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HERMES
GOD OF TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS

*THE ORIGINS OF LANGUAGE
AND THE PREHISTORY OF INTERPRETING*

A historical inquiry into the earliest days of interpreting, demonstrating how they provide a window onto both the "prehistory" of translation and the origins of language. Paper presented at the Translation2000 Conference, sponsored by the NYU Translation Studies Program in March of that year and presented again in October in Mexico City at the Universidad Iberoamericana as part of their Jornadas Jeronimianas .

Three-Sentence Précis of Paper:

The ancient Greek word for interpreter/translator is *Hermêneus*, directly related to the name of the god Hermes.

Its many further meanings—mediator, go-between, deal-broker, marriage-broker—open up a window onto the work of interpreters during prehistory.

And the knowledge that we gain of this prehistory thanks to these meanings provides an additional window opening onto the origins of language itself.

Comment on the preceding Précis:

This three-sentence summary contains two leaps. The first leap is from the premise that the Greek word for translator/interpreter has many other social, economic, and even peace-making connotations to the conclusion that interpreters almost certainly had to exist during the period before writing was invented, commonly known as "prehistory." This will be an easy leap for an audience of professional interpreters and translators—in fact the first audience for whom this paper was written—nor should other literate audiences find this leap terribly difficult to achieve.

The second leap may a bit harder for some to negotiate, at least on first hearing. It is based on the following inexorable logic:

Once we have in fact located interpreters on the far side of the "prehistory barrier"—which we successfully achieved during the previous step—the question then remains as to how far back into prehistory we may project the existence of these interpreters.

Here is the simple and logical answer to that question:

We may project the existence of interpreters as far back into prehistory as separate languages and dialects may have existed.

And how far back might that be?

Once again, a logical answer is almost immediately forthcoming:

Ever since language—or languages—first began.

And immediately we find ourselves directly on the threshold of the origin of language itself, which now becomes a legitimate question in itself and which this paper examines in some detail, providing a novel but perfectly logical perspective—and one entirely in keeping with Darwin's theory of evolution—onto this much debated subject.

Abstract:

The case for Hermes as the god of translators and interpreters is a clear and compelling one. While some European translators have campaigned for St. Jerome as the patron saint of translation, there are probably some good reasons, with all due respect to the translator of the Vulgate, for having a god of translation rather than a saint. First of all, in global terms Asians and others outside of Europe are more likely to respond to ancient Greek traditions than to Christian ones (as they do when they attend the Olympic Games), since similar "gods-of-the-road" are revered in Japanese, Chinese, and even Mayan culture. Furthermore, the circumstances surrounding the "divinity" of Hermes may open the way to some surprising new insights into translation history and broaden the scope of Translation Studies as a whole. Hermes was par excellence the god of interpreting, of quick-wittedness, of wily improvisation, and translation, like writing itself, was a later development. Several current schools of Linguistics have their grounding in ancient Greek works on grammar, but as we shall see, the Greeks themselves, following Plato, looked to two authorities where language was concerned: grammarians and interpreters. While grammarians have until recently rooted their quest for rules and their sometimes dubious claims of universality in the structure of a single language, interpreters have necessarily always been concerned with at least two or more languages and the frequently jagged interface between them. And as will be explained, the tale of Hermes can also open up unexpected vistas onto the prehistory of interpreting, an area usually regarded as beyond our study, and perhaps even help to unravel the mystery of the origins of language itself.

It should be added that Hermes of course also acted as divine messenger, presided over commerce and travel (both clearly linked to translation), and was the tutelary god of all the arts and crafts, including magic and matrimonial match-making. We may perhaps forgive him if he was also the god of thieves and deceit, since this function may spring somewhat naturally from some of his other attributes.

Text of Paper:

Hermes—God of Translators and Interpreters

The Origins of Language and the Prehistory of Interpreting

I want to thank you all for expressing your confidence in my little abstract by coming today. It's a rather odd abstract, if you've had a chance to think about it at all. It starts out as though it were some edifying literary exercise to raise the consciousness of translators and interpreters: Imagine, we must be pretty important after all, we even have a god. That's pretty impressive in itself, and perhaps the abstract should have stopped right there. But it didn't—it went right on and started wading into some very deep water. It actually claimed that certain unnamed schools of linguistics base their theories on what they call 'grammar' and look back to some rather late ancient Greek grammarians for part of their support, when if they had been listening to Plato, who wrote several hundred years earlier, they would have realized there are two authorities on language they ought to be consulting: both grammarians and interpreters.

That's pretty heady stuff. It goes far beyond a merely edifying presentation aimed only at interpreters and translators and actually suggests that the work we do can penetrate rather deeply into both the practical and theoretical side of language, so deeply in fact that we might actually be in a position to correct some of the reigning scholars in the mighty field of "Linguistics."

Specifically, the abstract says: "While grammarians have until recently rooted their quest for rules and their sometimes dubious claims of universality in the structure of a single language, interpreters have necessarily always been concerned with at least two or more languages and the frequently jagged interface between them."

Up to that point what was in the abstract was perhaps merely presumptuous, but what I just read you was something very close to a declaration of war. And if you've taken a look at my website and seen my piece "Thirty-three Reasons Why the Chomskians are Mistaken," you'll know I've gone a great deal further than that.

But even in the abstract, things don't stop here either. This author—I guess it's me—just keeps on going as though he had no sense at all. Next he's actually claiming that what we're about to learn about Hermes can open up "unexpected vistas onto the prehistory of interpreting." My god, the prehistory of interpreting—how can there even be such a thing? Even assuming it existed, how could we ever remotely know about it? But simply look at the speaker—he even has a chart behind him showing all the stages in human prehistory. Look at this—*Australopithecus*, the Southern Ape. Can he actually show us some connection between this chart and the prehistory of interpreting? [*The "chart" in question is a two- by three-foot 1997 National Geographic fold-out poster entitled "Seeking Our Origins," displaying a dramatic visusalization of human development over the last four million years.*] But he still isn't done—the abstract actually ends up with the suggestion that everything he's said so far—and that was crazy enough—might actually help us to unravel the mystery of—are you ready for this?—"the origins of language itself."

