

ELIE KEDOURIE MEMORIAL LECTURE

From Babel to Dragomans

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And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language . . . and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech (Genesis 11: 6–7).

THIS FAMOUS PASSAGE FROM THE BOOK OF GENESIS expresses the recognition of a distinctive feature of the Middle Eastern region as contrasted with the two other regions of ancient civilisation in the old world. China had substantially one classical language, one script, one civilisation; ancient India likewise, with relatively minor variations. The Middle East had many different unrelated civilisations and many languages which, from the earliest times, created problems of communication. The problem was apparently still unresolved by the time of the New Testament, and there again we have a reference to the situation created by the Tower of Babel, which was, when necessary, solved by what in Christian parlance is called 'the miracle of tongues'. Let me quote another passage: 'And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus etc . . . we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God' (Acts 2: 8–11). And again 'In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues' (Mark 16: 17). And again 'If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret' (1 Corinthians 14: 27).

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By this time, clearly, the office and function of the interpreter were well understood.

The interpreter—the one who translates from one language to another, who makes communication possible between different peoples speaking different languages, appears very early. Again I go back to the book of Genesis, where we learn that Joseph, as a high Egyptian official, spoke to his brothers newly arrived from Canaan, and they did not know that he understood them when they spoke among themselves—‘For he spake unto them by an interpreter’. (Genesis 42: 23). The word used in the Hebrew is *melitz* (מליץ). *Melitz* has a number of meanings; more often it means something like intercessor or advocate or even ambassador. But in this case, interestingly, the Authorized Version translates it as interpreter (obviously interpreting between Egyptian and Hebrew), and if we look at one of the earliest translations from the Hebrew text into Aramaic, we find that the word *melitz* is rendered as *meturgeman* (מתורגמן). Here we have an early form of what later, in English, came to be called ‘dragoman’. A *meturgeman* is a translator; the word is very old, and goes back to Assyrian, where *ragamu* means to speak, *rigmu* is a word and the *taf' el* form indicates one who facilitates communication.

This word *meturgeman*, also *turgeman*, passed from Aramaic to Hebrew, to Arabic, to Turkish, to Italian, to French, to English, and many other languages. It occurs in Italian in the form *turcimanno*, no longer used in modern Italian. In French it becomes *truchement*, in English, dragoman and drogman. The Hebrew word *Targum* is from the same root.

The earliest discussions of translation are in the context of the translation of scriptures such as the *Targum*, the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic. There is an interesting difference between the attitudes of the scriptural religions to this question. Jews decided at an early stage that it is permissible to translate scripture, and translations of the Hebrew Bible were made into Aramaic, later into Greek and into other languages, especially Judaeo-Arabic, Judaeo-Persian, and of course Judaeo-German, better known as Yiddish.

For Christians, translation is not only permitted, it is required, and some translations acquire the status of scriptures themselves. Such is the Latin translation, the Vulgate; the Syriac translation, the Ethiopic translation and, one might add, the Luther German Bible and the King James English Bible. Indeed it has been suggested, with some plausibility, that parts of the Greek New Testament are themselves trans-

lations from an earlier original in some other language, presumably Aramaic.

The Muslim position on the other hand is quite different; translation of the Qur'an is not only not encouraged, it is expressly forbidden. The text is divine, inimitable, uncreated and eternal, and to translate it would be an act of presumption and impiety. Of course they do translate it. Most Muslims nowadays do not understand Arabic, and the contents have somehow to be conveyed to them, but this is presented as interpretation, not as translation. Certainly there is no translation of the Qur'an which has the status of the Vulgate or the Septuagint or the Targum. It is interesting that the Qur'an itself refers in a number of places to the fact that it is in Arabic: the Hebrew Bible does not refer to the fact that it is in Hebrew. On the contrary, the word Hebrew, meaning a language as distinct from its use as an ethnic designation, does not occur in the Hebrew Bible, which usually refers to the language used by the ancient Israelites as '*yehudit*' (Jewish) (2 Kings 18: 26 cf. Isaiah 36: 11; Nehemiah 13: 24; 2 Chronicles 32: 18) or *Sefat Kena'an* (language of Canaan) (Isaiah 19: 18).

