

**Discours prononcé par Ingrid KURZ, lauréate du Prix Danica Seleskovitch
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Danica Seleskovitch Prize 2012

Acceptance speech, Ingrid Kurz

Dear colleagues, friends, family, distinguished audience,

First of all, permit me to express my profound gratitude to the jury for awarding me this prestigious prize. My thanks also go to the Association Danica Seleskovitch and to those who have suggested me for this award. The news was a wonderful surprise that left me almost speechless. After all, the Danica Seleskovitch Prize in the interpreting profession is tantamount to the Oscar, the Pulitzer Prize or the Nobel Prize in other domains. I am absolutely thrilled, all the more so because I am receiving this award for something I have thoroughly enjoyed doing throughout my professional life – interpreting, teaching and research. When looking at the list of previous laureates, of course, I realize that I am standing on the shoulders of giants, which also makes me feel very humble. For me, as for so many others, Danica Seleskovitch's writings have always been an inspiration and I keep quoting her in my own publications. Danica Seleskovitch was the first one to ask me for a copy of my PhD thesis and was also on the jury for my "Habilitation".

I had the privilege of meeting Danica Seleskovitch on the occasion of the Xth World Congress of FIT, which was held in Vienna in 1984. Even though, to my knowledge, the history of interpreting was none of her research topics, she introduced her presentation on that occasion with a reference to the past and stated that there were times when bilinguals who – throughout history and throughout the world - have served as interpreters were running the risk of having their tongue torn out because they were accused of „speaking in two tongues” and therefore not being trustworthy. They were suspected of duplicity and deceit.

“De tous temps et partout, celui qui savait plusieurs langues servait de truchement à ceux qui n'en savaient qu'une. Cela n'allait pas toujours sans danger puisque les vieilles chroniques rapportent qu'il arrivait aux interprètes d'être châtiés de leur double langage et de se voir arracher la langue pour les punir d'en avoir deux. *Double langage* en français, (*Doppelzüngigkeit* comme on dit aussi en allemand), désigne la duplicité et la fourberie (...).”
Since one of my fields of research has been the history of our profession, permit me to take you on

An eclectic journey through the history of interpreting.

Please join me in looking at roughly 4500 years of history. It all started with the confusion of tongues and the Tower of Babel, of course.

Our knowledge of the past performance of interpreters is derived from a variety of sources, many of which were only marginally or incidentally concerned with interpreting. Scribes, chroniclers and historians selected what was to be recorded and what was not. Anecdotes were handed down from one writer to another. Because of the absence of reliable records some blanks will probably never be filled. This is particularly true for those periods when power relations conferred prestige on one particular language to the detriment of others. But even though we have piecemeal records only, there is ample testimony showing that the interpreters of the past - whether they chose the profession or were chosen by it - have not only been witnesses of history but have helped shaping history.

What can we hope to learn from research into our profession? One of the questions that we can hope to find answers to is: Who were our professional ancestors? We will see that they

came from highly diverse backgrounds: Some were slaves, ethnic hybrids or women who formed a special subcaste; others were princes or highly esteemed court interpreters. Some were praised and renowned or considered heroes, while others were accused of misinterpretation or regarded as traitors. Most of them have remained anonymous, but there are some whose names are known. I will show you a few examples in the next twenty minutes or so.

Ancient Egypt

The Egyptians tended to look down on other nations and their languages. In spite of their ethnocentric cultural and linguistic prejudices, however, they could not ignore alien languages altogether and in their trade relations with other peoples, e.g., had to rely on the services of interpreters.

Some of the earliest records of the use of interpretation can be found in the rock tombs of the Princes of Elephantine, which go back to the third millennium B.C. The inscriptions on the walls tell us about the dealings of the Egyptians of the Sixth Dynasty with Nubia. The Princes of Elephantine, who were probably half Nubian themselves, became „*overseers of dragomans*” because they lived in a bilingual border region of Pharaonic Egypt. They were put in charge of trade and military expeditions to Nubia and Sudan.

By the way, the Egyptians had a hieroglyphic signifying „interpreting”.

A bas-relief from the tomb of Haremhab, a general who later on succeeded Tutankhamen as pharaoh (1333-1306 B.C.) shows the dual figure of an interpreter. The tomb was discovered early in the 19th century, dismantled, and many of the blocks were sold. The fragment showing the interpreter is in the Rijksmuseum Van Oudheden in Leyden, Netherlands. The double image of the interpreter clearly indicates his role as a mediator between the high dignitary on the left and a group of foreigners in positions of humility on the right. He is shown listening to the foreigners and conveying their pleas to Haremhab, who in turn will convey them to the pharaoh. The interpreter is much smaller than Haremhab, reflecting his lower social status. Above the interpreter's head is a raised surface which had been prepared for the words spoken to or by him, much like the bubble in a cartoon, but was never filled. The reason is that the tomb was never completed because when Haremhab became king he was given a tomb in Thebes.