Is the speaker standing here before you simply a raving megalomaniac? Has he finally gone beyond all reasonable bounds? Can he possibly present any credible evidence for any of these claims?

Oddly enough, not only can I present a fair amount of credible evidence for every single one of these claims, that's just what I'm about to do. So I hope you will forgive me for this slightly unconventional introduction. From this moment onward I shall observe all the well-established rules for academic presentations and provide clear references and even the odd source note for every statement I am about to make. Yes, it will definitely be a more conventional treatment—but that doesn't mean for a moment that it's going to be boring.

I'd like for us all to take a remarkably long journey together, and as our first step in that journey I'd like to start with a fairly prosaic analysis of some of the more ancient words for "translator" and "interpreter." And specifically the ancient Greek word *Hermêneus*, which is translated as both "interpreter" and "translator." But wait a second—it's got a whole lot of other possible translations as well. Here they all are:

[SLIDE 1]

Hermêneus

Interpreter, especially of foreign terms
dragoman
court interpreter
matrimonial agent

go-between
broker, commissionaire

the verb *Hermêneuo*

interpret foreign tongues,
translate
explain, expound, put into words
express, describe, write about

Why do we have all these other possible definitions? They all come from the standard ancient Greek lexicographical source, the Liddell Scott Lexicon. And that Lexicon adds one other crucial fact that no one has ever disputed, that both these words are directly derived from the name of the god Hermes.

In other words, when you conjugate the verb to translate or interpret in Greek, *Hermêneuo*, *hermêneueis*, *hermêneuei*, what you are also unavoidably saying is something like I hermes, you hermes, he or she hermeses, or if you will forgive a slightly slangier version:

I make like Hermes
You make like Hermes
He or she makes like Hermes...

Why is this? Because the God Hermes is seen as an active force of nature, as fulfilling an active need of nature: to explain, to clarify, to translate, to interpret.

In other words, the Greeks take it for granted that things aren't always clear—which they often are not—and that we need some way of making them more clear—which we often do. And they've invented a God to do this for them. And Hermes is that God.

Now that word *dragoman* is especially interesting, and I want to come back to it. But first I want to take what we just did with Greek and do much the same thing for Latin. Here the word for either a translator or an interpreter is a more familiar one:

Interpres

Now let's look at all the meanings a standard Latin dictionary gives for this word, and I think you'll note a few similarities with the Greek example:

[SLIDE 2]

Meanings of interpres:

[inter pres: prehendo, prendo, to catch, lay hold of, grasp, take]

(as in modern Italian: *Il ladro, l'hanno preso*—they caught the thief)

Literally: "Caught in between"

A middle man, mediator,
broker, negotiator,
Interpres divum, messenger, Mercury
Explainer, expounder, translator, interpreter

The source for these is also a very standard work, *An Elementary Latin Dictionary* by Charlton Lewis.

And finally I want to go back and look at the word dragoman, which as we will see is in some ways the most remarkable of the three, and then I want to make some generalizations about what all three of these words have to teach us.

(I should start by reassuring anyone else in the audience who like me just might have an ear for puns and also an ear for slightly off-color nuances that the word "dragoman" definitely does NOT mean a man who dresses up in women's clothing.)

[SLIDE 3] Dragoman...

One of the world's oldest words-

Spanish: Trujaman
French: Trucheman
Latin: Dragumannus
Greek: Dragoumanos
Arabic: Targuman
Aramaic: Turgemana
Mishnaic Hebrew: Targûm
Akkadian: Targumanu

Its meaning:

about 50% interpreter

40% go-between, mediator,

middle-man, broker

10% translator

This may well be one of the most ancient words we have in all the world's languages. Once again, I'm not making any of this up, my source here is just about any standard college-level dictionary I've looked at, including the one I use, the *Houghton Mifflin American Heritage*. Obviously a lot of this is etymology and not actual linguistic equivalents, but I've come up with my notion as to what its overall meaning is likely to be both from my own research and from talking to Charles Diamond, our Turkish expert in the NY Circle of Translators, who tells me you'll still find people calling themselves "dragoman" in Istanbul today, more or less guides to the sites of the city with some but not necessarily a great deal of linguistic knowledge, who take tourists around the sites for a fee.

Now I'd like to pull all of this together by asking you to consider why we have all these additional translations for Hermêneus, or for Interpres, and not simply "translators" or "interpreters." Why are we seeing so much of "middle-man," mediator, go-between, deal-broker, "negotiator," my god, even marriage broker.

I think most of you already know the reason for some of this, so this isn't that hard to explain. It's because we've done all these things in the past, and to a certain extent we still do most of them even today. The fact of being an interpreter or a translator, though especially an interpreter, frequently puts us in a position where we have to play these other roles as well. Some of my courtroom interpreter friends have told me of a few rather hairy situations where one side or the other in a trial—though perhaps more often the defendant—would put pressure on them to use language favorable to their side. An Arabist colleague informs me that the government can sometimes exert such pressure in order to convict alleged Muslim terrorists, and although I am not an Arabist myself, it sounds to me as if our government may have been exerting undue pressure in their so-called translation of words spoken by the pilot of the recent Egyptian Air tragedy.

So whether we like it or not, we are frequently called upon to play this middle-man, go-between role, and we sometimes actively seek it out or resent it when we are discouraged from playing it. I think we've all often heard translators asking:

Can I drop a footnote?
Can I explain something in brackets?
Can I get more information from the client,
so I can understand the process,
so I can translate it properly?

We're frequently called upon to play this middleman role, even if we do so-called "technical" translation. As for "marriage-broker," that could often also be a part of our job as deal-maker and even peace-maker: as recently as the nineteenth century peace treaties between nations could be further ratified by a wedding between two royal offspring from the disputing nations. And we're just about to see what this notion of marriage-broker may also have to do with the prehistory of our profession. There—I said it, that word, prehistory, and I'm going to say it several times again. Because when we see all these additional definitions for *Hermêneus* or *interpretes*, we're also seeing all the additional tasks interpreters were expected to perform, and we're also looking directly back into what life had to be like in the preliterate era, which is to some extent an alternate way of saying prehistory.

