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Closing speech

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

**International Conference: “Subtitling for Better Understanding”
Prague, 28 April 2010**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by making explicit two facts about the context of our conference today:

- first, Europe is becoming more and more conscious of its multilingualism, with both the advantages and the challenges that brings;
- second, we are living in the digital age.

We could have focused on those challenges and difficulties today.

We could have explored the consequences of having a multitude of languages on our continent.

We could have had a long and stimulating discussion about the digital divide between countries or between generations.

Instead, I am glad to say we chose to focus on the most direct and simple solution to both these issues: audiovisual translation in its various forms. Audiovisual translation crosses the invisible borders of linguistic diversity and meets the needs of digitalised societies by seamlessly communicating via the language in which we all feel most comfortable: our mother tongue.

Translation theory and practice are constantly changing and developing as their core material –languages and their users – change and develop. We create new applications and new areas for study to meet new communication needs in the societies that we service.

It is clear that our societies are embracing electronic media-sourced information and the virtual world of communication. That is the context in which audiovisual translation is emerging as one of the most modern fields of specialisation within a very rich family of translation studies and professions. Audiovisual translation crosses many disciplinary borders and demands new skills of translators who enter the field professionally. They need oral and written language skills, technical skills, excellent time management, and a good knowledge of the cinema in the culture of the language with which they work, to mention just a few.

It was interesting to hear today about different practices in audiovisual translation in the countries represented at our conference: the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland. The Czech Republic and Slovakia prefer dubbing, while Poland uses voice-over for TV programmes broadcast in their original language 'sotto voce'. As far as the cinema is concerned, subtitling is widely used, and even the Czech Republic, which has traditionally preferred dubbing at the cinema, is now moving towards subtitling.

Growing market demand for audiovisual language services has meant those countries have responded by organising the professionals involved, for instance, by setting up Associations of Audiovisual Translators and Art Translation, with a mandate to set standards for linguists specialising in this field.

Some surveys suggest that European citizens spend about four hours a day in front of the television. If we add a couple of hours a month at the cinema, and a few more watching favourite DVDs at home, those hours soon add up. Many viewers in Europe are exposed to hours of information or entertainment that were not originally conceived in their mother tongue.

What is more, subtitling is becoming more and more common, to cater for the growing population of viewers who are deaf or hard of hearing, as well as people with a limited command of the language they are hearing, or with thin walls and nervous neighbours. As a result, viewers are getting used to different ways of enjoying TV programmes and DVDs.

That is why I particularly want to emphasise how important quality is in this specialisation. If the quality of the audiovisual translation is poor, this affects not only enjoyment and understanding of the programme or film itself, but also, in the long run, standards in the target language. That is why a good film deserves good subtitles, and why translators working with subtitling deserve good training programmes with commonly accepted standards.

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At the Directorate General for Translation, we are now promoting a university network called the European Master's in Translation. Its members commit themselves to implementing a set of quality standards for training future translators. The key word is **quality**. [pause].

Quality is essential for educating new generations of professional translators, to equip them with awareness of the complexity of language services, and an excellent command of the competencies they need.

Audiovisual translation should become a specialisation within translation studies to prepare students for the specific needs of these markets. A study on the size of the language industry commissioned by the Directorate General for Translation last year showed clearly the dynamic rise of fields such as subtitling and localisation. The study forecasts an annual increase of 10% in EU turnover for the language service sector, so bearing this in mind, we can expect the subtitling and dubbing industries to have a huge share in these high growth rates.

Our discussion has shown that the three Member States we have heard from today understand this potential and perceive a need for specialised university courses in audiovisual translation. They have taken the first steps, but there is clearly an urgent need for closer cooperation among universities, translation associations and film distributors to raise awareness and provide quality training on subtitling techniques and the use of computer-aided technologies in this process.

Our question today is: how can audiences and viewers, the end-users of audiovisual translation, benefit from such specialisation and in-depth study? At the European Commission, we believe that subtitling has strong potential to encourage foreign language learning and to improve the audience's existing knowledge of languages in a very natural way.