My concern today is not with translations of scriptural texts, but rather with translations for more practical purposes, for purposes of government, diplomacy, trade, war, and the like. Here again we have some very early examples. A passage in the Book of Esther tells us that in the Persian empire an order was sent 'to the lieutenants, and the deputies and rulers of the provinces which are from India unto Ethiopia, an hundred and twenty-seven provinces, unto every province according to the writing thereof, and unto every people after their language' (Esther 8: 9). A considerable task, to translate an imperial order into presumably 127 languages so that the ruler's orders would be understood in all the provinces of his empire, from India even unto Ethiopia.

Who did the translations? How did it happen? We have literally hard evidence, in the form of inscriptions on stone, of the concern of the rulers of multi-national empires that their edicts and orders should be understood; we have bi-lingual and tri-lingual inscriptions, the most famous of course being the inscription at Behistoun in Iran and the Rosetta stone from Egypt, now in the British Museum. In these the same text is given in different languages, so that it may be understood by different elements of the population.

Translation requires a translator. Somebody has to know both languages, so as to understand a text in the source language and be able to express it in the target language. The Roman author Pliny

(*Natural History*, vi. 5) tells us that the peoples of the Caucasus spoke many different languages, so much so that the Romans needed 130 different interpreters [*interpretes*] to deal with the Caucasian kings and princes—even exceeding the Persian empire.

Another classical author, Plutarch, tells us that among the many qualities of Cleopatra, she was an accomplished linguist: ‘And her tongue, like an instrument of many strings, she could readily turn to whatever language she pleased, so that in her interviews with barbarians she very seldom had need of an interpreter [ἑρμηνεύς], but made her replies to most of them herself and unassisted, whether they were Ethiopians, Troglodytes, Hebrews, Arabians, Syrians, Medes or Parthians.’¹

One of our earliest accounts of a diplomatic communication in the Middle Ages comes from an Arabic chronicler called Awhadi. He tells us that a European queen, Bertha the daughter of Lothar, queen of Franja [Frankland] and its dependencies, sent a gift and a letter to the Abbasid Caliph al-Muktafi in the year 293 of the Hijra (906 CE). With them was a further message, not included in the letter, but addressed directly to the Caliph. The letter, says the Arab historian, was written on white silk ‘in a writing resembling the Greek writing but straighter’ (presumably this was Latin writing: the queen from Italy would obviously have used the Latin script). The message, he says, was a request to the Caliph for marriage and friendship—a rather odd listing; one cannot help but wonder whether there was some mistranslation here.²

How did they read this message in Latin? Who could there have been in tenth-century Baghdad that could read a letter in Latin? Awhadi tells us: they searched for someone to translate the letter, and in the clothing store they found a Frankish slave who was able ‘to read the writing of that people’. He was brought into the Caliph’s presence, where he translated the letter from Latin writing into Greek writing. They then brought the famous scientific translator Ishaq ibn Hunain and he translated it from Greek into Arabic.

Not surprisingly, nothing seems to have resulted from this embassy, neither by way of marriage nor of friendship. But it does give us an

¹ Plutarch, *Lives*, IX, *Anthony*, 27: 4, edited and translated by Bernadette Perrin, Loeb Classical Library (1920) p. 197.

² Ed. M. Hamidullah in ‘Embassy of Queen Bertha to Caliph al-Muktafi billah in Baghdad 293/906’. *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, 1 (1953), 272–300.

interesting early example of a method which we hear of much more, and that is the two-tier translation: translation through an intermediate language. It became very common in the later Middle Ages and the early modern period, when increasingly, we find a language which is, so to speak, accepted as a diplomatic and commercial *lingua franca*. In the later Middle Ages, Italian served this purpose in the Mediterranean; it continued until the beginning of the nineteenth century to be the most widely used European language in the region. Communications, for example, between the English and the Turks passed through Italian. An Englishman who had something to say to a Turkish official said it to someone who translated it into Italian and then someone else translated it from Italian into Turkish. The answer came back by the same route.

My main concern in this paper is with communications, through interpreters and dragomans, between the two major Mediterranean civilisations—the civilisations of Christendom and of Islam. It might be useful first to point to one or two relevant differences between these two cultures. On the Christian side, there was a well-established need to learn languages. Christians of whatever native language had two classical languages to learn if they wished to be considered educated: Latin and Greek, and two more if they wanted to read their scriptures in the original: Hebrew and Aramaic. In addition to that, they had a multiplicity of spoken languages: Rashid al-Din, the fourteenth-century Persian historian, notes with astonishment that ‘the Franks have twenty-five different languages which they use among themselves, and nobody understands the language of anybody else’.³

In 1492, a year well known also for some other events, a Spanish humanist called Antonio de Nebrija published a grammar of the Castilian language. This, as far as I am aware, is the first time that anyone had treated a colloquial language seriously. He tried to establish rules, and launched the process by which the Castilian dialect became the Spanish language. Very soon after that, Italian, French, English, German, and all the other vernaculars of Europe became recognized written languages with rules and eventually grammars and even dictionaries.