But now, just as a slight change of pace, let's listen to two things that Plato had to say about our profession. The second one is a bit more flattering than the first, but neither one is really that terrible. First, from his dialogue *Cratylus*:

SOCRATES: I should imagine that the name Hermes has to do with speech, and signifies that he is the interpreter (Hermeneus), or messenger, or thief, or liar, or bargainer; all that sort of thing has a great deal to do with language. (*Translation by Benjamin Jowett*)

Here we not only get to see Socrates confirming for us this connection between Hermes and our trade. Here I think we can also begin to see why translators and interpreters can sometimes acquire a less than positive image, and not just for translating or interpreting incorrectly either. In any translation there is always the possibility of a mistake. But more than a mistake, there is also a chance— however slight—that the translator might know something the client doesn't know, and so the client might be taken advantage of. After all, the translator or interpreter knows what is really going on—he or she is potentially in something of a position of power. If there is a chance for financial or social or other gain, the translator would have to be more of a saint than the general run of people not to take advantage of it. And whenever translators or interpreters do something like this, just as whenever they make an error in translation, you can be sure that they will be remembered for it.

It's also important to remember how truly international this figure of a trickster god who creates language truly is and how widely recorded it is in the world's mythology. Hermes recurs in ancient Egypt as Thoth, of course, but as Lewis Hyde points out in his book *Trickster Makes This World*, he can also be seen as the African Eshu, as any number of figures such as Coyote or Raven in Native American folklore, as Loki among the Norse, the child Krishna in Indian tradition, or even China's Monkey King, and in the latter case we have an example of a tale about a god being inspired by the travels of a real-life translator, the seventh century Xuanzang. In other words, Hermes in his various manifestations is truly worthy of being the god of translators on an international scale.

Now let's look at Plato's more positive description of us. It comes from his dialogue Theaetetus and is a crucially important quotation in the history of both language and linguistics. Attempting to distinguish knowledge from perception, Socrates teasingly asks Theaetetus whether people truly know a foreign language merely by seeing it in writing or hearing it spoken. In a reply praised by Socrates, Theaetetus states that we can only know what its letters look like and what its spoken form sounds like...

but we do not perceive through sight and hearing, and we do not know, what the grammarians and interpreters teach about them. (*Translated by Benjamin Jowett*)

And there they are, side by side, interpreters and grammarians, each of them invested with full powers as teachers. If anything, the interpreters have a slight edge, since it is assumed that grammarians can only be of use in describing the letters or written form of the language (and of the two ancient Greek words for grammarians, both closely related to the word for "letters," the one Plato uses here is the more demeaning one, usually meaning merely a "schoolmaster,"), while only the interpreters can tell us what is truly being said. In other words, if you want to know something about language, it might be a good idea to consult both.

It's often been observed that in myths we can find recorded or encoded some very real history. And that's what I think we've discovered here as well, so with that in mind, let's now go back to all those other meanings the Greek and Latin words for translator seem to have, including middle-man and go-between and deal-broker and even marriage-broker. Because in these meanings I believe we have a window looking through into the prehistory of our profession. Even the prehistory of the human race. And that is what I am now going to be talking about, the prehistory of interpreting, which is necessarily also the prehistory of translation.

And I think we're going to see that it isn't that hard to discuss this subject either, because I'm going to show you two other ways we can know about that prehistory. Not just based on the meanings of words, which is what I've been describing up until now. But there is also an inferential method of knowing about that prehistory. And there's even a method for knowing about it based on observations we can make here and now today, even quite close to home. And all three of the methods, as you will see, work quite closely together to confirm what I am about to tell you.

So now let's make an end to all the mystery and proceed into prehistory.

What is the prehistory of translation?

That's easy. The prehistory of translation is of course interpreting. History is by definition the period for which we have written records. When we go before there was any writing—

or when we talk to people who don't know how to write—we are totally relying on interpreting. And on interpreters for that matter.

But how long did prehistory go on for? Now there's an interesting question. It goes on back for a very long time. In fact, as you can see from this chart in back of me, it can potentially go back as far as four million years. Or at least for as long as there have been spoken languages. But my god, how long has that been? Now perhaps you can begin to see why this paper is also talking about the origins of language, because it's just possible that interpreters—or people not all that unlike interpreters—may have played a role even then. But in any of these cases, do we have any real standards for measuring how long this period has been?

Here the answer is a most definite and even well-defined YES.

First of all, we know fairly well when it ended, which is of course around 4000 BC in a few places but much later in most other places. But when did prehistory begin? Now this is where things begin to get interesting, and you can start to see why I am linking up Hermes and all these extra definitions for translator on the one hand with prehistory and the origins of language on the other.

