

# A Brief History of Interpretation and Translation

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by Daniela Schmidt

“All meanings we know depend on the key of interpretation”

Mary Ann Evans, a.k.a. George Eliot

There is more to the skill of interpretation and translation than being bilingual. As a profession, interpretation and translation rely more on a fundamental understanding of the cultural, social, and historical background of a language. Interpretation and translation originally served as a necessary tool to facilitate trade and political alliances for the prosperity of nations.

Regardless of how time and history may have changed its use professionally, interpretation's original challenge has always been the inseparability of a language from its people and their environmental and cultural origins, as highlighted by the following anecdote:

“How do you say ‘I run’ in your language?” [The Englishman] asked the Indian. The Indian was quiet for a while. (...) Suddenly his face lit up as if struck by a flash of sudden inspiration. He spoke very rapidly. If I had been able to transcribe what he said it would have spread across the page several times. (...) “But surely it doesn't take all that to convey the simple statement ‘I run’?” He replied, “Why, of

course not. It means I was sitting here with you. Then I looked out and saw a deer, so I quickly grabbed my spear, and now I am running after it.” Then, almost philosophically, he added to himself, “Only a fool would run for nothing.”

J. A. Loewen, 1964. [1]

Up until the twentieth century, interpretation and translation were interchangeable, both as an activity and as terminology. This article will use these terms interchangeably and include the information that is most relevant in the author’s view. It will also provide an insight into the future of interpretation.

## Interpretation in Ancient Civilizations

The Ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans were notorious for having little respect for any language and culture other than their own, but they couldn’t have built their highly advanced civilizations without them. The ability to communicate between language barriers was essential for consummating government, military, and trade alliances.

Some archeological discoveries depict interpreters as having two heads. The rock tombs of the Princes of Elephantine from 300 BC tell of Ancient Egyptian dealings with the Sixth Dynasty of Nubia. The Princes of Elephantine were bilingual, lived at the border of the Pharaonic Egypt, oversaw dragomans, and led military and trade expeditions in Nubia and Sudan.



*Rock tombs of the Princes of Elephantine*

Those who acted as interpreters and translators came from all social classes and could have been slaves, women, or royalty. The title of “Court Interpreter” referred to one who interpreted directly for a kingdom’s government, mostly as a communication intermediary with other cultures for people at the court.

One example can be found in Ancient Greece: More than one of Alexander the Great's campaigns required travel to India and the use of translators in order to communicate with allies and the people he conquered.

As the works of Roman authors such as Caesar, Cicero, Horace, and Pliny demonstrate, bilingualism among Roman people (both officials and peasants) was a common occurrence. Fluency in another language such as Greek was considered a basic standard for an educated Roman citizen. As Pliny put it, *Felices illos quorum fides et industria non per internuntios et interpretes*: "Those who are not dependent on interpreters are fortunate." The Romans employed interpreters privately to accompany officials to other provinces. On such occasions, translators were sometimes recruited locally. Romans also used interpreters to facilitate communication in all foreign languages of the time, except for Greek – a language the educated Romans learned as a first language from servants and slaves, along with their Latin "mother tongue."

Interpreters in ancient Rome went by various names: *interpres*, *interprex*, *interpretex*, *traducere*. The sarcophagus of Marcus Ulpius Romanus, dated 193–211 AD, describes him as a *salariarius* that contracted with the 1st Adiutrix legion for a specific task, probably regarding supplies, but he was also an *interprex Dacorum* – a Dacian language interpreter. Others were *salariarius* serving in the legionary forces along the Danube. There were also non-professional interpreters, go-betweens/intermediaries on a lower, unofficial level – also soldiers. [2]



MVLPQROMANO MIL  
PRAETRRI MO SCR  
INIO P R A E F  
F Q V I V I  
X I T A N XXXV  
M V E C E L E  
R I N V S S A L  
L E G T A D  
P F I N T E R P R E X  
D A C O R V M V I V V S S I B I  
E T F I L I O S V O S S C A R I S S I M O

*Sarcophagus of Marcus Ulpius Romanus*

An early example of sight translation – translation of a written document in real time – originates from Livy, a Roman writer and philosopher similar to Cicero, who recounted how a Gallic prince challenged a Roman to a duel by sending him a letter written by an interpreter. This account is given by Antti Lampinen in *Some Hypotheses on the Duel of Manilus Torquatus and a Gaul*. [3] Letters intercepted by the Romans were usually translated for the Roman emperor Claudius Nero by a Punic interpreter.

One of the earliest examples of conference interpreting took place in 202 BC, in a negotiation between Scipio and Hannibal. Both parties were unarmed, and each allowed the presence of an interpreter.

