

The future belongs to those who prepare for it today

Ladies and gentlemen,

When we think about the world of interpreting (or rather, universe, given that it is a field connected to countless languages and subjects), it should come as no surprise if hear that, eventually, technologies will make us redundant. Interpreters, apparently, have an expiry date and it seems not far off for the generations that follow us. Nevertheless, although we are labelled as an endangered species, can we expect this? Is it really possible that a heartless and static machine would be capable of replacing a lifelong career which demands constant learning?

When I was eight years old, I had the wonderful opportunity to visit the breathtaking city of Paris. In fact, my little eyes would sparkle with joy at the simple thought of seeing the Eiffel Tower and meeting Mickey Mouse whilst watching the eye-catching shows Disneyland prepared for us. Nonetheless, there is one memory that has stuck in my head and comes to the forefront more often than I admit. Beyond the romantic city lights that I will always remember, beyond the cartoon characters that I doodled in my notebook, I can't forget her.

Having walked for three hours, my family decided it was time for a break. That is why we rested in a Parisian park with nothing around us except trees, stones and sand. As any young child, I was eager to play and started doing so with the sand, digging a hole with my bare hands. After a few minutes, I saw I was not alone and that another little girl was also playing with the sand. Immediately I approached to her and we started to play altogether. She was Asian, and couldn't speak Spanish; I am Spanish, and back then, apart from Valencian, Spanish was my only language. Regardless, I remember there being no uncertainty when I approached her; we started playing together instantly, despite the language barrier. I cannot remember what the game was about, or how we managed to agree with our decisions, but for half an hour our nationalities were irrelevant and, together, we were able to have a good time.

I never saw that little girl again, I don't even know her name; she may not even remember me anyway. I recall telling my mum that I wanted to see her again and to be able to talk to her. I was not aware at that time but, looking back, I can now truly say, hand on heart, that was when I decided to become an interpreter.

As the years went by, I have seen the need for communication become crystal clear, albeit sometimes no vehicle is offered in our mother tongues. What should we then do? Communication must become the solution but laziness is often the excuse to not learn another language, since we expect the other party to be the one making this effort.

Now that I am studying to become an interpreter, to enhance communication, I still sometimes question how we, as interpreters, can ensure communication, why we are a better option than a machine and how I believe interpreting will change. As I hear such claims and those arguments, the only picture that comes into my head and my thoughts is the little Asian girl playing in that Parisian park, and I wonder: had I not had this desire for communication, would I have approached to her? Would I have been interested in other languages? Would an interpreting machine have been better in this situation? Could a machine have awoken this feeling of belonging and curiosity?

That is the reason why, when I think about the future of interpreting, I already know we will not disappear. Because, despite the fact that a machine is able to repeat or reproduce a message over and over again, it will never replicate the emotions of the speaker, or the sincerity of the words, or the hidden meaning of a pun, or the irony of a situation. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is up to us. If we want communication to reach our interlocutors and be effective, we have to rely on somebody who can fully understand us, who will walk a mile in our shoes and be willing to offer a professional interpreting service. Technology is marching ever onwards and will improve our quality of life; however, it is not supposed to replace us, but enhance our job. We should not see it as a competitor, but a tool to make things better.

That is why, when we think about being prepared for the future, we must focus on the word 'prepare' instead of the word 'future'. It is most certainly true that technology will continue advancing more and more over the years but, rather than accept that, we should be educators of the fact that communication without interaction results in isolation. We cannot ignore human diversity, because a machine will not make us equal. Only empathy, identity and understanding will do that. So, instead of accepting that we may become extinct, let's try to think about what it is that makes us unique.

Instead of thinking of a bright future, think about how you make a bright present. Because the future is now. Thank you.