

Rachel Stuart

Hello ladies and gentlemen,

Whenever I tell people what I want to become after university, I always manage to garner the same reaction: "An interpreter?" they say, "what's that?" cue a lengthy discussion on trying to explain the job, only for them to say "oh you mean a translator?"

Add a computer programmer into the mix and the conversation will heat up quickly. "In 10 years you'll become obsolete," said a French guy I had never met before at an Erasmus party, "we'll have no need for interpreters or translators because everything will be done by machine. In fact," he paused, "I'm working on a computer programme that will be capable of translating vast literary works in just under 5 minutes."

Now I don't know if his ambitious plan ever worked, but it left me wondering why there is such rivalry between humans and technology. So many people are afraid of living a 1984-esque future and worry about a robot revolution. Take for example, my great uncle Jock, a whisky distiller, who was so god-fearing and afraid of electricity that when the council came to install all of the wires and cables and electrical fittings in 1918, he threw it all out into the street the next day. He claimed it was the "Devil's light" and that it would be the "downfall of humanity". But, despite being so strong in his beliefs and rejecting all things modern in his home, he was helpless to stop the "devil's light" and its contraptions from coming into the distillery, which eventually put him out of work. The distillery in my small village where he worked once employed around 30 people, and now only needs 5 men to operate the machinery. However, certain jobs will never be replaced by machines, and the work of translators and interpreters falls into that category. If we have the machinery to replace men in the distillery do we really still need them there? No. And this leads on to the question that if there are already programmes out there that do the work of translators and interpreters, do we really still need them today? Yes. Because machines and humans excel in different activities. Machines are frequently no match for our human minds, senses and dexterity.

So what would the future of interpreting look like to my great uncle Jock, or to that French guy? Well, Jock with his pessimism probably saw a robot takeover in the interpreting booths, just as what happened to him in the still house. And that French guy is probably programming technology for machine interpreting as we speak. Machine interpreting does seem to be a likely reality, and I'm sure we've either heard about it, or seen it in action at least once before.

Let's go back to this distillery in my village in the north-east of Scotland, where I have also worked as a tour guide instead of a distiller. One day, a group of tourists from China came in. There was an obvious, instant language barrier as they didn't speak a word of English and I didn't speak a word of Chinese. But low and behold one of the guys in the group produced a slim little device from his pocket and spoke away. The device gave out a chirpy little beep and then said "We would like a tour, please." Amazing, I thought, now I'll be able to communicate with them no problem. He held out the device indicating for me to give my reply. I did so, but this time instead of giving a happy little beep, it made a sad noise. It said "Sorry, I did not understand you." This happened a few more times before we realised it was my accent that was the problem. Most of you can probably hear right now that I don't have the strongest Scottish accent, so I would love to know what would have happened if these Chinese tourists went to a bar in Glasgow and ordered a pint. Or even worse, I would hate to see what would happen if machine interpreting ever entered the doctor's office, or the court room, or even here, in Brussels. The potential mishaps and misunderstandings would have more serious consequences than just a tourist receiving a cider instead of a beer.

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This is just one example of the many reasons why we need humans to do an interpreter's job. A machine will never be on par with us as interpreters when it comes to understanding accents, jokes, puns, tone of voice, the list goes on and on.

So what does the future of interpreting look like to me?

Nowadays we're seeing a digital transition, a mass exodus to the virtual realm. We are entering a new era and we need to adapt to that, we do not need to fear technology taking over our profession, and (whilst Jock may be turning in his grave to hear me say this) we need to embed that technology into interpreting and invest in it. For example, we could build an interpreter-finding app, allowing freelancers to set themselves up easily. Or maybe seeing tools like tablet interpreting become more commonplace in the booths. It's a challenging time for everyone, especially since the future is so unpredictable, what with the never-ending drama of Brexit and so many of our politicians running around like headless chickens. But there is a silver lining to all this: it's obvious that English interpreters will be in high demand. So even though Brexit maybe screwing up the UK, at least my potential job prospects have improved... and coming from Scotland, I suppose we have the proposed second independence referendum as a get-out-of-jail-free card.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope I've convinced you that preparing for the future of the interpreting profession means embracing technology. I also hope that in the future, the next time a programmer asks me about my job, they tell me about how they've built new technology to help us as interpreters, instead of trying to replace us.

And as for the future of Brexit, if everything goes in Scotland's favour and our get-out-of-jail card is accepted, I might just have to interpret in the Scots booth so that you can understand some of our politicians.

Thank you for listening.