

“Thank you for your attention”. Every interpreter knows what these words mean. When you turn off the microphone and the participants of the conference head to the buffet you know you have contributed greatly to someone’s cause, and yet you’ve been invisible all time long. The world doesn’t see you, it doesn’t acknowledge your work until you’re called to fix someone else’s damage.

I see it a bit like the fairy godmother’s wand. Nobody sees it, but without it the fairy godmother cannot get the job done and do her magic. But who exactly does the magic? Does she do it? Or does the wand do it?

Martin Luther King once said: “The future belongs to those who prepare for it today”. I like to think that the work of an interpreter is the wand who helps prepare the future from behind the curtains of a world that needs decision, goodwill and faith at the same time. We, as interpreters and interpreters to-be, are the unsung heroes of a story with no possibility of coming back. Of a future that needs us to be ready, today. We help fulfil the dreams of many people humbly lending our voice to those who wouldn’t have one. Or at least whose voice wouldn’t be heard otherwise. In doing so we fulfil our dreams too. Being an interpreter is not a decision we make light-hearted. We know what the costs are, or at least we imagine it. On the one hand there is the dream of a very large and comfortable booth in an important organization and the hope of making the difference, at least a little bit. On the other hand there is the great responsibility that the job implies, the constant fear of not being good enough, the struggle to choose the right word at the right time and the anger you feel once you go home and think that you could have interpreted that one word in another way. That is exactly what we signed for when we were just kids watching the news and hearing the interpreter’s voice and said: “That must be difficult. I want to do that when I’m older”. That’s what we signed for, a life in which if you’re good at your job, no one will notice you. In which you can’t just go home and tell your family about your day or you’ll violate a non-disclosure agreement to the very least. And we wouldn’t change it for the world.

Interpreters help prepare the future every time they carefully choose between one word or another, because just one word can make a huge difference. It’s true: you can’t bring your ideas to the table and participate actively in the decision-making progress, you have a far greater responsibility. You have the responsibility of interpreting faithfully what the people who want to make a difference said, clearly contributing either to the positive or to the negative results. When that red light is on you are on stage and behind the curtains at the same time. The destiny of many depends on you, it doesn’t matter whether it’s about preventing another war in an international organization or trying to sell as many items as possible while working at a trade fair. No kind of interpreting should be considered less important than the other, as long as it gives someone a voice.

To achieve such results, to contribute to the shaping of our future, the quality of your service must be impeccable. The importance of specific training as a prerequisite of a high quality interpretation can never be stressed enough. Our (future) profession must be protected from people who pretend to be professional interpreters without a proper training, leading therefore to low-quality performances and resulting in a damaged reputation of the whole professional category. For me it’s paramount that interpreters are able to register, in every member state, to a professional organization that can protect their interests. This profession needs to be based on the pillar of meritocracy: interpreters cannot have a corrupted voice if their work is based on faithfulness. Faithfulness to the clients,

colleagues, to the words they interpret but most of all, to themselves. How do we learn to do that? What should an interpreter do when he/she has to lend his/her voice to someone he/she despises or whose ideas are not in line with what he/she believes in? What should I say if the speaker offends someone? What happens if I don't understand something? These are all questions young interpreters have when they start their professional training or when they move their first steps towards this profession. They and we all can get these answers in the dozens of professional interpreting training facilities and universities who are responsible for the training and professionalism of future interpreters. We, on our turn, will be responsible for giving a high quality service which cannot be replaced by anyone who just claims to speak two or more languages. If we're lucky enough, we will help people prepare for the future and we prepare ourselves for it at the same time. All this is achievable only if our professional category is protected, well represented and if our voices are heard even when we're not speaking into a microphone, interpreting someone else's ideas. It would be a remarkable step toward the recognition of interpreters as representatives of a respectable profession if every member state organized a professional registry of qualified professional interpreters. In some countries, like Italy, the profession is only protected by organizations which do their best to represent professional interpreters, but they can't replace clear regulations on this matter. Court interpreters are still paid less than janitors, if they are paid at all. If we want to be ready for the future we have to start from ourselves, fighting for what's right and for what would allow us to work in the best possible conditions. Allowing us to do the job we love the way it is supposed to means allowing us to give the best possible service to those who sit "in the room where it happens" and helping indirectly shape of our future. Let's get ready for what awaits us together, today.