The situation on the Islamic side was entirely different. The many languages of antiquity either disappeared or dwindled into insignificance, surviving as written languages, if at all, in scriptures and rituals.

³ *Histoire des Franks*, ed. & trans. K. Jahn (Leiden 1951), p. 11 of Persian text, p. 24 of translation. A Persian writer added: ‘All they have in common is letters and numbers.’

After the spread of Islam, there was only one language that mattered—Arabic. It was the language of scripture, of the classics, of commerce, of government, of science. And although, like Latin in the west, it developed a number of vernaculars, they did not, like French and Spanish and Italian and Portuguese, develop into autonomous languages. Colloquially of course they did, but that development was never formally recognised or recorded. Just one language met all needs, and there was therefore no need to learn any other. Why would an Arabic speaker bother to learn the barbarous idioms of infidels and savages beyond the imperial frontier? Arabic provided all his needs, and if anyone wanted to talk to him, they would learn Arabic. One finds a similar attitude in parts of the English-speaking world at the present time.

A little later, first one, then another language was added: first Persian, then Turkish. In the Islamic Middle East and North Africa there were no more. Others were at most local dialects. A medieval (probably tenth-century) Arabic writer explains: ‘The perfect language is the language of the Arabs and the perfection of eloquence is the speech of the Arabs, all others being deficient. The Arabic language among languages is like the human form among beasts. Just as humanity emerged as the final form among the animals, so is the Arabic language the final perfection of human language and of the art of writing, after which there is no more’⁴—a remarkable anticipation of the later concept of evolution.

Nevertheless, there was need for communication—in commerce, in war, and in some other matters. From an early date, and especially during the Crusades and after, there are numerous references to interpreters, mostly professional interpreters who came to be known in Arabic as *tarjumān*. The same word found its way, as I mentioned before, into a variety of western languages.

Who were these interpreters? Why does anyone set out to learn a foreign language, to learn the language of another people and learn it well enough to understand and interpret what are often very complex statements? The commonest and most widespread reason for learning a language is that it is the language of your masters, and it is wise, expedient, useful, or necessary to know the language of your masters. I am using the word ‘master’ in three different senses: a slave learns the language of his master, that is his owner, needing it in order to do his

⁴ *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Safā*, III (Cairo 1928), p. 152.

job, to receive his orders, to survive. The owner does not learn the language of the slave. The same is true of the master in the sense of ruler: the subject needs to learn the language of his ruler. In British India, Indians learned English; very few Englishmen learned the languages of India and when they did, for the most part they didn't learn them very well. One finds much the same thing in French North Africa and in the various other empires that have flourished. Many Central Asians know Russian, very few Russians, even in Central Asia, knew the languages of Central Asia.

In a third sense of master, meaning teacher, the learner sees some earlier civilisation, some other culture as having classical status. The Greeks and the Romans provide us with examples of both. The Romans learned Greek because Greek was their classical language, the language of science and philosophy and the highest literature known to them. The Greeks eventually learned Latin because the Romans conquered and ruled Greece.

Another group who find it expedient and convenient to learn a language are refugees: those who flee from one world to another. There were considerable numbers of refugees who fled from Christian Europe to the lands of Islam in the Middle Ages and the early modern period; there were very few who went in the opposite direction. Among these refugees from Europe were many Jews, notably those who came after the expulsion from Spain in 1492. Some of them learned Turkish and were able to make themselves useful to the Turkish empire in a variety of ways.

A distinctive group among the newcomers consisted of those who changed their religion, and made a new career—those whom the Christians call renegade and whom the Muslims call *Muhtadi*, one who had found the true path of God. Considerable numbers of Christian—shall we say adventurers?—went from various parts of Europe into the Muslim lands, bringing useful skills—military, commercial, technical, and also linguistic—for which they were able to find a ready market.

All these groups—slaves, refugees, renegades—came in from the outside. There were also those who went out from the inside; there were prisoners-of-war, not too many, but we do know of some people from the Muslim lands who were captured by one or other Christian state and spent some years in a Christian country before they were ransomed or escaped, and went home. These are remarkably disappointing. Very few of them wrote anything about their experiences and even fewer

appear to have played any sort of role on their return. There were also merchants who travelled abroad and returned home; they normally seem to have been non-Muslims—Christian and Jewish subjects of the Muslim states, and they have left little record.

