

2. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF TRANSLATION

The purpose of this chapter is threefold: First, to give you a bird's-eye view of the history of translation since the beginning of time; second, to show you how universal translation is, encompassing every corner of the earth; and third, to make you realize how important translation is to human progress.

In the history of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic world, there are three key periods which have determined and defined those three civilizations, and all three periods are characterized by a high level of activity in the field of translation. The first is the beginning of the Christian era, at which time many languages, most important among them Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek and Latin, interacted to create the new Christian civilization and the transformed Judaic civilization. The second begins with the birth of Islam in the seventh century, and culminates in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, notably in the city of Toledo, Spain, where Christian, Muslim and Jewish scholars and translators from all parts of Europe and the Middle East undertook the enormous task of translating the Greek and Arabic classics into the new languages of Europe, and, in effect, laid the foundation of those new languages and cultures, providing the bridge to the Renaissance and the Modern World. The third key period is today. All the major civilizations of the world are at present in a state of flux. The world as a whole is being transformed as never before in recorded history, and at the same time languages are being transformed, and translation has taken on a new significance unlike anything since the end of the Middle Ages.

Translation is one of the oldest occupations in the world. One of the earliest dictionaries known to us was discovered a few years ago by Italian archeologists in the ancient town of Ebla, in the Middle East. It dates back anywhere between 6,000 and 10,000 years, to the dawn of civilization. It is chiseled in clay tablets, using a writing method known as cuneiform. There, on the face of the tablet, are two parallel columns of

words, in two different ancient tongues, related to taxation (tax-collecting is also one of the oldest occupations).

Before there was writing there was speaking. Neighboring tribes and nations have always spoken different dialects and even totally different languages. And yet they had to talk to each other in order to engage in trade, to threaten each other, and, after the folly of fighting was over, to talk peace. To do this, they needed oral interpreters, those linguistically gifted individuals who had managed to master one or more tongues other than their own. From the beginning of time, those interpreters were considered an important asset for the community, or for the leader of the tribe or nation. They played a vital role in both trade and in the affairs of state. Quite often, they became confidants of the ruler, and enjoyed special privileges.

There was, however, a downside to the life of the interpreter. Since the interpreter was often at the center of important events, taking part in crucial negotiations and decisions, if things went wrong, if a deal failed, or, worse yet, a battle was lost, the interpreter was often used as a scapegoat. Examples of this unfortunate turn of events abound throughout the history of interpretation as well as translation. Writing, as was mentioned before, has been around for at least 10,000 years, probably longer. In ancient Egypt, the court scribe was one of the most important officers of the Pharaoh's court. He was a

Translators, humble servants of knowledge, often nameless, seldom acknowledged, more erred against than erring, forever looking for the right word.

Where would we be without them? How would we in the West enjoy the Rubaiyat without Fitzgerald? How would Europe know the Bible without St. Jerome? How would nations interact, how would they enrich each other's culture and language without their translators and interpreters?

Anonymous

highly cultivated person, and most likely knew more than one language. In the Old Testament there is no clear distinction between the scribe and the interpreter or translator. When the Assyrians lay siege to Jerusalem, a Hebrew scribe served as an interpreter between the Hebrew-speaking Judeans and their Aramean-speaking enemies.

Humans beings have long been fascinated, intrigued and even intimidated by the great variety of languages and dialects in the world. This phenomenon is reflected in the legends and oral traditions of nearly every culture. The biblical story of the tower of Babel is a case in point. Originally, according to this story, everyone spoke the same language. Then people became so presumptuous that they began to build a tower reaching into heaven. Subsequently, the tower was destroyed and the mortals were punished by being made to speak many different languages. In the late nineteenth century, a new language called Esperanto was created by Ludwig Zamenhoff, intended to be the international language. It has enjoyed a certain measure of success, but only among small circles of scholars. In our time, however, the language that comes closest to being an international language is English. Be that as it may, the other languages of the world will not be disappearing any time soon. Clearly, in an ideal world there will be no need for translators, or, for that matter, for physicians, lawyers, as well as hundreds of other occupations. But in the real world we need all of them.