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# Speak through it, and at the same time displaces the original work.

Cicero was convinced that only an inexperienced interpreter and translator would interpret word for word: *verbum pro verbo*. In Cicero's view, the central concept of translation – equivalence – meant conveying the message of the original in the socio-political context of the target language.

Cicero referred to translation as *(con)vertere*, which implies neither accuracy nor literalism of translation. For literal translation he uses *ad verbum de verbo exprimere* and *verbum pro verbo reddere*. The verbs *exprimere*, *explicare*, and *reddere* are used to express various aspects of translation from Greek, which means free interpretation of the original wording in combination with borrowing elements of the original. While in Latin the verb *transfere* means “to transfer, to borrow, to use in context,” Seneca, Pliny, and Quintilian used *transfere* to mean simply *translation*.

Cicero approached translation without preconceived rules. His standard was to match the appropriateness of his work to the rhetorical power of his translation. This meant that Cicero conveyed the original meaning of the source text in a way that made it work with the different cultural context of the translation language (target text) of the reader.

In his view, a good translation enables the author of the source text to speak through it, and at the same time displaces the original work, i.e., a Roman youth turns to Cicero's Latin translation to study Demosthenes's rhetoric of the Greek source text.

Cicero also made lexical operations in connection with genres and his predilections as a translator when they were necessary, as in cases of systemic differences between the source and target text. He also did so to retain as much as possible the style of the source text, which in Cicero's time was an essential attribute of artistic translation. He translated the meaning of each sentence as opposed to word for word, known today as *meaning for meaning*, i.e., translating the meaning of each whole sentence before moving on to the next. Cicero named this practice the principle of “equivalence.” The meaning-for-meaning translation term was coined a few hundred years later by Jerome, a Roman Catholic priest who reviewed the Latin translations of the Gospel at the request of Pope Damasus to produce “a more reliable translation.”

## Interpretation in the Age of Exploration

The ancient languages of interpretation – Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Chaldean – were replaced a few centuries later with Spanish and Portuguese. The Genoese, Portuguese, and Spanish conquistadors used interpreters throughout their journeys. Columbus, who intended to sail across the ocean to Asia on his first voyage in 1492, enlisted people who could translate from Arabic and Spanish. One such interpreter was Luis de Torres, skilled in translating Arabic, Hebrew, and Chaldean. Of course, Torres's fluency in all three languages turned out to be useless when the first ships eventually arrived in what is now known as the Caribbean.

On his return, Columbus captured six native Taino people to convert them to Christianity and teach them Castilian Spanish. Two escaped by throwing themselves overboard. On a subsequent journey, Columbus transported two families of natives and, to prevent any escapes, carried the wives and children on separate boats. This is the first major example of enslaving people to serve as future interpreters – an early example of interpreter training.

The first example of relay interpreting took place during the time of conquistador Hernan Cortez, who bought a girl named Malinche, a cacique of noble origin. The Spanish priest on his crew knew some Mayan but did not know Nahuatl (the Aztec language). Malinche interpreted from Nahuatl into Mayan and the Spanish priest from Mayan into Spanish. Malinchista refers today to a disloyal compatriot, especially in Mexico.



*Malinche*

Columbus's records refer to a treacherous interpreter by the name of Felipillo. Diary entries detail how Felipillo deliberately perverted the Inca ruler Atahualpa's testimony of his innocence directly against the leader. Atahualpa was found guilty and sentenced to be burned alive. But Friar Valverde then convinced Atahualpa to be baptized as a Christian and have his sentence commuted to death by garrote (immediate death by strangulation). Felipillo later confessed to having misinterpreted Atahualpa's testimony and was hanged on an expedition to Chile. This is an early example of an interpreter's professional responsibility.

Another example of an inefficient and disloyal interpreter took place in 1353, when King Louis IX sent a Flemish Franciscan missionary from Constantinople to Asia to convert Tatars to Christianity. Several entries document the Flemish Franciscan missionary's complaints of the interpreter's inconsistencies and unprofessional demeanor, including getting drunk on the job.

In 1555, merchant John Lock brought back five Africans from Ghana to teach them English so that they could interpret on future trips to Guinea to buy gold and pepper. This valuable tie of trade to interpretation paved the way for the English to engage in the slave trade.

In 1600, pilgrims who arrived from England on the Mayflower received help from Tsiquantum (or Squanto), a Native American man. He had been abducted by an Englishman to be sold as a slave in Spain in 1585. After his escape, he made his way to England, learned English, and returned to his homeland, only to find that his tribe had been destroyed by an epidemic. He subsequently befriended the English settlers. Through his interpretative skills, he helped them peacefully coexist with neighboring tribes, advised them about local plants, and showed them how to grow native crops successfully. His advice was crucial to the bountiful crop of 1621, which led to the first Thanksgiving.

