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**HERMES,
GOD OF TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS**

The director of Hermeneus has asked me for a prologue and, lacking ideas, I resort to the Internet. A search for "Hermes" leads me to Plato and Socrates and innumerable links.

Asked about the meaning of the god Hermes, Socrates replied that it had something to do with interpreter—hermeneutikos—and messenger, as well as thief, liar and merchant. He also added that this god has invented language and the word. Hermes was the god of commerce: one of the proposed etymologies for the Latin *interpres* is inter-pretiutn, the intermediary between two parties who, supposedly, do not understand one another.

The Spanish term *trujaman*, originating from the Arabic for interpreter or translator, combines all the meanings mentioned above, and is further strengthened by the traditional mistrust between Moors and Christians in the Hispanic context.

The reason, therefore, that translators and interpreters are not always held in high esteem is not solely due to incompetence, but also because they know more than their clients and can thus take advantage of them. When translators or interpreters faithfully carry out their task, they go unnoticed; they are only remembered when they make errors or deceive. A curious contrast: Hermes flew on winged feet, but the custom of killing the messenger is an ancient one, and translators and interpreters must walk softly.

This is not the only contrast, since language, an invention attributed to Hermes, has two faces. One of them may be, seen in the relation between speaking, or expressing one's self, and the behavior of animals that spread substances, liquids or gasses, to mark their territory. The interminable arguments and wars between people or nations over borders are, probably inseparable from this generalized animal conduct, behavior that has been highly refined by modern man, who, heeding his instinctive desire for power, has become a specialist in defending tooth and nail his particular parcel, privileges, property and domain.

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Hard-line nationalists or defenders of the faith who continue to set the pace of current societies base their tenets to a large extent on the eighteenth century idea of Volkgeist or spirit of the people manifested by language, a type of unmistakable essence composed of air and saliva. Since smell is not the sole sense, man, unlike animals, spreads his sign in numerous ways: signs, fences, passports, and cacophony in the form of arguments that are often openly hostile or propagandistic.

If, due to our animal instinct, speaking or writing supposes the erection of barriers, it, on the other hand, offers the possibility of demonishing them, which is one of the tasks of rhetoric, the art of persuasion in the precise moment, as demonstrated by Priam in the Iliad. Hermes endows Priam with the art of persuasion, which allows him to cross mental barriers and recover the body of his son, Hector. But the art of elegant speech, according to the definition of rhetoric, requires a learning process in order to perfect the persuasive capacity needed to demolish barriers erected by others.

Gross believes that the theory of evolution lacked an essential ingredient –that of language– in order to be complete. Speech could be viewed, according to the theory of Gross, as yet another prosthesis, one developed in the larynx and the mouth, a spray that sprinkles signs, in the same way that we use the pen or the keyboard. Speech is as artificial as these other tools developed at a much later date.

Time also erects barriers, those of forgetfulness, and it appears that many years will pass before a system capable of memorizing those words carried away with the wind will be perfected.

Our capacity to establish frontiers by speaking and writing is inseparable from crossing them, although it be merely a temporary incursion. Translators and interpreters are the ones who best embody this faculty that philologists in general share with them with respect to demolishing obstacles to comprehension or interpretation erected by words. We are professionals. Our craft is a specialized one that should be a right for all men and women: to cross frontiers without limitations of any type, without violence. Until this is achieved and it is possible to leave behind this tribal world in which we live, we must call upon Hermes, that he may touch us with his wand. Thus, with winged feet, we will be afforded a more enlightened view of our craft.

Source: *Hermeneus*, 2002, n° 4, p. 13-18.