Translating the Bible

The history of translation, not unlike the history of culture itself, begins with religion and eventually leads into secular culture. Language has always been a critical element of religion. To every culture, its language has always been sacred. It was the means of maintaining and transmitting traditions, and of communicating with the higher powers. Therefore, the issue of translating one's sacred writings and prayers into another language was always a very critical decision, which was never taken lightly. It took the Catholic Church centuries before it decided in the 1960s to allow celebrating Mass in the vernacu-

lar, rather than in Latin. Jews and Muslims, on the other hand, still consider praying in languages other than Hebrew and Arabic, respectively, questionable.

The Judeo-Christian-Muslim world derives its culture from a common source, namely, a set of books originally written in Hebrew, known to Christians as the Old Testament, to Muslims as the Holy Books, and to Jews as the Tanakh (acronym for Torah, Prophets and Writings). The Hebrew Bible was created over a period of some one thousand years, roughly 1300-300 B.C. By the time it was completed, its originators had begun to disperse around the Middle East, and spoke several languages other than Hebrew, including Aramaic and Greek. The original Hebrew text became canonized, hence sacred, but for practical purposes it had to be recited and written in the Aramaic so that masses of believers in places like Babylonia, Syria and even Palestine could understand it. Thus, several Aramaic translations of the Scriptures emerged, of which the most celebrated is the one attributed to Onkelos.

While Jewish life and learning flourished in and around Babylonia, with Aramaic as its main language, a major Jewish community prospered in Alexandria, Egypt. Here the dominant culture was Greek, and the main language spoken by the Jews was Greek. This gave rise to the first great translation of the Hebrew Bible, known as the Septuagint. While attributed to Ptolemy II, the Greek king of Egypt, it was most likely originally created to serve the needs of the Jewish community of Alexandria. The Septuagint was to play a crucial role in the development of Christianity. It was, in effect, the conduit through which Hebrew beliefs and civilization reached the pagan world about to become Christian and, despite its imperfections, it continued to exert influence on the development of such diverse Christian cultural and linguistic groups as the Ethiopic and Coptic in Africa, the Slavonic in Eastern Europe, and on the rest of Europe through the Latin versions of the Catholic Church.

No translator in history achieved greater honor and acclaim than St. Jerome (347-419), the patron saint of translators in the Catholic Church. Jerome translated both the Greek and Hebrew

versions of the Bible into Latin, and produced the Vulgate, the standard Bible of the Church for the next thousand years. Throughout his life in Europe and in the Middle East, translation was his great passion, and despite adversity, he managed to leave the Church a vast corpus of translations and commentaries which were pivotal for the development of Christian civilization.

From a linguistic standpoint, an even more remarkable story related to the development of language and culture is the story of the two brothers, St. Cyril and St. Methodius. The two are credited with introducing Christianity to the Slavic world in the ninth century. To do so, they actually had to devise a new alphabet, based on Greek characters, which eventually became the Cyrillic alphabet, used today in Russia and other Slavic countries. They translated the Holy Scriptures into the language later known as Old Church Slavonic, and in effect laid the foundation for the Slavic cultures.

The ninth century also saw the beginning of Bible translation into English under Alfred the Great, into French under Charlemagne, founder of the Holy Roman Empire, and into German through the efforts of von Weissenburg and others. Here again, biblical translation is closely linked to the development of national cultures during this pivotal period in European history.

However, the great impetus for Bible translation in Europe came immediately after the Reformation in the sixteenth century. The main force behind it was Martin Luther, who not only broke away from Rome and helped establish Protestantism, but also paid close attention to the principles of translation, and to the establishment of the German language as a functional language, ready to pick up where Latin had left off. Indeed, some of Luther's basic translation principles, such as paying close attention to the transmission of meaning to the target language, and the emphasis on clarity and simplicity of translation, have remained valid to this day.