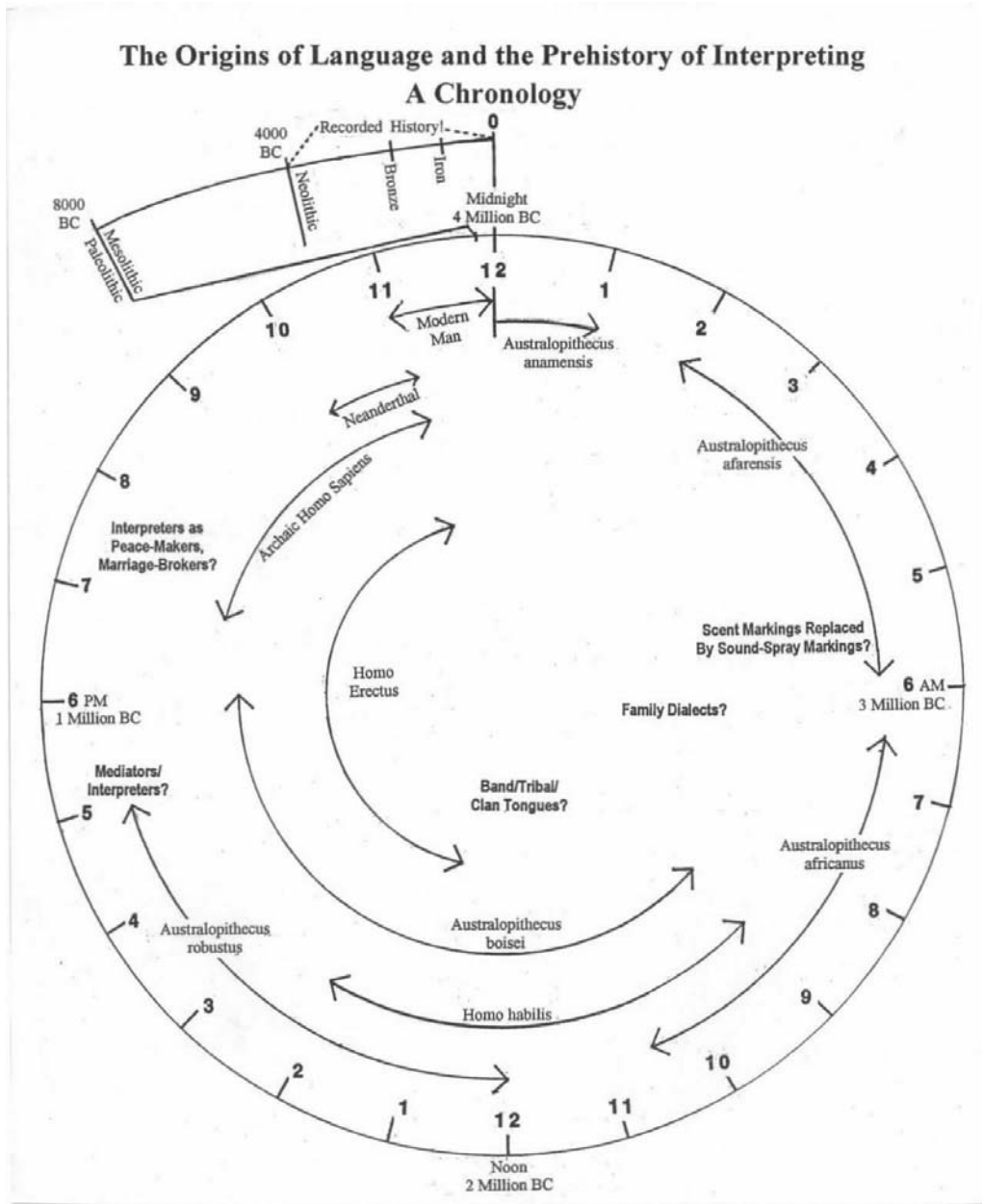
Let me pass out these sheets at this time. Each of these sheets shows a time-clock, which I'm calling, like the subtitle for this paper "The Origins of Language and the Prehistory of Interpreting—A Chronology." You may have seen something like this time-clock before, probably relating to geology and the age of the earth, but never in connection with the prehistory of language. The somewhat similar-looking chart you'll see in geology books shows the age of the earth. Or the one for biology that starts with the origin of life. In either case the time periods are far longer than the ones I'm showing you here today. The one for geology is based on the famous 4.5 billion year age of the earth, with all of recorded human history entering in only at one second before midnight.

This one is a little easier to comprehend: it includes only the four million or so years that man in some form has been on this planet, and as you can see based on this twenty-four hour clock, written history, dating from about 4000 BC only begins about two and a quarter minutes before midnight. That's a lot better than one second before midnight.

I've had to invent a word to describe the problems a lot of people have when confronted by this sort of time frame. I call that word *dyschronopia*, the inability to conceive of or even look at time in this manner.

Dys-, meaning difficulty, faulty, bad, even disease, as in dyslexia. *Chron-* from *chronos*, or time, as in chronic or chronometer. *-opia*, looking at, vision, as in myopia, A difficulty in looking at time.

That's why I made this chart—to help us get past that problem of looking at time.



CAPTION FOR ILLUSTRATION, taken from the text below:

But there is one other excellent reason to suppose that the development took place over a longer rather than a shorter period. The sheer complexity of the task of working our way up from the relatively simple signals contained in our scent markings must have required

many stages and phases of elaboration before they could take on the nuances of what we like to differentiate as supposedly "mature" language. Organs of speech had to change and develop, as did organs of hearing, not to mention the areas of the brain needed to regulate them. At every stage there must have been countless disagreements as to what constituted a word or utterance, what should be recognized as a concept worthy of such an utterance, and precisely how that utterance should be pronounced, all taking place among constantly shifting micro-populations. For such a process to occur would require a positively mind-boggling panorama over time on an evolutionary scale. But this in no way presents an obstacle to the theory I am presenting, rather it confirms it many times over, for this is precisely what humankind had at its disposal: a positively mind-boggling panorama over time on an evolutionary scale, as we can see right here on the chart I've given you. Dates are of course conjectural, but that is not the same thing as saying they are impossible.

(text continues below...)

Parenthetically, I've also been looking for a word to convey the problems most people have in conceiving of astronomical distances. So far the best I've come up with is *agalaxopia*. The inability of looking at—or conceiving of—galaxies. That's because I don't like the sound of *dysgalaxopia*. If anyone has a better idea... Or conceiving of the infinitely small—viruses, molecules, atoms and their particles—perhaps that one should be *amicropia*.

But let's get back to the prehistory of interpreting. So what we're looking at when we say "middle-man," "mediator," "go-between," "deal broker" and even "marriage broker" is what we did throughout prehistory. It's how human beings survived when we lived in far smaller communities, closer to the size of the bands in which primates gather to this day. It's how human beings survived, and it's how interpreters, people not all that unlike ourselves, helped them to survive—as middle-men, as brokers, and yes, as leaders. Yes, interpreters as leaders. Or as the close advisors to leaders.

Here's an example of what I'm talking about [SLIDE 4] from a preliterate society, an illustration of a gold finial, the topmost ornament on a traditional linguist's staff, held by the official tribal linguist as he sat next to the chief to advise him on complex negotiations and to question members of other tribes in their own language. It comes from nineteenth century Southern Ghana, a culture rich in its own highly sophisticated traditions, as those of you who have seen the PBS presentation on their *asafo* trading flags may be aware.

Now we can argue as to precisely how long our role in that human prehistory lasted, whether it goes back all the way for four million years to *Australopithecus anamensis* or

whether it starts with the advent of *Homo erectus* two million years ago or whether it even had to wait until *Archaic homo sapiens* came along eight hundred thousand years ago.