## Translation in the Middle Ages

During the Middle Ages, as the vernacular gradually replaced Greek and Latin in business and church, the equivalence and meaning-for-meaning translation methods started to shift towards more precise terms, fidelity, clarity, elegance, and adaptation. Leonardo Bruni, who reviewed the medieval translator Robert Grosseteste's translation from Latin of Aristotle's *Ethics*, pointed out the importance of not confusing the term "good" with "useful" when translating philosophy. By the same token, Alexander Fraser Tytler wrote in his *Essay on the Principles of Translation* (London, 1791) that translation must fully represent the ideas, style, and ease of the original composition.

Adaptation in translation is deviation from the principles of equivalence and meaning-for-meaning translation: It means recreating the effects of the source text into the target text by locative adaptations of the source text. In Martin Luther's translation of the Bible, the shekel – the currency of ancient Israel – turned into "silberling"

– the currency in Saxony at the time of Luther. Another example of adaptation to account for the unaccomplished tense in Hebrew in Luther’s Bible translation is God speaking to Moses in front of the burning bush: “*Ich werde sein, der ich sein werde*” (“I will be who I will be”). Though Hebrew lends itself to this option, it is not always chosen by translators. In French, the most usual translation is “*Je suis celui qui suis*”: “I am who I am.”

## The Modern Era of Machine Translation

The distinction between translation and interpretation grew more pronounced in the modern era. The modes of interpretation were more clearly defined: sight translation, consecutive interpretation, and simultaneous interpretation. Sight translation is a hybrid type of interpretation where the interpreter reads a document written in the source language while translating it orally to the target language. In consecutive mode, the statements made in the source language are rendered into the target language after a pause between each completed statement.

While sight translation and consecutive interpretation have existed since biblical times, simultaneous interpreting was developed in the 20th century with the advent of globalization and availability of interpretation equipment. Simultaneous interpretation attracted linguists and other researchers because of its context of communication: The simultaneous interpreter is listening and speaking at the same time, allowing a relatively undisturbed flow for the speaker and smoother output for listeners. The first simultaneous interpreting machines appeared in 1946 in the Nuremberg Trials, though an earlier machine dates back to 1926.

A significant transformation of translation came in 1970 when Anthony Gervin Oettinger proposed that translators be “relieved by automatic dredges.” He coined the term *communications* to describe a combination of computer and telecommunication technologies that would replace the analog forms of communication. Today Oettinger provides a basis both for investigating fundamental technical aspects of automatic translation and for the general study of mathematical linguistics. He has also pioneered contributions to machine language translation, to information retrieval, and to the use of computers in education. He illustrated the machine translation challenges with an example: *Time flies like an arrow, fruit flies like a banana.*

Discussions about equipment, coding techniques, and the aims of translation led to the analysis of lexical problems. Linguists and computer scientists joined forces to advance machine translation and facilitate the task of human translators. Soon Oettinger and other scholars came to realize that there is no single solution that solves the problems of translation, and that the correspondences between even closely related languages were too variable to be computerized.

Half a century after Oettinger, we now have plenty of computer-aided translation technologies. Interpreting and translation are different professions governed by different laws and organizations. About the same time Oettinger was developing his translation technology in the 1970s, those with limited English proficiency in courts were still not given access to an interpreter.

The last 50 years have seen progress in the translation and interpretation professions, with important gains both in assuring due process for the people in need of such services and in improving the livelihood of linguists. The current pandemic has made remote interpretation a matter of necessity, with our performance sometimes dependent on our internet connection. Remote interpretation also raises questions about human rights, confidentiality, and ethics.

The internet seems to have made machines our “colleagues” – a necessary third party. Technology is elevated today from our servant to our friend. AI, robots, and computers will likely soon be the interpreters and translators of choice for governments and private parties alike, since they don’t need vacation pay and medical insurance. Robots might gain equal protection rights in the workplace or even become our bosses. Has the COVID-19 pandemic forever changed the paradigm of interpretation and translation? It’s probably too early to tell.



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[1] *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, by David Crystal, Cambridge University Press 1987

[2] Negotiating with the Dacians. The Case of M. Ulpius Celerinus, *Interpres Dacorum*, by Dan Augustin Deac, 2007–2013

[3] In *Vacuum Pontem Gallus Processit – Some Hypotheses on the Duel of Manlius Torquatus and a Gaul* by Antti Lampinen – 748-Article Text – 18264-1-10-20130114.pdf