The impact of Luther's translation of the Bible was soon felt in other parts of Europe. Translations of Scriptures were soon to follow in Danish, Norwegian, Swedish and Icelandic,

as well as in Slavic languages such as Slovene, Serbian (and Croatian, which is basically the same language), and Czech. The Kralice Bible in the Czech language (1579-1593) is considered the greatest example of classical Czech. All these translations made a seminal contribution to the development of the national cultures of these peoples.

The history of biblical translation in England is particularly fascinating. While it has its beginning with Alfred the Great in the ninth century (as was mentioned before)—the same Alfred who actually rescued the English language from foreign invaders such as the Danes, and ensured its future—it is once again in the sixteenth century that biblical translation in England reached the level of high drama. In the spirit of the time, affected by both the Reformation and the invention of the printing press, the scholar William Tyndall who was at home in both Greek and Hebrew (and a few other languages), translated both the Old and the New Testaments into English, with a view to replacing the Latin, which he considered less adequate for conveying the Bible to his people than their native tongue. Tyndall, who like Luther (whom he met in Germany) put an emphasis on clarity, also emphasized good functional English, which he helped fashion. Politically, however, he was out of favor with the “powers that be” (an expression coined by Tyndall) in England, and had to flee to Belgium where Charles V’s hitmen reached him and managed to have him strangled *and* burned at the stake.

Human rulers can kill people, but they cannot destroy ideas. Despite the concerted effort in England to eliminate Tyndall’s work, including the efforts of Henry VIII, who broke off with Rome and reintroduced the English Bible, which was largely Tyndall’s work, without giving the martyred scholar any credit, it survived all the vicissitudes of the sixteenth century. In fact, when what became the Authorized Version of the Bible in England, namely, the King James Version was published in 1611, the product of some 54 scholars, it was largely Tyndall’s translation. This version marks a cultural as well as a religious turning point in English history. Together with the work of Shakespeare, it stands at the apex of English

culture. Ironically, the authorship of both the Bard’s plays and the King James Scriptures has been disputed, distorted, claimed and reclaimed for the past four centuries.

The history of Bible translations is similarly intertwined with the development of national languages and cultures throughout the rest of Europe and many other parts of the world. The Bible is the most translated book in the world, having been translated into over 2000 languages and dialects. Every year new translations of the Bible appear all over the world. The American writer Ernest Hemingway said that he learned to write by reading the Bible. My suggestion to aspiring translators—as well as to seasoned ones—is to keep reading the Bible, not only because of its timeless message, but because of its genius for clarity, brevity, and simplicity, the attributes of all superior translations.

Translation in the East—Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism

In Islam, the Qur’an is considered untranslatable. This is why millions of Indonesian Muslims, for example, study it or use it for worship in the original Arabic, rather than in Indonesian. There are, in effect, hundreds of translations of the Qur’an, but officially they are considered “explanations,” rather than “authorized versions,” as would be the case with the Bible in a country like England. Arabic to the Muslim, like Hebrew to the Jew, is the language of revelation. Having said this, however, it is interesting to note that during the centuries of classical Islam, from roughly the seventh to the thirteenth century, translators played a critical role in making Islam the standard-bearer of civilization as Medieval Europe was sinking into ignorance and backwardness.

Soon after the spread of Islam throughout the Middle East, North Africa and Spain, the new Muslim empire undertook ambitious programs of translating the classics, notably Greek philosophy, astronomy and medicine, giving rise to such prominent translators as Hunayn ibn Ishaq (809-875), one of the early great translators of Baghdad, where translation flourished for the next four centuries (until the Mongolian

conquest). In retrospect, by translating and preserving the works of Aristotle, Plato and other Greek philosophers, poets and scientists, Islamic scholars served as a bridge between antiquity and the modern world. Our scientific world has its roots in ancient Greece and Rome, but many of its branches have grown on the trunk of Islamic culture, which, in addition to transmitting the knowledge of the ancients through translation, added a great deal to it in areas such as mathematics and medicine.