There were also sailors. When Prince Jem, brother of Sultan Mehmed II, fled to Europe and spent a little while as the guest of various European rulers, the Ottoman government was not unnaturally concerned about what he was doing and what he might be plotting with the enemies of the empire. So they sent a spy to Italy and to France to keep an eye on the exiled prince and report on his activities. But whom could they send, whom would they have that could move around in Italy and France? They sent a sea-captain, who had been to Europe and apparently had sufficient language skill, not to pass as a native, but to sail, so to speak, around under his own flag, as a sailor, and communicate and report.⁵ The Venetian Father Toderini, who visited the Turkish naval school in the late eighteenth century, found that almost all the teachers were foreigners, Europeans who had learned Turkish, but he did find one Muslim, a native Algerian seaman, who had learned Italian and was able to help him.⁶ They were not a large group, but they were not insignificant. They have left their record in the European loanwords in Ottoman Turkish. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, and the massive intrusion of new ideas and objects and words to designate them, European loanwords in Turkish were very few, and most of them were Italian and maritime.

By far the most important of those who went out and came back were Christians. From the seventeenth century, wealthy Christian families began to send their sons (not daughters of course) to Europe, principally to Italy, to study in the universities. They returned with a serious knowledge of at least one European language and usually some other useful skills as well. These came to play an increasingly important part.

In doing so they replaced the Jews. Jews had come from Europe in the fourteenth, more especially in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. They came with a knowledge of languages and countries and for a while were very useful. But they lost their usefulness; no new ones were coming, and the second generation born in Turkey no

⁵ V. L. Ménage, 'The Mission of an Ottoman Secret Agent in France in 1486', in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1965), 112–32.

⁶ G. Toderini, *Letteratura turchesca* (Venice, 1787), vol. I, pp. 177.

longer possessed the skills and knowledge that their parents had brought from Europe. They were replaced by Greeks, and to a much lesser extent Armenians, who went out and came back, and took over many of the roles which Jews had formerly played in the Ottoman lands.

What were these roles? Who employed interpreters? We have rather scattered information, showing that they were employed at various levels, including the lower levels. They were needed locally. An imperial government has to have people who know the local language, for practical purposes like collecting taxes and maintaining order. For this, local people were usually used.

Jews served especially in the customs administration, where their knowledge of European languages and conditions was useful. Those who came from Europe could speak Spanish and often Italian too. We find for example great numbers of customs receipts in the Venetian archives, in Hebrew letters. A customs receipt is given so that the recipient can show it to another customs officer, and if the other customs officer was also likely to be Jewish, it made good sense to write the customs receipt in Hebrew letters. In the Venetian archives there are boxes of customs receipts given by Sephardic Jews in the Ottoman service to Venetian merchants.

There were more important interpreters, at government level, who served in negotiations between the Ottoman government and the various European embassies. This is the period when something new was developing, that is to say, resident embassies conducting continuous diplomacy. The older custom was that one sent an ambassador when there was something to say; he said it, and then he went home. The idea of having a permanently resident ambassador conducting continuous diplomacy came in at the end of the Middle Ages and beginning of the modern period, and one after another the European states—the Venetians, the Genoese, the French, the English, and the rest—established embassies in Istanbul to negotiate with the Ottoman government on matters of concern, primarily of course on commerce.

How did they talk to each other? Ottoman officials did not know any English or French or Italian or any other Christian European language, nor did these westerners know any Turkish. Communication was carried on through first one and then two groups of intermediaries—those employed by the Sublime Porte, and those employed by the embassies, each side hiring and paying its own interpreters.

The earliest dragomans of the Sublime Porte about whom we have information seem to have been renegades, or from a Muslim point of

view *Muhtadi*, and they seem to have come in the main from the periphery of the empire, including Hungarians, Poles, Germans, and Italians. These were gradually replaced by Greeks, who were of course Ottoman subjects. There were a few Jews, but not in major positions. In most of the jobs they had held, Jews were replaced by western-educated members of the Greek patrician class of Istanbul. They came to be known as the Phanariots, from the district in Istanbul where many of them lived and where the office of the Greek Patriarch was situated. These, generation after generation, continued to send their sons to Italy, where they graduated from Italian universities, came back with a thorough knowledge of Italian and of European conditions and were able to serve the Sublime Porte consistently, effectively and remarkably loyally for many generations. The earliest to bear the title of Grand Dragoman was a certain Panayotis Nicosias, a Greek who was appointed by his patron, Köprülü Ahmed Pasha, in 1661. He was followed by a medical doctor called Alexander Mavrokordato, founder of one of the great dragoman dynasties.