But however long it lasted, even though that's a long time ago, using my dramatic license and my background as a playwright, I think I can duplicate for you a dialogue that went on over and over and over again during that that incredibly long period of time.

VOICE 1: Look, we've got to talk with them.

VOICE 2: We can't talk with them—they don't even speak our language.

VOICE 3: But they're our enemy—they live on the other side of the hill.

VOICE 1: But we have to talk to them—we've got to find a wife for El-El.

VOICE 4: And don't forget—we also have to find a husband for La-La.

VOICE 5: Yeah, we can't let them marry each other. That didn't work out so well last time.

VOICE 2: Oh, alright. But how are we going to talk to them?

VOICE 1: We've got Dub-Dub here. He speaks a little of their language. From when they kidnapped him. Can you handle this for us, Dub-Dub?

DUB-DUB: Yeah, it's a little dangerous, but I can probably handle it for you.

And there it all starts to come together. Go-between. Mediator. Marriage-broker. Interpreter.

And that's not the only kind of argument they could have. People could also argue over the correct form of words. I say the word for hill is *wug-wug*. The people on the other side of the hill call it *wug-a-wug*. And we've even got a few people in our own group who think you need separate words for the side of the hill, *ooowug*, the top of the hill, *wugooo*, and the way the hill looks in the twilight, *wugganah*.

After all, people fight over the correct form of words even today, so why wouldn't they have done much the same then as well? And some of those fights could sometimes turn nasty. Just as they can today, even among highly literate people. You just have to listen to some of the disagreements between rival academic linguistic clans to know what I'm talking about.

So what happens if those people who say *ooowug* and *wugooo* get angry and move around to another side of the hill to form a new clan? They take those words with them, and most of our people grow up not even knowing what they mean.

And let's be honest, humans beings are sometimes not all that bright. So this sort of thing went on for what?—two, three, maybe four million years...

I can't say for sure, but I think the longer period is more likely. I'll tell you why after a bit.

Guess how many times during all those years that little dialogue, or something very like it took place. Or how often that disagreement about the correct form of words took place. Not all these little arguments ended happily. Not all of the groups agreed to work with each other. Add to all this competition over turf and hunting rights.

Not all of the interpreters were successful. Not all the women found husbands or the men found wives.

How do we know this? Inference based on the present. Things like this still happen today. Even during the historical period we've seen a slow process of small families becoming clans, clans becoming larger tribes, tribes moving towards alliances, and alliances moving towards nations. You just have to take that process back further until you get close to groups of prehistoric people close to the size of bands of apes and even monkeys.

Here's an example from Chinese. This is the character *qiao*, second tone [SLIDE 5]. It's usually translated as "overseas," as in *hua qiao*, overseas Chinese. *Huaqiao de qiao*. But my Chinese professor tells me that its original meaning was simply "someone from the next village." And later someone from the next region or province. So there you see once again the process the village moving outward until it becomes the entire world.

And it could also be positively dangerous being an interpreter. One truly dramatic example of this, to jump back into recorded history for a moment, comes from Plutarch in his life of Themistocles:

"When the king of Persia sent messengers into Greece, with an interpreter, to demand earth and water, as an acknowledgment of subjugation, Themistocles, by the consent of the people, seized upon the interpreter, and put him to death, for presuming to publish the barbarian orders and decrees in the Greek language; this is one of the actions he is commended for..." (*This was translated by my honored colleague John Dryden.*)

I think we also have to imagine this sort of event happening over and over again throughout the countless centuries of prehistory as well, as tribes and clans moved in every possible direction. The interpreter's motives could easily be misunderstood, even

by his own people. And we wouldn't expect him to be enormously popular with members of the opposing group either.

So we know a great deal more about our prehistory than we thought we knew simply through inference. Another way we know about this incredibly long period of time called prehistory is that it still isn't completely over. There are still lots of people left on this planet living in a preliterate condition.

As soon as I say that, some of you will think, oh yes, well perhaps somewhere far away, say in Africa or India or South America. How about just a few blocks away? More and more of those people are coming right here to the US. They really don't understand what our fabulous modern life is all about, though they're happy enough to latch onto some of its external features.

And guess who among us has a very good chance of running into them? Once again, it's us, it's you—interpreters who work in the hospitals or the courtrooms. Because many of these illiterate or preliterate or semi-literate people have a very shaky notion of our legal system or of modern medicine and what they do know can often run counter to both. And we quickly discover that they are also relying on age-old notions of family loyalty and seeking out husbands or wives through marriage brokers.

So this is pretty much what happened to us, the human race, as we began to mature and language slowly developed among us.

Which brings us rather organically to the question of the origin of language. How did these early versions of man, or woman, or person, *Australopithecus*, the Southern Ape, learn to speak in the first place? What we are going to see is that just as the many meanings of the Greek and Latin words for interpreter provided us with a window onto prehistory, so what we now know about prehistory also provides us with a window opening directly onto the origins of language.

There has been an enormous amount of conjecture over these origins in recent years, with large numbers of scholarly papers devoted to this question. In fact there is even something called the Language Origins Society (LOS)—it was founded in 1983 and has been holding yearly conferences entirely devoted to ferreting out the answer to this enigma ever since 1985. More recently, a second such organization has been founded as well, devoted to answering much the same questions. While their aims could not possibly be more earnest, based on many papers presented at these conferences it would appear to be open season on this subject, with just about everyone free to take a pot shot. One problem is that everyone is so specialized today that they can only see their own little segment of the subject—the blind men and the "language origins elephant," so to speak.

Another problem is something that I would love to have remembered as Gross's Law: all scholarship tends to expand exponentially to occupy the total number of scholars available to carry it out. And/or the total number of budget lines available to fund it. And so you find vast numbers of specialists with no real background in the practical side of language all trying to come up with novel theories of their own. Some concentrate on the shape of the vocal chords over time, some on almost infinitely small problems of neuroscience, others on so-called logical languages. Other papers presented at these conferences, all supposedly aimed at discovering the origins of language, have been concerned with communication in the womb, gesture as proto-language, proto-indo-european root forms, Gestalt psychology, the possible influence of bird songs, paleolaryngeology, echolocation, Chomskyan linguistics, and assorted hyper-symbolical, postmodernist, and other French litcrit approaches. Quite a few papers manage to avoid the topic of language origins altogether.