The ancient Greeks, too, had little respect for the languages of other nations, referring to them as „barbarian”, but like the Egyptians they could not do without interpreters. In the course of his campaigns, which took him as far as India, Alexander the Great had to rely time and again on interpreters to communicate with the various peoples he conquered or who became his allies.

Ancient Rome

The works of classical authors, such as Livy, Caesar, Cicero, Horace and Pliny, are a rich source of information on language policy in ancient Rome.

Unlike the ancient Egyptians and Greeks, the Romans were often bilingual. To be fluent in Greek was considered a requirement for the educated citizen. Children often learned Greek from slave girls as their first language. Individuals who spoke several languages and did not require an interpreter were accorded particular respect.

Pliny considered those who were not dependent on *interpretes* fortunate: *Felices illos quorum fides et industria non per internuntios et interpretes ... probantur!*

Roman authors also gave thought to the rules governing translating and interpreting. Cicero writes that only an inexperienced *interpres* translates word for word, and Horace continues in the same vein: *nec converti ut interpres; non verbum pro verbo*.

The most important areas where interpreters were required were government, military uses and trade.

Interpreters were essential for official contacts with foreign representatives and for administrative dealings with Egyptians, Syrians, Scythians, Germans, Celts, etc. Interpreters accompanied Roman governors and other representatives on official business in the provinces. They were either paid by the state or directly by the official himself. Sometimes the interpreters were brought from Rome; frequently, however, they were recruited locally. Latin was the official language in the provinces. Even when Roman officials were fluent in the local language, interpreters would be used for communication with the indigenous population for reasons of national pride. Frequently, their presence was not essential for comprehension, but was used as a means to accentuate the distance vis-à-vis the barbarians and to enhance the dignitary's own prestige.

Some monuments with inscriptions referring to these interpreters in the provincial administration have survived, such as a sarcophagus from the Budapest region commissioned by Marcus Ulpius Celerinus, an interpreter working for the first legion.

Interpreters, of course, 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. Let me give you a few examples.

Livy recounts how a prince from Gaul resorts to the services of an interpreter to challenge a Roman to a duel.

Letters from Hasdrubal to Hannibal, intercepted by the Romans, were immediately translated for the Roman Claudius Nero by a Punic interpreter (an early example of sight translation). Army interpreters could also be required to officiate during peace negotiations. During the peace negotiations in 202 B.C., Scipio and Hannibal met unarmed, and with only interpreters present – one of the first recorded interpreted summit meetings.

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

To summarize, Rome recognized the need to transact business in foreign languages, and classical writers attest to the use of interpretation in conducting the affairs of State.

Interpretation was practiced as a profession, with recruits commonly being drawn from the provinces of the far-flung empire. Interpretation was not always used to enhance communication, however; it was, on occasion, used to enhance prestige.

A fictitious interpreter by the telling name of Cloridrique even made it into the comics. In *Astérix et les Goths*, the treacherous interpreter deliberately mistranslates the Druid's statement in an effort to save his own skin.

Spreading the word of God

William of Rubruck was a Flemish Franciscan missionary and explorer. On May 7, 1253, on the orders of King Louis IX (Saint Louis), he set out from Constantinople on a missionary journey to Asia to convert the Tartars to Christianity. He traveled through Southern Russia and across the Don River as far as Karakorum and was received by the Great Khan, the predecessor of Kubla Khan. Rubruck was accompanied by another Franciscan monk, Bartholomew of Cremona, a clerk named Gosset, and an interpreter – *turgemannus* – called Homo Dei (i.e. Abdullah). Unfortunately, the interpreter turned out to be incompetent and unreliable and Rubruck felt hampered in fulfilling his mission. There are numerous entries in his diary complaining about the interpreter's inefficiency and lack of loyalty.

„I was distressed because I could do no preaching to them. The interpreter would say to me, ‘You cannot make me preach. I do not know the proper words to use.’ And he spoke the truth. For after a while, when I had learned something of the language, I saw that, when I said one thing, he said a totally different one according to what came uppermost in his mind. So, seeing the danger of speaking through him, I made up my mind to keep silence.”

