

INTERPRETING IN ANCIENT ROME

The Latin term *inter-pres* originally refers to a middleman, intermediary or negotiator. The etymology of *interpreter* is *interpres* a medium of communication from *inter-partes* a medium of communication between parties, or *inter-pretium* a medium of communication between cultural values. Accordingly, the *interpres* is the person who serves as intermediary between two individuals, e.g. during a commercial transaction, as the instrument of communication from one language into another. It is obvious that the linguistic services of interpreters were required for the administrative and commercial transactions that took place in Rome, in Italy and in the provinces.

THIEME identifies the following categories of situation in antiquity where interpreting played an important role :

1. Interpretation of the sacred into everyday language for lay persons;
2. Official translation and explanation of administrative language for the common citizen;
3. Interpretation of literary works for audiences with different language backgrounds;
4. Interpretation of commercial transactions of all kinds.

The following essay will not dwell on the first three categories - the interpreter as soothsayer; the interpreter as translator of legal texts; or the interpreter as *interpres poetarum*, but rather concentrate on interpretation between the languages in which the business of the empire was conducted. The most important areas where interpreters were required were : government, defence, trade. First of all, however, a few preliminary general remarks about language comprehension and language ability in ancient

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Rome.

Unlike the Greeks, and the Egyptians who adopted a supercilious attitude towards the "barbarians", and considered their language to be the only one worthy of respect, the Romans were often bilingual. *Utriusque linguae, utriusque orationis facultate*, i.e. to be fluent in Greek, was considered to be a requirement for the educated citizen of the late Republic.

Individuals in antiquity who spoke several languages and did not require an interpreter were accorded particular respect. King MITHRIDATES IV (ca.130-63 BC), for example, was "not only an eloquent man, but also spoke the languages of the twenty-two nations over which he ruled without requiring the services of an interpreter" (MOMMSEN). In the days of the Empire small children often learned Greek from slave girls as their first language, and in schools Greek and Latin enjoyed equal status. (HERRMANN).

PLINY deemed those fortunate who were not dependent on interpretes : *Felices illos quorum fides et industria non per internuntios et interpretesprobabantur !* And Cicero complained that interpreters could interpret uncertainties any way they choose.

CICERO encouraged his son MARCUS to follow his example and study Latin and Greek :.... *ut ipse ad meam utilitatem semper cum Graecis Latina coniunxi neque id in philosophia solum sed etiam in dicendi exercitatione feci, idem tibi censeo faciendum, ut par sis in utriusque orationis facultate.* PLINY even goes a step further and recommended that the young PEDANIUS FUSCUS practise translating between Latin and Greek as an exercise for the mind. *Utile in primis, et multi praecipunt, vel ex Graeco in Latinum vel ex Latino vertere in Graecum. ... Intelligentia ex hoc et iudicium acquiritur.*

Roman authors also gave thought to the rules governing translating and interpreting. CICERO writes that only an inexperienced interpreter translates word for word, and HORACE continues in the same vein : *nec converti ut interpretes; non verbum pro verbo; genus omne verborum vimque servavi....*

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There were trilingual communities in the Roman empire : the Sicilians knew the Greek, Latin and Punic languages, and the inhabitants of Massilia (Marseilles) Latin, Greek and Gallic. The melting pot of the southern Celtic territory was ridiculed for its "barbaric" Latin, but this low Latin enabled the distant Allobrogians to communicate with the Roman authorities, to conduct trade and even testify before Roman courts without an interpreter (MOMMSEN). Since there was a active trade between Rome and the land of the Celts, and Romans acquired property outside the borders of Rome, people in free Gaul were familiar with Latin even before the Roman conquest. However, such knowledge was confined to a relatively small number, an interpreter had to be used to communicate with the officials of the Gau of the Hadui, who were allies.

Interpreters in the administration

Interpreters were important to the state for official contacts with foreign representatives - for obvious practical reasons, but also because Roman dignitaries would not speak Greek or the languages of the barbarians for reasons of prestige. Hence, even when interpreters were not essential for purposes of comprehension, they would sometimes be required to intervene in order to accentuate the distance vis-à-vis the barbarians and to enhance their own prestige : *Magistratus vero prisci quantopere suam populique Romani maiestatem retinentes se gesserint hinc cognosci potest, quod inter cetera obtinendae gratuitatis indicia illud quoque magna cum perseverantia custodiebant, ne Graecis umquam nisi latine responsa darent. quin etiam ipsos linguae volubilitate, qua plurimum valent, excussa per interpretem loqui cogebant non in urbe tantum nostra, sed etiam in Graecia et Asia, quo scilicet Latinae vocis honos per omnes gentes venerabilior diffunderetur.*

When a deputation of philosophers from Athens was received by the senate in 154 BC, a roman senator called C.ACILIUS officiated as interpreter: *Et in senatum quidem introducti interprete usi sunt C. Acilio senatore.* Since the time of SULLA the use of Greek was authorised at senate receptions. Other

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rules applied for Carthaginians and Spaniards : Communication was only authorised via an interpreter (HERMANN).

Whilst people with knowledge of languages would on occasion help out, there is no doubt that there were also professional interpreters. Roman emissaries to Greece generally had an interpreter with them. CICERO used one CN. PUBLICIUS MENANDER as his interpreter. He recounts how his application for dual nationality was refused : *Duarum civitatum civis noster esse iuris civili nemo potest. Neque enim sine causa de Cn. Publicio Menandro, libertino homine, quem apud maiores legati nostri in Graeciam proficiscentes interpretem secum habere voluerunt, ad populum latus est ut is Publicius, si domum revenisset et inde Romam redisset, ne minus civis esset.*

Interpreters were essential for administrative dealings with Egyptians, Syrians, Scythians, Germans, Celts etc. Interpreters constantly accompanied Roman governors and other representatives on official business in the provinces. They were sometimes paid by the state, sometimes paid directly by the official himself. Sometimes the interpreters were brought from Rome, frequently though they were recruited locally in the province itself. (HERMANN). Latin was the official language in the province. But even if roman officials were fluent in the local language, an interpreter was used for communication with the indigenous population for reasons of national pride. Even as late as 400 AD interpreters were appointed by the relevant authorities for communication with the barbarians.