And almost all of them assume that there had to be some truly momentous event, some great divide, some magical, decisive, and defining moment in which human language suddenly took flight and completely separated itself from those horribly rude and base noises made by animals. After all, we're different from animals, we're superior to them, aren't we? There's no way that we could be using the same method that animals use to communicate, is there?

Promise me you won't walk out of this hall until I have fully explained what I am about to say. It is my contention, it is more than my contention, it is in my opinion a matter of demonstrable proof that human beings—and I can even offer some evidence for what I am about to say—that human beings and animals even today still communicate in exactly the same way.

Did I say that human beings go around mooing and clucking and oinking and barking the way animals do? No, that's not what I said at all, I said that human beings and animals even today still communicate in exactly the same way. The difference between them is entirely a question of degree, not a question of method, or essential nature, or of definition.

I've already published a brief version of my position in a fairly obscure publication, I have a much longer and more elaborate version I am working on—though not necessarily a better one—and hope soon to publish in some form, and I also have a more humorous version of this theory, as contained in my computer program *Truth About Translation*, which if time were to permit—which it doesn't—I could also read to you.

But let me start with the brief version, and I hope you'll forgive me for using a few paragraphs I've already published—they have a somewhat different meaning in today's context in connection with interpreters and Hermes. They first appeared in the ATA's

own *Sci-Tech Translation Journal* back in 1993 and as slightly revised here remain by far the best shorter description of this process I've come up with so far.

The long-debated origins of language—variously attributed to a number of equally unlikely theories—are so inauspicious and unpersuasive that readers may wonder what point there can be—like so much else in linguistics—to any further discussion at all. But once we turn our attention to biological development, both of the species and of our related animal cousins, a different perspective may unfold, and some startling insights may just be within our view. As human beings we frequently congratulate ourselves as the only species to have evolved true language, leaving to one side the rudimentary sounds of other creatures or the dance motions of bees. It may just be that we have been missing something.

On countless occasions TV nature programs have treated us to the sight of various sleek, furry, or spiny creatures busily spraying the foliage or tree trunks around them with their own personal scent. And we have also heard omniscient narrators inform us that the purpose of this spray is to mark the creature's territory against competitors, fend off predators, and/or attract mates. And we have also seen the face-offs, battles, retreats, and matings that these spray marks have incited.

In an evolutionary perspective covering all species and ranging through millions of years, it has been abundantly shown time and time again—as tails recede, stomachs develop second and third chambers, and reproduction methods proliferate—that a function working in one way for one species may come to work quite differently in another. Is it really too absurd to suggest that over a period of several million years, the spraying mechanism common to so many mammals, employing relatively small muscles and little brain power, may have wandered off and found its place within a single species, which chose to use larger muscles located in the head and lungs, guiding them with a vast portion of its brain?

This is not to demean human speech to the level of mere animal sprayings or to suggest that language does not also possess other more abstract properties. But would not such an evolution explain much about how human beings still use language today? Do we really require "scientific" evidence for such an assertion, when so many proofs lie so self-evidently all around us? One proof is that human beings do not normally use their nether glands—as do some but by no means all mammals—to spray a fine scent on their surroundings, assuming they could do so through their clothing. They do, however, undeniably talk at and about everything, real or imagined. It is also clear that speech bears a remarkable resemblance to spray, so much so that it is sometimes necessary to stand at a distance from some interlocutors.

(I should add that I insert a footnote at this point pointing out that this resemblance extends even to the etymology of the two words, speech and spray, which are closely related in the Indo-European family, as shown by a variety of words beginning with *spr-* or *sp-* related to spraying and spreading: English/German spread, sprawl, spray, sprinkle, sp(r)eaK, spit, spurt, spew, spout, *Spreu*, *spritzen*, *Sprudel*, *Spucke*, *spruehen*, *sprechen*, Dutch *spreken*, Italian *sprazzo*, *spruzzo*, Latin, *spargo*, Ancient Greek *spendo*, *speiro*, etc. The presence of the mouth radical in the Chinese characters for "spurt," "spit," "language," and "speak" may to some extent also indicate how related these concepts are on a cross-cultural level.]

Would not such an evolution also aptly explain the attitudes of many "literal-minded" people, who insist on a single interpretation of specific words, even when it is patiently explained to them that their interpretation is case-dependent or simply invalid? Does it not clarify why many misunderstandings fester into outright conflicts, even physical confrontations? Assuming the roots of language lie in territoriality, would this not also go some distance towards clarifying some of the causes of border disputes, even of wars? Perhaps most important of all, does such a development not provide a physiological basis for some of the differences between languages, which themselves have become secondary causes in separating peoples? Would it not also permit us to see different languages as exclusive and proprietary techniques of spraying, according to different "nozzle apertures," "colors," viscosity of spray, or even local spraying conditions? Could it conceivably shed some light on the fanaticism of various forms of religious, political, or social fundamentalisms? Might it even explain the bitterness of some scholarly feuding?

Of course there is more to language than spray, as the species has sought to demonstrate, at least in more recent times, by attempting to preserve a record of their sprayings in other media, such as stone carvings, clay imprints, string knottings, and of course scratchings on tree barks, papyri, and different grades of paper, using a variety of notations based on characters, syllabaries or alphabets, the totality of this quest being known as "writing." These strivings have in turn led to the development of a variety of knowledge systems, almost bewildering in their number and diversity of styles, slowly merging and dissolving through various eras and cultures in a multi-dimensional, quasi-fractal continuum. Thus, language may turn out to be something we have created not as a mere generation or nation, not even as a species, but in the embryologist Von Baer's sense as an entire evolutionary phylogeny.

Now of course I realize that this theory—I think it's more than a theory myself—has a certain shock value. People don't like to be reminded that they're not all that different from animals. This was true in Charles Darwin's time, and it's still true today, when we find that Darwin's ideas are still under attack. If anything, I believe this account of how language developed represents one more major proof that Darwin was totally and

stunningly correct. If we can say that Darwin dropped one shoe, the biological shoe when he published his theory, I would truly love to imagine—though I apologize in advance for such grandiloquence—that I've dropped the other shoe, the linguistic shoe, today, if only because it may focus attention on the true grandeur of the original discovery.

