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Welcome address

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank the organisers of this meeting for giving me the opportunity to speak at the 2016 EFNIL Conference.

I am responsible for the Multilingualism and Interpreter training support unit at DG Interpretation, DG SCIC, at the European Commission. DG SCIC is, as you know, the biggest interpretation service in the world and together with my colleague Filip Majcen from DGT we are here to represent our institution.

When asked about what we could contribute to your debate, Mr. Stickel, our old friend, said to us that the most important message that we could send to this prestigious forum could be that, for the EC, multilingualism still matters. Gerhard, I can reassure you:

The European Union has always seen its great diversity of cultures and languages as an asset. Firmly rooted in the European treaties, multilingualism is the reflection of this cultural and linguistic diversity. It also makes the European institutions more accessible and transparent for all citizens of the Union, particularly through its translation and interpretation services, and this multilingual system is essential for the success of the EU's democratic system.

The EU's motto is unity in diversity. Cultural and linguistic diversity is embedded in the genes of the EU project and has always been taken for granted.

The first legal act that was issued concerned the use of languages. Regulation number 1 of 1958 – which has been modified at every enlargement – defines in its article 1 the official languages of the European Union, and at present, as you know very well, we have 24 official languages. Not once in the past 50 years has this principle been challenged or called into question.

The EU's multilingualism policy has 3 facets:

1. Striving to protect Europe's rich linguistic diversity.

Here is where stakeholders like EFNIL can help enormously with their experience and first-hand knowledge of the different realities of our countries and our languages.

- The European Commission works with national governments and interest groups of all kinds to establish shared goals, and supports their efforts, especially by encouraging the sharing of good practice in the field of the promotion of language learning;

- It also helps fund projects and partnerships designed to raise awareness of minority languages, promote their teaching and learning, and thereby help them survive.

2. **Promoting language learning.** The EU supports language learning because:

- better language skills enable more people to study and/or work abroad, and improve their job prospects;
- speaking other languages helps people from different cultures understand one another – essential in a multilingual, multicultural Europe;
- to trade effectively across Europe, businesses need multilingual staff;
- the language industry – translation and interpretation, language teaching, language technologies, etc. – is among the fastest growing areas of the economy.

3. The **third** facet is **multilingualism in the EU’s decision-making process.**

And here is where our two services derive their “raison d’être”, providing highly qualified professionals in order to facilitate communication inside and outside the EU Institutions.

Let me now move to the subject of the conference: linguistic prejudices and stereotypes.

What can we define as linguistic prejudice? We could consider linguistic prejudice as the unfair treatment of an individual based solely on the use of a language. This use may include the individual’s mother tongue or other characteristics of the person’s speech such as accent, use of syntax or vocabulary.

In fact interpreters, but also translators, are the first people to be confronted with linguistic prejudices.

And linguistic stereotypes? These are the sometimes inaccurate and simplistic generalisations about a group of speakers that others use to categorise them.

Here again, our colleagues in the booths in particular face temptation daily to think in terms of stereotypes about their customers.

My intention is to contribute to your debate just one idea: **linguistic professionals are the people that fight in their everyday work against these prejudices and stereotypes.**

I would invite you to pay a visit to one of the EU buildings where conferences take place. There you will see a big group of delegates, possibly with 28 different nationalities and 28 different cultural traditions and ways of speaking, trying to make themselves understood in 24 different languages. In fact, if someone coming from the outside world were to be projected into the middle of the meeting to have a look at what is going on in the room, he would be thinking of the tower of Babel, a place where communication is almost impossible.

And yet this is not the case. Thanks to the work of our interpreters and our translators communication *is* possible, so they can be considered, if you like, as the Anti-Tower of Babel service.

German is a very difficult language; Italian is a synonym for histrionics; and Spanish is a much spicier and funnier language than others because of the fiesta. Our colleagues could think of the languages – their work tools – in a very simplistic manner, in those terms.

But once those prejudices are overcome, once you have studied for years a language, its vocabulary, its expressions, its accents; once you have become acquainted with the culture of the country, the traditions, the social conventions and national references, all those things that as a professional you need in order to put the thoughts expressed in one language into another, making communication possible, you have become someone who can make linguistic barriers disappear, and with them linguistic prejudices.

What is interpreting, in fact? Interpreting is the art of enabling people of different mother tongues to communicate with one another in real time. Interpreting is about making communication possible among people that don't speak the same language and that are, by definition, full of linguistic prejudices.

As a matter of fact, interpreters play the role of mediator, a kind of go-between for people coming from different realities, from different ways of understanding the world. Interpreters are aware of the weight that words carry and they know that when they choose words, they can present a particular picture, a particular image of the world.

History, culture, way of life, philosophical principles and idiosyncrasy all contribute to this image of the world. Interpreters know that they are the ones in charge of fighting against prejudice. They are the best antidote against cultural or linguistic prejudices. The good interpreter will be the one aware of his or her role as linguistic and cultural mediator. The person able to reduce a very long and ornate speech delivered by a Latin speaker into a more comfortable and credible message for a listener of a Nordic language.

Interpreters, good interpreters, can carry their audience across a cultural divide. Their mission goes beyond the actual translation of the words. Given the cultural tradition and the history enshrined in languages, interpreting means moving beyond words and travelling from culture to culture. They are there to help the users of their services to cross the bridge between different universes and ways of understanding the world; they are there to contribute to eradicate linguistic prejudices and stereotypes.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Bibliographical information

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