Linguistically, the subcontinent of India is one of the most varied parts of the world, with more than 1500 languages and dialects, with 16 official languages, the most prominent being Hindi and English. The leading religion is Hinduism, but there are also millions of Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains and Parsis. Needless to say, in such a linguistic kaleidoscope, translation is a thriving industry, moving in many different directions. The most translated work of Hinduism is arguably the Bhagavad Gita, originally written in Sanskrit. This religious work has been translated down to our time as a means of promoting the teachings of Hinduism. Some of the more recent notable translations are by Tilak (early twentieth century) into Marathi, and by Mahatma Gandhi (early-mid twentieth century) into Gujarati.

Unlike Hinduism, with Sanskrit as its sacred language, Buddhism is more universal and ecumenical, and has spread its teachings throughout Asia in several languages. The sacred scriptures of Buddhism were translated from Sanskrit into Chinese by the Buddhist monk and pilgrim to India Hsuan-tsang (602-664), one of the great enterprising translators of all time. Upon his return to China, he translated a large body of Buddhist sacred literature, which he had brought back with him after a long journey through mountains and deserts. One of his students in China was the Japanese monk Dosho. While Hsuan-tsang's version of Buddhism proved too esoteric for the Chinese, his disciple Dosho had more luck with it in Japan. After he returned to his native land, Dosho established the

Hosso school, which became the most influential of all the Buddhist schools in Japan.

Translators Opening the Door to the Modern World

The most glorious period in the history of translation is represented by the so-called School of Translators of Toledo, which flourished in that beautiful Spanish city during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Toledo in those years was the crossroads of the cultures of the world, both spatially and temporally. On one side was the Islamic Empire, now nearing the end of its centuries of political and cultural preeminence. On the other side was Christian Europe, striving to emerge from the Middle Ages. And in the middle were the Jews of Spain, experiencing a Golden Age in their own Judaic and Hebraic culture, unlike anything anywhere since biblical and Talmudic times. Best of all, all three religions, usually at odds with one another, enjoyed a prolonged time of peaceful interaction which often accounts for great intellectual achievements.

In Toledo, the cultures of antiquity, preserved in the Arabic language in thousands of volumes, were translated first into Latin and later into the new languages of Europe. This undertaking has been compared to the discovery of the New World.

Translators put a "spin" on history:

What was Adam and Eve's phone number?

Two-eight-(ate?)-one-apple

What did God tell Moses to take for his headache?

Two tablets.

Why did Columbus go to Cuba instead of India?

He figured it would be easier to go to a Spanish-speaking country

In fact, the great discoveries of Columbus and others might never have occurred without the transmission of knowledge and science that took place in Toledo in those years. The modern world as we know it today might not exist. What is truly remarkable about the Toledo school is that it attracted translators from all parts of Europe, the most prominent being the Italian Gerard of Cremona, the Englishman Adelard of Bath, and Herman the German. But most critical of all was the part played by the Spanish Jewish translators of that time, who had the advantage of being equally at home in Muslim and Christian cultures, not to mention their own Judaic culture. The most prominent among them was the ibn Tibbon family, a dynasty of translators. The founder, Yehudah ibn Tibbon, has been called "patriarch of translators." His monument stands to this day in Granada, Spain. His grandson, Moses, translated Arabic works, helping disseminate Greek and Arab culture throughout Europe. The ibn Tibbon dynasty remains to this day the exemplary translators of Judaism, not only because of their great cultural achievements, but because they formulated a theory of translation, based on the knowledge of the source and target languages as well as the knowledge of the subject matter, which has remained valid to this day.

Translation in the New World

The story of translation in the New World is, for the most part, not a happy one. During the age of the Great Discoveries, great explorers such as Columbus, Pizarro, Cortés and others came into contact with new, hitherto unknown cultures and languages, those of the natives of the New World and other parts of the globe. Here again interpreters became the bridge between the white man and the other races. Cortés, the conqueror of Mexico, might have failed in his ruthless mission had it not been for a local native woman who served as his interpreter. The same was true of many other conquerors and discoverers. The great civilization of the ancient Maya of Central America was made known to us through the translation into Spanish of such Mayan classics as the *Popol Vú*.