On whom did the embassies rely? They drew on a rather different group of people, whom it has become customary to call Levantines. The word *levantine* comes from Italian—Levante is the sunrise; people who come from the east are politely called ‘people from the sunrise’ *levantini*. Those who came from the west were sometimes called *ponentini*, people from the sunset. *Levantine* came to be something of a term of abuse; it came to mean people who are European but not really European; who have a veneer and a smattering of European ways and education but are really local; and yet who don’t possess the real local culture. The Turks called the Levantines *tathsu frengi*, sweet-water Franks, as opposed to the genuine article, who are salt-water Franks.

The Levantines flourished for several centuries. They were overwhelmingly Catholic by religion; mostly they spoke Italian. Many of them seem to have been of Italian origin, though they intermarried freely with Greeks, especially with Catholic Greeks, and they formed a more or less self-contained, autonomous society, not only in the capital but also in many provincial cities, since dragomans were needed not only at the embassies but also at consulates, vice-consulates and trading posts and the like. Both embassies and consulates relied very largely on Levantines to do these jobs.

Almost from the start, we find continual complaints about the Levantines in the diplomatic documents of the European powers. Sometimes the interpreters are accused of incompetence; they pretend

to know Turkish well but they don't. That appears on the whole to be an unjustified complaint. There may have been some who were not able to do their job properly, but on the whole, they seem to have been pretty competent.

A more serious complaint is disloyalty: they are accused of serving their own interests, of selling their services to the highest bidder, of forming a sort of self-contained, coherent Levantine dragoman group which owed no real loyalty to anybody. Certainly there are quite awful stories told by many ambassadors about dragomans selling secrets to another embassy, or exchanging secrets with colleagues. They were mostly related to each other, so that a dragoman of the British embassy might be the first cousin of a dragoman of the French embassy. At a time of acute Anglo-French rivalry, this would give rise to interesting possibilities for both of them.

Another accusation, made very frequently and certainly justified by the evidence, is that they were frightened—too frightened to do their job properly. They were after all not Englishmen or Frenchmen or Austrians; they were local people who lived in Turkey. They were not citizens in the modern sense (the word has no relevance to that time) but they and their families were subjects of the Ottoman Sultan, and entirely at his mercy. They did not enjoy any kind of diplomatic status (not that the Ottomans in the high period of Ottoman rule cared all that much for diplomatic status, though they generally respected it). But the Levantine dragomans, until a very late stage, were not diplomats, and the embassies almost all agreed that they were far too scared of the Turkish authorities to deliver any unpalatable message honestly. Thus, for example when the British or the French or the Austrian ambassador wanted to deliver a severe message, the severity disappeared entirely. The severe message as transmitted by the dragoman to the *reis efendi* or whatever other Ottoman official he dealt with became a humble supplication.

As an example of a dragoman's style I may quote one example. A man called George Aide or Aida, who was the dragoman of the British consulate in Aleppo, working for the Levant Company and the consulate—by his name one would assume a Syrian Christian—got into trouble for reasons which are not quite clear, and was imprisoned in the Citadel. He asked the British ambassador to help him. The ambassador responded and eventually managed to get Aida released. But as a precaution, the dragoman also sent a petition from the citadel, where he was imprisoned, to the Aga of the janissaries, the highest military

officer in Turkey. One passage will suffice to give the flavour of such documents.

This is the petition of the dragoman to the Aga of the janissaries: Having bowed my head in submission, and rubbed my slavish brow in utter humility and complete abjection and supplication to the beneficent dust beneath the feet of my mighty, gracious, condescending, compassionate, merciful benefactor, my most generous and open-handed master, I pray that the peerless and almighty provider of remedies may bless your lofty person, the extremity of benefit, protect my benefactor from the vicissitudes and afflictions of time, prolong the days of his life, his might and his splendour and perpetuate the shadow of his pity and mercy upon this slave.⁷

It goes on like this at some length. If this was how a dragoman addressed a high Ottoman functionary, one can understand a certain concern on the part of European diplomats about the form in which their words—written or spoken—were transmitted to their Ottoman addressees.