I have a few other comments I've developed about this matter, and I'll get to them in a moment—and I hope there's time for me to read the semi-humorous version of the theory as well, though I doubt it. But I would like to add that I have done one small piece of research which I believe strengthens the validity of my position. If we assume that our immediate ancestors in the human family tree, seen here in the chart, had already begun to abandon scent markings in favor of language, it would be reasonable to also assume that the hominid apes, chimpanzees and gorillas among them, were already busy doing something similar. I sent a copy of the article containing what I just read you to my colleague Dr. Jane Goodall and asked her whether or not chimpanzees used scent markings to any great extent, and she most graciously sent me back a reply that, much as we might expect, no, they do not, though males ready to mate do give off a rather strong odor.

This is one of the main reasons why I favor the earlier date and the longer period—a full four million years—during which humans started to play with language. Since today's hominid apes are already in the process of abandoning scent markings, it would appear logical to assume that humans had already begun to abandon them as well and were in the process of developing language. This may be the only type of field evidence that may be available to confirm my position, and I'm happy to note that in this instance it does appear to do so, though in a few minutes I will be suggesting a small scientific experiment each of you can perform even while listening to me speak that also tends to confirm this theory. Almost all other animals, great and small, do to one extent or another most definitely use scent markings as a means of communication. And in their elaborated, evolved form as language, leaving out the olfactory element along the way, that is what human beings use as well.

But there is one other excellent reason to suppose that the development took place over a longer rather than a shorter period. The sheer complexity of the task of working our way up from the relatively simple signals contained in our scent markings must have required many stages and phases of elaboration before they could take on the nuances of what we like to differentiate as supposedly "mature" language. Organs of speech had to change and develop, as did organs of hearing, not to mention the areas of the brain needed to regulate them. At every stage there must have been countless disagreements as to what constituted a word or utterance, what should be recognized as a concept worthy of such an utterance, and precisely how that utterance should be pronounced, all taking place among constantly shifting micro-populations. For such a process to occur would require a positively mind-boggling panorama over time on an evolutionary scale. But this in no

way presents an obstacle to the theory I am presenting, rather it confirms it many times over, for this is precisely what humankind had at its disposal: a positively mind-boggling panorama over time on an evolutionary scale, as we can see right here on the chart I've given you. Dates are of course conjectural, but that is not the same thing as saying they are impossible.

Most other argument on this subject has centered around whether or not the larynx of our prehistoric ancestors could support something as sophisticated as true speech and whether or not the hyoid bone in those species was capable of supporting the larynx. I see no reason why our ancestors had to suddenly discover "true speech" all at once, and in any case the evidence is not overwhelming either way in either area. Nor is there any compelling reason to assume—as do some theorists—that the earliest languages had to possess as many sounds as our modern languages: here too an evolutionary process may have taken place. And at least some theorists speculating on this question are clearly suffering from "dyschronopia:" for instance, Steven Pinker in his recent book *Words and Rules* insists that it is simply reasonable to assume that language must have evolved only once, thus coming close to the Biblical assumption of a single language and a Tower of Babel incident that cast them asunder. In so doing, he also comes close to the silliness of Voltaire's famous court lady at Versailles who said:

What a pity that accident with the Tower of Babel should have got languages all confused--otherwise everyone would have always spoken French.

Pinker fails to recognize that human evolution has necessarily been a remarkably slow and massive continuum, lasting over four million years, during which language could easily in fact have evolved hundreds of times, if such a process had been required. Evolution still continues to take place, even at the most primitive level, in the seas all around us and perhaps also in the seas of our bloodstream as it nourishes our brains.

I am not sure how much more support I truly need to express for the theory presented here—I rather believe that it is the obligation of those who may oppose it to provide a negative proof, that this theory is not true. In my opinion this would be even harder to do than for me to provide definitive proof that it is true, as so much circumstantial evidence—along with the experiment I will soon be explaining—suggests it may be.

Here are some of the other thoughts I have developed about this matter, published only in a manner of speaking, since the sole place they appear is in a special file on the full registered version of my computer program *Truth About Translation*.

In other words, let's just play with the idea—without necessarily taking it seriously—that our languages (and perhaps even our understanding) might simply be a damp and dubious outer coating, an actual biological, evolution-determined extension of ourselves that we carry around with us, even though it has no totally physical form or shape, something that we can neither see nor see beyond. The proof that it exists is simply all the ways we act and interact every day, all the ways we understand and misunderstand each other, all those mistakes or shortcomings in translation between two languages or merely understanding a single one we commit without ever being aware of them. I wonder if this comparison to animal spray is really that much more far-fetched or counter-intuitive or totally crazier than some of the cosmological and molecular theories going the rounds with their supposed galactic soap bubbles and vast clouds of virtual particles perpetually switching on and off in the middle of vast intergalactic vacuums.

I also find it quite revealing that this idea of language being related to animal spray or 'scent markings' should seem to have such a high shock value, at least for some people. Biologists have never hesitated to call scent markings a form of communication, so the only issue that seems to be shocking some people is that these scent markings have here been directly compared to human language and found analogous if not absolutely identical. The usual approach to describing human language is usually much more sanctimonious and self-congratulatory. The ultimate proof that we humans must be superior to all other animals, we are often told, is that we alone have invented Language. "Language"—invariably with a capital "L"—is far beyond the capability of all other species, who can therefore only be inferior to us. Language separates us from the beasts! But if true, why are we so defensive—and so arrogant—about this supposed mark of superiority?

Certainly language is far more complex than any system of animal signals so far studied, even though this could simply be due to the fact that we are interested in all sorts of matters that animals find relatively unimportant. But the resistance by some to the notion that language and animal spray could be linked may tell us more about ourselves than we care to admit. This notion is so counter-intuitive to so many observers that their resistance may come close to recalling the first reactions to Darwin's theory that man and ape might share a common ancestor. Whatever the final truth about human language and animal spray may finally prove to be, perhaps no theory capable of irritating so many people can be entirely mistaken.