Some monuments with inscriptions referring to these interpreters in the provincial administration have survived. The following example is taken from Budapest region : a sarcophagus commissioned by MARCUS ULPIUS CELERINUS, a Dacian interpreter, working for the 1st Legion, for himself and his son (*Marcus Ulpus Celerinus salariarius legionis I. adiutricis piae fidelis interpres Dacorum*).

Interpreters in the army

Interpreters were essential in times of war. There are numerous references to army interpreters in the literature, which show the diversity of language-related tasks they were called upon to perform. A few illustrations

LIVY recounts how a prince from Gaul challenged a Roman to a duel during the attack on Italy by the Gauls in 390 AD : *Gallus ... provocat per interpretem unum ex Romanis, qui secum ferro decernat*. Before the battle of Zama in 202 BC, and so as to preserve the cohesion of his multiethnic army HANNIBAL had his troops addressed in their ed for the Roman CLAUDIUS NERO by a Punic interpreter : *qui ubi ad consulem pervenerunt litteraeque lectae per interpretem sunt...*

Interpreters also had thankless tasks to perform : An officer of CAESAR sent the interpreter CN. POMPEIUS with a request to spare the Gaul AMBIORIX.... Q. *Titurius, cum procul Ambiorigem suos cohortantem conspexisset, interpretem suum Cn. Pompeium ad eum mittit rogatum, ut sibi militibusque parcat.*

In addition to their more mundane activities army interpreters could also be required to officiate during peace negotiations.

In the second Punic war one of HANNIBAL's soldiers served as interpreter and peace broker with the Saguntines : *has pacis leges abnuente Alcone accepturos Saguntinos, Alorcus, vinci animos, ubi alia vincantur, adfirmans, se pacis eius interpretem fore pollicetur; erat autem tum miles Hannibalis, ceterum publice Saguntinis amicus atque hospes.*

Again during the second Punic war the negotiations with HANNIBAL and HANNO for surrender by the inhabitants of Cannae, or Nola, were conducted using an interpreter.

During the peace negotiations in 202 BC SCIPIO and HANNIBAL met unarmed, and with only interpreters present - one of the first recorded summits - *Summotis pari spatio armatis cum singulis interpretibus congressi*

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sunt...

Another example of a secret conference with a particularly trustworthy interpreter was the meeting between SULLA and King BOCCHUS of Mauritania in the Jugurthian war (106/5 BC), where negotiations were conducted for Jugurtha to be handed over. Both sides requested the presence of one DABAR, described as a *vir sanctus*, an honourable, and reliable man, since he had remained faithful not only to his king, but also to the Romans : *ubi plerumque noctis processit, Sulla a Boccho occulte adcersitur. ab utroque tantummodo fidi interpretes adhibentur, praeterea Dabar internuntius, sanctus vir et ex sententia ambobus.*

Interpreters are also mentioned frequently during the Gallic wars of CAESAR. When CAESAR converses with a friendly Gaul who is well disposed towards the Romans, he does not use the normal interpreter but calls upon a senior official, a man in whom he trusts C. VALERIUS TROUCILLUS *cotidianis interpretibus remotis per C. Valerium Troucillum, principem Galliae provinciae, familiarem suum, cui summam omnium rerum fidem habebat. cum eo colloquitur.*

Interpreters in commerce

Interpreters also played an important role in trade. However they are only mentioned by historians on exceptional occasions. The reason being presumably that their presence was so taken for granted that it was not considered worth mentioning. (KLAUSER).

On the character of interpreters

Considering the manifold language-related tasks that were performed by interpreters in the Roman empire, it is not surprising to find reference to their character and the quality of their work.

CAESAR mentions one C. VALERIUS PROCILLUS, whose services were called upon during the war against ARIOVIST. He describes him as a

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young man *summa virtute et humanitate*.

In a letter by CICERO we discover that provincial Roman officials were on friendly terms with their interpreter. CICERO is full of praise for the loyalty and modesty of his friend and interpreter, and he intercedes on behalf of his son : *Cum multa mihi grala sunt, quae tu adductus mea commendatione fecisti, tum in primis, quod M. Marcilium, amici atque interpretis meifilium, liberalissime tractavisti; venit enim Laudiceam ei tibi apud me mihique propter te gratias maximas egit. Qua re, quod reliquum est, a te peto, quoniam apudgralos homines beneficium ponis, ut eo libentius iis commodes operamque des, quoad fines tua patietur, ut socrus adolescentis rea ne fiat. Ego cum antea studiose commendabam Marcilium tum multo nunc studiosius, quod in longa apparitione singularem et prope incredibilem patris Marcili fidem, abstinentiam modestiamque cognovi.*

Again in CICERO on another occasion we find a negative assessment of an interpreter. A. VALENTINIUS in Sicily is not so much an interpreter for Greek but more a party to shameful and scandalous goings on : *A. Valentius est in Sicilia interpres, quo iste interprete non ad linguam Graecam, sed ad furta et flagitia uti solebat.*

In conclusion it may be recalled that a treacherous and disreputable interpreter even features in the Astérix comic strip "Astérix chez les Goths".

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