Sir James Porter, an ambassador writing in the mid-eighteenth century, notes with regret that ambassadors

are under a necessity of trusting other men to transmit their thoughts and sentiments to these unknown ministers; or, which is still worse, are obliged to have recourse to writing, and if the Turkish ministry happen to not like the subject, it will never produce an answer. Hence arises a great perplexity to zealous ministers, for if they entrust their secret to interpreters, who with large families live upon a small salary, and are used to Oriental luxury, the temptation of money from others is with difficulty withstood by them [Sir James is very considerate in putting it that way] and even exclusive of any considerations of gain, they are often excited by mere vanity to discover [meaning to reveal] the secret they are entrusted with in order to show their own importance.⁸

This became a serious source of concern, and various ways were found of dealing with it. In time the system broke down on both sides—the use of the Levantines by the embassies, the use of the Phanariot Greeks by the Porte; they broke down in different ways and for different reasons.

Most of the European powers decided, sooner or later, that they could no longer rely on these people, and that the only real answer was to train people of their own. And so young Englishmen, young Frenchmen, young Austrians, young Russians—these being the four

⁷ Document in the Public Record Office, S.P. 102/62.

⁸ *Observations on the Religion, Law, Government and Manners of the Turks* (1771), p. 211.

Powers mainly concerned—were assigned to learn the language. There is a long and interesting story about how attempts were made and finally succeeded—to some extent. The French began with what they called '*les jeunes de langue*', a *jeune de langue* being a kind of language cadet. They were sent from France, where they had some preliminary training in a Middle Eastern language, and then attached as what we would nowadays call, I suppose, interns, to the French embassy. The Austrians at one stage even insisted that their ambassador must speak Turkish. The Russians, according to the testimony of Adolphus Slade, one of the best British observers, had a much simpler method: when they wanted something, they would say 'Do so or I will declare war' and this, apparently, was normally effective.⁹

By the nineteenth century, the older system was dying, though it persisted quite far into the century, and for a while young Englishmen and Levantine dragomans served side by side, naturally with not very happy relations between them. On the Ottoman side, the end came with the Greek war of independence. The last of the Greek grand dragomans, Stavraki Aristarchi, was hanged in 1821 on suspicion of complicity with the rebels. I have no idea whether the suspicion was well grounded or not; I am inclined to think not. The Phanariot bureaucratic families showed very little sympathy with the rebels; they had a long record of attachment to the Ottoman state which continued even after these events. Indeed, as late as 1840, the first Ottoman envoy to independent Athens was a Phanariot Greek, Kostaki Musurus, later Ottoman ambassador in London.

But it was no longer considered safe to entrust what had become a crucial post, in the newly important field of foreign policy, to non-Muslims. The basic change was in the relationship between the Ottoman empire and the western world. In the new balance of power, the Ottomans could no longer afford the attitude of easy disdain, of contemptuous unconcern for the barbarous peoples of Europe and their absurd dialects. It became necessary to learn languages. After the hanging of the chief dragoman, Aristarchi, we are told by the contemporary Turkish historians that there was total confusion in the office of the grand dragoman; papers were piling up and there was no one that could read them. So they brought the chief professor of the naval school, a Jew converted to Islam who knew several European languages, and he held this office for a while.

⁹ Adolphus Slade, *Records of Travels in Turkey, Greece, etc.* (1833), vol. II, p. 192.

With the increasing importance of relations with European countries the chief translator became more than a chief translator; he became in effect a minister of foreign affairs, conducting the policies and drafting the letters, not just translating them. Later the Ottomans established a translation office, and that soon became the main avenue to power in Turkish bureaucratic politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In other words, on both sides—the Ottoman government on the one hand and the foreign embassies on the other—they were tending more and more to use their own people.

An important question is that of mistranslation, not just mistranslation by simple error or ignorance, but systematic, intentional mistranslation, of which there are interesting examples. I had occasion some time ago to look at the correspondence between London and Istanbul in the late sixteenth century, after the establishment of the first English embassy to the Ottoman government: letters from the Ottoman Sultans to the Queen of England and replies from the Queen to the Sultans; also correspondence with the Grand Vizier and other functionaries. The Sultan's missives were of course in Turkish; a contemporary translation was provided in Italian which the English could understand; the reply was drafted in English, sent in Italian and presumably translated into Turkish. We do not have the letters from the Queen of England which reached the Sultan in their Turkish form; we have originals in English and translations in Italian but not the final form. We do have the successive versions the other way round, and they show systematic mistranslation right through.

