

Ladies and gentlemen,  
Aspiring interpreters,  
Future colleagues,

Autumn has always been a time of thought for me. The year comes to an end, leaves litter the pavement and the Belgian weather inevitably turns sour. Therefore, I spend much of my time indoors. And just like the trees outside, I too lose some of my pretences. So I take some time to reflect on myself, my experiences, and my surroundings. This year, I had the opportunity to think about what interpreting, as a profession and a passion, means to me and what it can mean for the next generation of interpreters. I'd like to explore those ideas with you today.

I feel lucky, ladies and gentlemen, that I have been able to study interpreting for the past 3 years now. I've studied in Belgium, at the University of Ghent, and in Germany, at the University of Mainz in Germersheim. As I look back on this journey, I realise that these years have shaped me and my fellow students into very different people than we were before. For me the most important change was realising that I really do not know anything yet. It's a very humbling thought, ladies and gentlemen. But maybe becoming painfully aware of one's own ignorance is a rite of passage for every interpreting student. Moreover, my ignorance motivates me as well. Because we are not helpless. Our interpreting teachers have taught us how to cope with not knowing something. And they continue to teach us how to educate ourselves for the rest of our lives.

Obviously, it is not just me who has changed. The world is changing, too. Humanity faces serious difficulties every day. Climate change, wars, politics, ... every day seems more challenging than the last. However, it is in times like these that interpreters play an essential role. We are on the frontlines of global politics. We form the bridge between cultures and languages.

Ladies and gentlemen, we all know that interest in learning languages declines in favour of STEM. But interpreters are vital to economic, social and political cooperation. We stand in direct relation to this complex world. If we want to attract the next generation of interpreters, we must realise that this complexity is an immense strength for our profession, and we must advertise it as such. Entering the world of interpreting should not be a blind leap into the unknown, facilitated by a lack of interest in mathematics! It should be a deliberate choice and an exciting prospect. Because interpreting is not just translating words from one language to another. It is so much more. And that is what makes it so valuable. I think that we can do more to advertise interpreting as such. To do so, I have tried to capture the essence of interpreting in three key principles, which each pose both a challenge and an opportunity to interpreting students worldwide: humanity, curiosity, and adaptability. Highlighting these key principles as an integral part of language and interpreting studies can be the extra step in inspiring the next generation.

Let's explore these three concepts in more detail.

If you asked me to define interpreting without mentioning language or translation, I would say that interpreting is fundamentally about being human. Because using language to communicate and form culture is a very human condition. Therefore, humanity is my first pillar. After all, an interpreter listens to humans, interprets their words and emotions, and conveys them to other humans. To interpret is to be sensitive to nuance. To cultural specificities. To unspoken truths, half-uttered words and meaningful glances. Interpreting means caring deeply about your booth partner, the audience, the speaker you are interpreting, and, in a broader sense, humanity as a whole.

A shared interest in other human beings leads interpreters down this path. And it should attract others to do the same. Because this profession is a unique possibility to expand your worldview and

gain a deeper understanding of all that humanity has to offer. The good sides, and the ugly. Every day. And this brings me to my second pillar.

The second pillar of interpreting can be found in curiosity. I greatly admire my interpreting teachers' knowledge about the world, which is acquired not only through interpreting, but also through an inherent curiosity about the world around us. This positive attitude towards knowledge starts in the earliest phases of an interpreting career: in class. Be it new vocabulary, election results or the winner of the latest football game: to be an interpreter is to be insatiably curious.

And last but not least, interpreting is about adaptability. Because humanity and curiosity are not enough to keep pace with the times. Ladies and gentlemen, the emergence of AI is as scary as it is exciting. Some tasks that were previously accepted by interpreters might be carried out by AI systems in the future. Of course, that does not sound appealing. But we cannot ignore, or deny the existence of these AI companions. They are persistent, like a sidekick that learns from you, emulates you, and secretly (or not so secretly) hopes to surpass you one day. Interpreters are expected to make full use of that and perform better, faster and stronger. In some cases, clients might even prefer the help of our AI counterparts over us. But ladies and gentlemen, as my generation loves to say – “it is what it is”. AI is here to stay. We can ponder it, we can question its ethical implications, but we cannot make it disappear. So we might as well make the most of it. That is where adaptability makes the difference today.

In this sense, interpreting is no different than any other profession. Only a few generations ago, it was possible to pick one profession to specialise in for the rest of your life. That reality is long gone. In a new world, you cannot afford to be left behind. Therefore, interpreters must educate themselves to keep up with this world in change. We need to start in interpreting courses, and continue in the field.

Ladies and gentlemen, I see a future for young interpreters in a profession that adapts to its surroundings. Because humans invent, humans challenge, and humans innovate. If interpreting is an inherently human activity, then the value of interpreters will never wane. As I've mentioned before, nurturing these three pillars, on top of developing interpreting skills, is a great challenge. But it is a great opportunity as well. It allows you to help others and to really make a difference, while gaining invaluable experiences, which you can then reflect on and be incredibly grateful for in autumn.

Thank you.

Isa Devos