

Roger Bacon
(c. 1214-1294)

COMPENDIUM STUDII PHILOSOPHIAE

(Chapter 8)

[1271]

The eighth reason [for errors in contemporary science] is connected to the seventh. For not only does it follow that the Latins must know languages to get full benefit from translated texts, but it is also impossible that they come to understand truth unless they learn foreign languages. For, as St Jerome says in his book, *On the Best Kind of Translating*, the attributes of the first language can not be preserved in the second (Letter 57.4) For, as Jerome says, if you wish to turn Homer into your native language, you will see a ridiculous person and a poet scarcely able to speak. And this is the experience of anybody who wishes to translate into his own language logic or grammar, or any other matter he has learnt in Latin. For the properties of one language do not agree with those of the other, and what rings well in one language makes little or no sense in the other. This is clear to those who know both Latin and vernacular languages, and have researched the problem. We see the same problem when a language has different dialects, that is, different varieties and speech customs, as in English, which has different dialects in North, South, East and West, and in French with Picard, Norman, standard French, and Burgundian, etc. What sounds well and is correct among men of one dialect, sounds out of place among others. All the more reason then, why there are this lack of agreement and this separation among languages that are totally different. And for this reason, it is impossible can be properly and truthfully reported in another. And this is especially true of the sciences, which carry their own difficulties.

The ninth reason is that we see in all translations of science that the words remain indefinite, as in Scripture. This is true of medicine, natural science, mathematics and all the others. And it can not be otherwise: translators can not find in Latin words that are a satisfactory match for foreign terms, and they can not coin new terms. And so it is that inevitably, those who are ignorant of other languages remain ignorant of sciences when they are translated into Latin. In their pharmacopoeias doctors find that almost all the names of herbs and drugs and other things pertaining to medicine are, for the most part, taken from other languages. This means that they can not understand what the books say, nor can they

act as the art of medicine dictates. And the same is true of all knowledge, particularly in Scripture, where all personal and place names, not to mention innumerable other things, are Greek, Arabic or Hebrew. And it is this way in astronomy, alchemy, and particularly in the major useful sciences.

Source : J. S. Brewer (ed.), *Compendium studii philosophiae*, in *Fratri Rogeri Bacon Opera Quaedam*, London, 1859, I. 393-519.