Our culture. And what is the most significant expression of our culture? Our *language*.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is to me *the added value of our profession*: today, in this globalized world we live in, interpreters help defend and protect our languages and cultures, our uniqueness, while also building a bridge to save our distances from one another. We are a vehicle for diversity. And look around you. *We are diversity*.

Allow me to conclude with a thought, a beautiful one: our minds are wired to learn in a unique way. They are a white sheet where we can write other people's stories *in their own words*, as if it were in *their own minds*.

So, if I somehow got the chance to talk to that fifteen-year-old girl with a curious mind and a desire to do great things, but scared of having no idea whatsoever of what she wants to do when she grows up, I would tell her to "keep calm and carry on", as now I

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know she would find her way to one of the most exciting and, yes, transcendent, professions in the world.

I want to thank the people in this room, all of you, for having decided yourselves you wanted to do this when you grew up, and for inspiring others, girls like the one I was not that long ago, to do something this beautiful.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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