In the meantime, here is the more formal reply to this question. It takes the form of a definition of "Language," as seen through the defining lens of this theory:

"Language. Any of the numerous complex systems of exudations or spray-sound markings emitted by human beings and projected onto objects, other human beings, abstract processes, and seemingly repeatable occurrences. These networks of exudations

purport to define, describe, explain, and classify relationships, artifacts, and value systems created by the human beings who produce the exudations. More or less similar systems of humid markings are shared by various groups of humans, these groups sometimes being known as families, tribes, nations, or cultures, and are commonly called "languages." Such systems vary to a greater or lesser extent among these groups, and a process of integration or disintegration in these systems can be readily identified throughout history and in human society today. On a biological and evolutionary scale, these systems may have evolved over time from analogous systems of scent markings produced by many animals for territorial and/or mating purposes. The territorial nature of human language, along with its similarity to animal markings, is evident in warfare, negotiations for treaties or business contracts, and much academic feuding.

"Specific systems of these markings as well as individual spray-sounds purporting to identify perceived objective realities or perceived relationships vary greatly among groups of humans. Over the centuries various attempts have been made to establish a unifying principle linking these systems, such as a "universal grammar" or a "conceptual glossary," but no such attempt has as yet proved truly workable. Qualified mediators between two systems, known as "translators" or "interpreters," have often enjoyed considerable success in converting between specific pairs of these systems, depending on the complexity of the material at hand, the amount of time allotted for the task, and the skill or ingenuity of the individual translator or interpreter."

I have spoken of circumstantial evidence supporting this theory, but by this time some of you may ask if there is any real proof for what I have been describing, any hard "scientific evidence." I believe I can show you quite dramatically that such scientific evidence does in fact exist, so let me come almost to the end of this paper by summarizing all the reasons favoring this theory.

- 1) Vast numbers of animals, including almost all mammals, employ some form of scent markings as a means of communication, so why would human beings be an exception?
- 2) This theory can provide a reasonable explanation for the entire period when the evolution of language must have taken place, quite possibly starting four million years ago and extending to the present.
- 3) Many known evolutionary processes in other animals display a comparable trade-off over time between form and function: fins becoming wings, forelegs becoming arms that reach, tails becoming sacral vertebrae and their adjoining coccyx, so it is by no means unprecedented that scent markings would have metamorphosed into the spray-sound markings of language.

4) As already noted, the goals of both scent marking and spoken language have much in common: the defense of turf, the assertion of status, and both attracting and clearly identifying a mate.

5) The obvious truth that humans do not use scent markings as such as a form of communication. Where else has this function gone if not into the development of language? And why has human sensitivity to olfactory signals declined within the same time period?

6) The unmistakable similarities between the words used for "speaking" and the words used for "spewing" or "spraying" in most Indo-European languages.

7) The embarrassing but equally unmistakable truth that the very act of employing spoken language also involves the emission of a thin but nonetheless quite discernible film of spray. As does even whispering. If you doubt this, then here is a little "scientific experiment" you can all try out for yourselves. Simply try speaking or whispering while standing directly before a mirror and watch its surface slowly become misted over just in front of your mouth. Or better yet, you can try this experiment right now without disturbing anyone by whispering to yourself directly into the palm of your hand. If you do so long enough, you will notice that one area of your palm has become a bit damper than the rest. So if you were looking for scientific evidence that speech and language are akin to animal spray, now you have it, and you hold it quite literally in the very "palm of your hand." (My wife somewhat maliciously suggested that I should ask you to whisper continuously into your neighbor's ear instead, but I won't inflict that on you.) In any case, what we call our lips have always been seen in biological terms as a flexible, nozzle-like orifice covering the buccal cavity, containing mucous membranes and their embedded salivary glands, empowered by a whole host of nearby aeration devices and spray-producing mechanisms.

8) The tragic but indisputable fact that disagreements between humans over language can have much the same consequences as conflicts over scent markings among animals: confrontations, attacks and retreats, and even battles ending in death.

Having listed these eight arguments favoring the evolution of language from scent markings, I do not believe it is the author's responsibility to offer any further defense for this theory. It is rather for those who imagine they oppose this theory to prove that it is mistaken. I do not believe they will be able to do so for the simple reason that such a proof would involve the totally unworkable task of trying to prove a negative over the unwieldy and remarkably elusive period of the last four million years.

And now I think I've told you just about everything I promised I would. We've talked about Hermes, and how interpreters functioned in prehistory, and we've discussed the

origins of language. And everything I have presented today has come to us from the God Hermes, from the various meanings of the word interpreter in ancient Greek. In closing, I'd like to take us back to Hermes with a brief invocation to that God, coming from the Homeric Hymn to Hermes, probably written some time around 800 B.C.

In this passage the God Apollo honors Hermes by bestowing upon him the tripartite sacred staff or caduceus by which he is known. It's just a few lines, I'll say them twice, once in ancient Greek, and once in English, and with this brief passage honoring Hermes I will close my presentation:

[αἰετὸν ἤκε πατήρ· ὃ δ' ἐπώμοσεν· ἢ σε μάλ' οἶον¹] 526^a
 σύμβολον ἀθανάτων ποιήσομαι ἠδ' ἅμα πάντων,
 πιστὸν ἐμῷ θυμῷ καὶ τίμιον· αὐτὰρ ἔπειτα
 ὄλβου καὶ πλούτου δώσω περικαλλέα ῥάβδον,
 χρυσεῖην, τριπέτηλον, ἀκήριον ἢ σε φυλάξει 530
 πάντας ἐπικραίνουσ' ἄθλους² ἐπέων τε καὶ ἔργων
 τῶν ἀγαθῶν, ὅσα φημὶ δαήμεναι ἐκ Διὸς ὀμφῆς.

And now the English, as translated by H.G. Evelyn-White:

And Apollo swore also: `Verily I will make you alone to be an omen for the immortals and all alike, trusted and honored by my heart. Moreover, I will give you a splendid staff of riches and wealth: it is of gold, with three branches, and will keep you beyond all harm, accomplishing every task, whether of words or deeds that are good, which I claim to know through the utterance of Zeus.

I want to thank all of you for coming, by all means visit me on my website, and if you are in New York on April 15 I would love to have you attend my free seminar on the theme "A Practical View of Translation History," yet another event sponsored by the NYU Translation Studies Program. Thank you again.

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