This argument has been used on many occasions and is readily supported by examples from countries with a long-standing tradition of subtitling for television, such as Sweden, the Netherlands or even my home country, Slovenia. However – as our discussion today has proved – promoting foreign language learning is not and cannot be the only objective for promoting subtitling.

We also agreed that subtitling with written translation helps to fight illiteracy among viewers. It also facilitates the social integration of persons with hearing impairment. I particularly want to stress this angle, given that 2010 has been designated in the EU as the Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion.

I could go on by adding more arguments for subtitling, such as promotion of cultural and linguistic diversity, or preserving the original character of the audiovisual production, but its numerous advantages should not ignore its limits.

Translation is there not just to transfer the original information, but also to entertain, to make us laugh, to educate, and to fulfil all the other roles encoded in the original context. That is why audiovisual translation in its different forms, like any other form of translation, must be audience-driven. For instance:

- **Dubbing** is certainly a perfect solution for young viewers whose main aim is simply to enjoy the film they are watching
- **Subtitling** can make it easier for older children to get acquainted with foreign sounds while enjoying their viewing
- **Voice-over** can help convey long or complicated texts in news, documentaries and other productions.

Audiences with different needs and different ways of accessing the media they use expect their audiovisual translation to be made to measure. In other words, choosing the right technique from among those available is yet another challenge for policy makers who need to decide together with the professionals which methods of audiovisual translation best fit any given purpose.

Let us not forget the Internet. This major media of our times will take a more dominant position on the global market for subtitling services, as more and more businesses and social portals inform their customers and users through websites rich in multi-media forms, such as video messages, web streaming, and so on.

At the Directorate General for Translation, we understand that nowadays there is demand in Europe not only for quick and easy access to legal texts in a national language, but also for direct access to practical information for citizens.

That is why we have set up a special web translation unit to provide on-line information in all 23 EU official languages. We hope this approach will put us in the forefront of modernising information services in the multilingual reality of Europe.

The European Union has already taken several initiatives recognising the specific needs of the film and audiovisual sector. Recommendations on promoting this heritage and the competitiveness of related industrial issues were adopted in 2005. These clearly stated the need to [and I quote] “promote professional training in all fields related to film heritage”. We need to strengthen the European dimension in education and to promote cultural diversity.

The recommendations put forward issues such as visual education, film studies and media literacy as essential elements for a media society based on knowledge.

On this point, in 2009, the Commission recommendation on media literacy in the digital environment for a more competitive audiovisual and content industry was defined as [and I quote:] “one of the key prerequisites for an active and full citizenship in order to prevent and diminish risks for exclusion from community life”.

In our multilingual context, audiovisual translation is **THE** indispensable tool for knowledge transfer and for developing a new “digital competence”.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When the world-famous Polish film director Andrzej Wajda received his Oscar for lifetime achievement in 2000, he said: “I will speak Polish because I want to say what I think and I always think in Polish”. He, who can speak through the most eloquent images, referred to our most basic reality – we share wordless experiences and emotions, and we have more and more means of expressing them through different media. But at a certain point, we want to name them, and then we search for the right words in our own language. This is also what we expect from the modern media.

The audiovisual industry faces a great challenge, that of providing the highest quality of translation and adaptation. Language transfer is our most immediate tool to enable circulation of thought and culture within Europe. It must be done consciously, with sensitivity to the needs of specific target audiences, and clear understanding of the structure of specific audiovisual markets. This calls for serious training programmes and close cross-border cooperation among partners in Europe.

I am very happy to represent the European Commission’s Language Service today. We wanted to facilitate these first contacts among professionals in neighbouring countries by organising this meeting. I hope that today’s conference will start an international discussion among those present about the relationship between subtitling and the development of multilingualism.

Let our work on professional training standards and the exchange of best practice be guided by our aim to deliver high quality in enabling our European viewers to share the pleasures of our audiovisual heritage.

Thank you.