After a 9000 km journey with oxen, carts and on horseback, they reached the court of the Great Khan at Karakorum.

On January 4, 1254, William of Rubruck was given an audience by Mangu, the Khan. Again, the interpreter failed on this important occasion.

„He had us asked what we wanted to drink (...) I replied, ‚My Lord, we are not men who seek to satisfy our fancies about drinks. Whatever pleases you, will suit us.’ So he had us given of the rice drink, which was clear and flavored like white wine and of which I tasted a little out of respect for him. But, for our misfortune, our interpreter was standing by the butlers, who gave him so much to drink that he was drunk in a short time.”

Discoveries and conquests

Christopher Columbus and his interpreters

When the great Genoese, Portuguese and Spanish navigators, conquistadores and explorers set out on their voyages and expeditions, they generally enlisted „interpreters”, i.e. people who had picked up Arabic or other languages by living in the foreign countries. References can be found in a great variety of archives of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Christopher Columbus was but one among many who believed one could reach the Orient by sailing directly westward. So, when in August 1492 he set out on the expedition that led to the discovery of America, he, too, was careful to include a few men in his crew who would be able to converse in Arabic. As it turned out, however, they were of no use in the New World. Columbus’ logbook contains several entries referring to the use of interpretation and the overcoming of language problems, with specific mention of an interpreter by the name of Luis de Torres, who spoke Arabic, Hebrew and Chaldean. As it turned out, he had all the wrong languages and thus clearly failed as an interpreter. His mission was not altogether in vain, however. He came back with the first authentic report of a strange habit of the „Indians” – the smoking of tobacco.

On October 12, 1492, Columbus landed on San Salvador. On that day, the Admiral noted the following in his logbook: “On my return I shall take six of these men with me in order to show them to the King and the Queen. Besides, they are to learn our language.” Taking captured natives back to Europe, showing them to the people at home, converting them to Christianity, teaching them Spanish and using them as interpreters on future expeditions was common practice at the time.

Columbus’ logbook entry for October 14 is more specific: “We took seven natives aboard the *Santa Maria*. Luis de Torres shall endeavor to teach them Castilian so that we can use them as interpreters.”

It seems, however, that not all of the natives Columbus had selected were particularly tempted by the prospect of undergoing interpreter training and being presented to Spanish monarchs. They were by no means willing to exchange their island for a voyage to Spain, as testified by a logbook entry on October 16: Two of the natives Columbus had intended to turn into interpreters jumped overboard. Columbus let them go for fear of losing the natives’ friendship.

On November 12, Columbus again commented on the difficulty of communicating with the natives: „Communicating with the natives is difficult because on each of the islands a different language is spoken.”

Having realized that the first load of prospective interpreters he had taken aboard on San Salvador might not be sufficient to overcome language barriers in the „Indies“, Columbus made sure to recruit additional natives from other islands. Accordingly, on November 21, he noted in his diary: „From the islands I took several natives on board – seven men, seven women and three boys – in order to take them to Spain.” Having learned from previous experience, he had the men’s wives put aboard the *Santa Maria* to make sure the men would not try to escape.

On his subsequent voyages Columbus was to benefit from the interpreting services of one of the natives captured on the first voyage and taken back to Spain – a young man who was christened Diego Colón and was taught to understand and speak Castilian.

Doña Marina (c. 1496 ? or c. 1505 ? – 1529)

Doña Marina, who is also known as Malinche or Malintzin, is one of the best known native interpreters who served conquerors and discoverers and is regarded as one of the chief figures in the Spanish conquest of Mexico.

She was born as the daughter of a *cacique*, i.e. a nobleman, in what was then a „frontier region” between the Aztec empire and the Mayan states on the Yucatan peninsula. Her father died when she was still young. Her mother remarried and had a son. Determined that her son should be the heir to her first husband’s estate, Malinche’s mother sold her into slavery. She was one of 20 slave women given to Cortez by the natives of Tabasco in 1519 after the Spaniards had defeated them. Her age at the time is unknown, but it is assumed that she was in her teens or in her early twenties.

Cortez had a Spanish priest in his crew: Geronimo de Aguilar, who - after having been shipwrecked – had spent several years in captivity among the Maya peoples in Yucatan. He had learned some Mayan, but did not speak Nahuatl (the common language of central Mexico at that time). Initially, Cortez used Marina for translating between Nahuatl, the Aztec language, and Mayan. Aguilar would then interpret from Mayan into Spanish. (An early example of relay interpreting.) However, Marina learned Spanish very quickly, so a relay interpreter was no longer needed. She became the sole interpreter. In addition to translating, she provided Cortez with insight into the Aztec culture.