From the Ottoman point of view, the Ottoman Sultan was the ruler of the world; outside there were enemies or vassals, and Ottoman protocol was not willing to use the full titles which these outside rulers claimed for themselves. Thus, in letters addressed to Queen Elizabeth—polite, friendly letters—she is addressed as 'Queen of the vilayet of England'. The Holy Roman Emperor himself, in Vienna, is called 'the king of Vienna'. The words used for 'king' and 'queen'—*kıral* and *kıraliçe*—are European, not Turkish or Islamic. The Ottomans in Europe, like the British in India, used native titles for native princes.

The letters themselves reveal the same sort of approach, so that when the Sultan writes a friendly letter to the Queen of England, the purport of what he says is that he is happy to add her to the vassals of his imperial throne, and hopes, in the formal phrase, that she will 'continue to be firm-footed on the path of devotion and fidelity'. None of this appears in the translation, which was made for the English

ambassador in Italian and communicated by him to London in English. In these the language is one of equal negotiation between sovereigns. Thus, for example, in the berat (diploma) granted by Murad III to Queen Elizabeth authorising English merchants to trade in the Ottoman lands, the Sultan speaks of the Queen as having ‘demonstrated her subservience and devotion and declared her servitude and attachment’ (*izhar-i ubudiyet ve ihlas ve ish`ar-i rikkiyet ve ihtisas*). The contemporary Italian translation renders this ‘sincera amicizia’.¹⁰

It was, it seems, the general practice for the dragomans discreetly to modify the language, making it less imperious and more polite. One may safely assume that they were doing the same thing the other way round, and that when, for example, the Queen wrote to the Sultan expressing good will and friendship, in the Turkish version which reached the Sultan this became loyalty and humble submission.

In the early stages, the Embassies were not aware of these discrepancies and there was no way they could have been aware of them. Later there was a growing realisation that the interpreters employed by the embassies were systematically misrepresenting their texts. That became more and more of a problem, and the subject of frequently expressed concern. An ambassador negotiating with a foreign minister needs to know exactly what is being said. A certain amount of sprucing up and tidying up is permissible, but when it comes in misrepresentation, falsifying the atmosphere that exists between two governments—that is not acceptable. At a fairly early stage, certainly by the eighteenth century (and there are some suggestions even earlier than that), diplomats were becoming very dissatisfied with their interpreters. We don’t find this on the Ottoman side, with reason. The Ottomans knew with whom they were dealing; their interpreters were their own subjects, working for them, their livelihoods and even their lives being entirely dependent on them.

That is one kind of mistranslation—the mistranslation of diplomatic documents, and I suspect that this continued into modern times, indeed may still be going on. A second type of mistranslation—perhaps more dangerous—occurs in treaties. A treaty is drawn up between at least two parties; it is usually elaborately negotiated and an agreed text is produced which both parties sign. What exactly is this agreed text?

¹⁰ Documents in the Public Record Office, S.P. 102/61 ff. For a study of some of these documents, see S. A. Skilliter, *William Harborne and the Trade with Turkey 1578–1582: a documentary study of the first Anglo-Ottoman relations* (1977).

Two examples may suffice. The first, the treaty of Küçük Kaynarja between Russia and Turkey, was signed in 1774 after a Russian victory in a war. The treaty was drawn up in Italian, still at that time the main diplomatic language. The last article of the Treaty (Article XXVIII) says that the Treaty will be signed and sealed in two versions—one in Italian and Russian, the other in Italian and Turkish, so that each of the two signatory nations would have a version in their own language. The Italian version, which is the same for both, was obviously the binding one. There is no doubt that the Italian version was dictated by the Russians; for one thing, they had just won the war and they were laying down the terms. But there is even a linguistic piece of evidence: the Italian text of the treaty refers to the Ottoman Sultan by his title *Padishah*, but writes it *Padishag*; only a Russian would write a *g* for an *h*. *Padishag* in Italian shows beyond all doubt that the Italian was translated from a Russian original.

There was an agreed Italian text, which is the presumed basis of both the Russian and Turkish versions. Yet the Russians used the Russian version and the Turks used the Turkish version, and quite considerable discrepancies appear between the two, both nominally based on the same Italian text.