The conquest of new worlds by the nations of Europe did not, however, result in an attitude of respect on the part of the conquerors towards the conquered, whereby the languages of the latter might have been studied by the former, and their oral or written traditions translated into such languages as Spanish, English, French and so on. Instead, the colonizers looked upon their new subjects as heathens whose language and culture were worthless, and imposed their own language, culture and religion on those who survived the many massacres inflicted upon them by their enlightened conquerors. It would not be until many years later that valuable cultural assets, such as Indian dialects of North America, African languages, and many other oral and written traditions, would be treated with respect, studied, and translated, as is finally beginning to happen in our time, in some cases after the originators of those cultures have all but disappeared.

Nor, for that matter, is the history of translation in the United States particularly uplifting. The European colonists who settled this continent had little need for translation, and soon developed an insular attitude still reflected to this day in the political attitudes of American isolationists. No one has characterized this attitude better than Mark Twain in the celebrated exchange between Huck Finn and Jim, in which the runaway slave wonders why the French can't speak "like the rest of us." One of the great anomalies of American life to this day is the fact that while no other country in history has had a more culturally varied population coexisting as effectively as the population of the United States, translation has a long way to go to become as well established here as it is in other parts of the world.

The Twentieth Century

Translation in the present century has seen some good times and some bad times. Translation has fared the worst under totalitarian regimes such as Fascism, Communism, and Nazism. The history of Communist Russia, Fascist Italy, and Nazi Germany abounds with the suppression and persecution of

translators. A more recent totalitarian regime, namely, that of Iran, has engaged in active terrorism against translators, in this case against the translators of the Indian-born British author Salman Rushdie, one of whom was murdered by Iranian agents, and the other wounded.

When the Republic of Ireland was formed in 1922, a major translation program was launched which sought to revive the use and study of the Irish language, or Gaelic. Since the English language and culture had already been deeply entrenched in Ireland, to this day the dominant language remains English. But the example of Ireland is being emulated at present throughout the world.

Another national language that was reintroduced programmatically to both daily life and literature is Hebrew, the same biblical Hebrew we have encountered at the dawn of civilization, now transformed by many old and new cultural influences. Israeli Hebrew is one of the great linguistic success stories of all time. Not only has it become the spoken language of several million people who arrived in the new state from over 100 different countries, but, using American English as its working model, it is constantly adding current expressions as well as technical and scientific terminology which has enabled the new society to use Hebrew in all fields of contemporary science and technology.

As the twentieth century comes to a close, two linguistic phenomena are clearly dominant. The first is the growing incursion of American English into nearly all the languages of the world, mostly because of American pop culture and high tech. This is bound to have a lasting effect on languages in general in the next century. The second phenomenon is the reemergence of national languages throughout the world. Until a few years ago the Soviet Union, encompassing many nations and cultures, conducted all its affairs in one language: Russian. With the breakup of the USSR, there are now dozens of official languages all the way from the Baltic Sea to the Far East. In Africa many languages are emerging as well, but there the trends are still hard to define. What is clear at this time is that linguistic diversity as well as a growing influence of one

international language, namely, English, should characterize the beginning of the next century.

What all of this means for translators is that we are standing on the threshold of a new golden age for translation, not unlike the one in Spain at the end of the Middle Ages. There is a new cultural openness in today's world, brought about by several factors, the most notable being the end of the Cold War between the West and the former Communist Bloc, the incredible progress in global communications, including such technologies as satellite communications, computers, modem, fax, e-mail, and the Internet, and the fast-growing international trade throughout the entire world, as well as the new international awareness of many languages and cultures that for centuries were subjugated and suppressed. The world today, rather than being dominated by a few colonialist languages such as French, English or Spanish, is finally reaching a stage of linguistic and cultural—albeit not quite yet social and economic—equality, whereby literally hundreds of languages and dialects are beginning to play a part in the global tapestry of human interaction. As a result, hundreds of new dictionaries are being published all over the world, language courses are being offered everywhere in an unprecedented number of languages, and the demand for competent translators is growing at a steady rate.

In conclusion, as the twenty-first century begins to unfold, the role of the translator will once again, as happened before during ancient and pre-modern history, become critical in shaping history and helping civilization make the transition into the next age.