She became Cortez’ mistress and gave birth to his son Martin, who is considered one of the first *mestizos* (people of mixed European and indigenous American ancestry).

In his *True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, Bernal Diaz del Castillo speaks repeatedly and reverentially about the “great lady”, always using her honorific title „Doña”. He writes: „Without the help of Doña Marina we would not have understood the language of New Spain and Mexico“

In Aztec codices, such as the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* (History of Tlaxcala), Cortez is rarely portrayed without Malinche at his side. She is depicted as tall, if not taller, than he. She is also shown at times on her own, directing events as an independent authority. She was Cortez’ „tongue” and „ears”. As such, she held a position of considerable power.

Following the conquest of Mexico, Marina accompanied Cortez on an expedition to Honduras (1524 – 1526). She never became Cortez’ legal wife since he was married to a Spanish woman, but Cortez acknowledged her son by him and provided for his education. He married her to Juan de Caramillo, one of his soldiers, and gave her several estates. She and her husband faded into anonymity. The circumstances and date of her death are unknown. Her accomplishments are best summarized in Cortez’ statement: „After God we owe this conquest of New Spain to Doña Marina.”

Until this day, Doña Marina remains one of the most influential and controversial figures in the history of the Americas. She overcame the bonds of slavery and played a pivotal role in

the conquest of Mexico. Whether she is seen as a traitor to her people and culture or as a heroine, she was definitely an extraordinary woman.

The treacherous Felipillo (1508? or 1510? – 1535)

Felipillo was a native Peruvian who was one of the youths Pizarro had taken to Spain to learn Spanish so that they might serve him on his return as interpreters. He returned to Peru with Pizarro and accompanied him and Diego de Almagro on their various expeditions.

In 1532, Pizarro landed at Tumbez and ascended the Andes to Cajamarca, where the Inca ruler, Atahualpa, awaited him. Professing friendship, Pizarro lured Atahualpa into the Spanish camp, seized him, exacted a stupendous ransom, and then treacherously had him executed. Felipillo was one of Atahualpa's worst enemies. He had fallen in love with one of Atahualpa's concubines, and his intrigue with her had become a source of gossip. In Atahualpa's eyes, Felipillo was a man without rank in the Inca hierarchy, an upstart of the worst type, mean and arrogant. Felipillo soon learned the state of the ruler's feelings towards himself, and from that moment regarded him with deadly hatred.

Felipillo's interpreting skills seem to have been rather mediocre. When the Dominican friar Vicente de Valverde – with his breviary in one hand and a crucifix in the other – explained, as clearly as he could, the mysterious doctrine of the Trinity, Felipillo, according to Garcilasso de Vega, explained it by saying that „the Christians believed in three Gods and one God, and that made four.“

Worse, though, he deliberately misinterpreted Pizarro's messages to Atahualpa, which led the Inca ruler to speak in unflattering terms about Catholic doctrine, the Bible, and the presence of the Spanish in his land and thus excited rumors that the Inca was making secret preparations for the destruction of the invaders. Atahualpa was brought to trial. Again, Felipillo's interpretation was far from faithful. Prescott in *History of the Conquest of Peru* writes that Indian witnesses' „testimony, filtrated through the interpretation of Felipillo (...) received a very different coloring from that of the original.“

Atahualpa was found guilty and sentenced to be burnt alive in the great square of Cajamarca. Friar Valverde tried to persuade Atahualpa to accept baptism, promising that if he did so the painful death by burning would be commuted to death by the garrote, a mode of punishment causing immediate death by strangulation. To save himself from the torture of the flames, Atahualpa agreed to renounce his own religion and receive baptism.

Felipillo paid the forfeit of his crimes some time afterwards – being hanged by Almagro on an expedition to Chili – when, as „some say, he confessed having perverted testimony given to Atahualpa's innocence, directly against the monarch“

Conclusions

Historical records show that even though in the distant past no distinction was made between the different types of interpreting, interpreters have always pretty much covered the wide range of assignments that we are confronted with today – (eye-on-eye) summit meetings, liaison interpreting, interpreting in conflict zones, peace negotiations, trade missions involving extensive traveling, etc. There are even early references to sight translation and “embedded” interpreters in the military. In my mind, therefore, the history of interpreting makes interesting reading. I hope I could whet your appetite for it.

Finally, I would like to thank my interpreters. I hope I have not made things too difficult for them.