A second example is the treaty of friendship signed in 1971 between the Soviet Union and the United Arab Republic. According to the text of the treaty, it was drawn up in two languages—Russian and Arabic, of equal validity. Unlike many other treaties, this has no agreed common version. Both Moscow and Cairo published English translations, but they are markedly different. We do not know in what language the treaty was negotiated and agreed. It may have been Russian or Arabic, with extensive use of interpreters all the way. It cannot have been English, since the Moscow English text is clearly translated from the Russian and the Cairo English text is clearly translated from the Arabic.

There are a number of significant differences between them:¹¹ let me quote just one. Article 7 says that in the event of a threat to peace or a violation of peace, the two contracting parties would contact each other in order—in the Moscow English version ‘to concert their positions’, in the Cairo version ‘to coordinate their stands’. Obviously, there is a considerable difference, even in diplomatic language, between ‘concert their positions’ and ‘coordinate their stands’. Both translations are

¹¹ See further Bernard Lewis, ‘Orientalist notes on the Soviet-United Arab Republic Treaty of 27 May 1971’, in *Princeton Papers in Near Eastern Studies*, 2 (1993), 57–65.

accurate. The Russian text reads *soglasovanie svoikh pozitsii* ‘concertation of their positions’—the same formula as is used in the protocol signed between Moscow and Paris a few months earlier, in October 1970—that is, something definitely short of an alliance. The Arabic text says *Tansiq mawqifayhimā* ‘coordination of their stands’. ‘*Tansiq*’ is a very strong word, used of coordinating committees. It implies direction and control, not just *soglasovanie* (singing in harmony).

Today, the dragoman has given way to the highly trained professional translator, a member of an immense and still rapidly growing profession. Despite the widespread use and understanding of a few major languages, translators are now more in demand than ever before. Bodies like the United Nations and the European Union require that speeches and documents be translated into all the official languages. Sometimes even purely domestic speeches and documents must be translated, in countries with more than one official language.

For the official translator, elegance is of no significance. What matters is accuracy. But even today, startling discrepancies may sometimes arise. Thus, for example, Article (i) of Security Council Resolution 242 of 22 November 1967 requires the ‘withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict’. The omission of the definite article before ‘territories’ has usually been taken to mean that the required withdrawal relates to some but not necessarily all of the territories in question. This fine but crucial distinction is lost in both the French and Russian versions. The French text includes the definite article, since French grammar requires it. The Russian text omits the definite article, since in Russian none exists. The Arabic translation, for both stylistic and political reasons, includes the article, but at that time Arabic was not an official UN language.

In translating and interpreting official documents, the purpose is not to evoke aesthetic appreciation but accurately—and in some but not all situations unequivocally—to convey the meaning of the original. In such translations the issues are not literary or linguistic, but political and even military.

Speed of movement and ease of communication have greatly increased both the range and scope of the translator’s work, and the need for his services. The impact of these new methods and opportunities can be seen in literary as well as bureaucratic translation. In this century the craft of the literary translator has flourished as never before, and more texts of more kinds are being translated from more languages into more languages than at any time in history. The Bible,

still easily the most translated book, is constantly reaching ever new readers in ever new languages, in some of which a Bible translation is the first text ever committed to writing. With the growth of literacy and the improvement in communication, works of literature rapidly become known far outside their place of origin, and books are being translated into an ever-widening range of languages. In countries using lesser-known languages, a majority of the books offered for sale in bookshops are translations from other languages. Even in countries using a major world language, a significant proportion of new publications are translated from other languages, including some previously little-known languages. The first to benefit from this were the Scandinavians. Nineteenth-century writers like the Norwegian Henrik Ibsen, the Swede August Strindberg, the Dane Hans Andersen and Søren Kierkegaard, were able, through translation, to achieve world fame. Others, geographically, linguistically, and culturally less accessible than the Scandinavians, took a little longer—but only a little. The twentieth century brought such previously hidden talents as the Czech Karel Čapek and, most recently, the Albanian Ismail Kadare before a world audience.

The literary consensus on the quality of translation is on the whole pessimistic. As far back as the seventeenth century, the English writer James Howell remarked that some held translations to be ‘not unlike . . . the wrong side of a Turkish tapestry’. In the nineteenth century George Borrow sadly remarked that ‘translation is at best an echo’. A similar sentiment inspired the Turkish poet Ahmet Hashim who, when asked what was the essence of poetry, replied: ‘That which is lost in translation.’ A French wit is quoted as likening translations to wives—‘some are beautiful, some are faithful, few are both’. A classical Italian phrase sums it up: ‘Traduttore traditore’—translator, traitor.¹²

¹² An abridged version of this lecture was published in *The Times Literary Supplement* of 23 April 1999.