

In Others' Words.
Foreigners, “Oriental Languages”, and Interpreters
in Venice, Livorno, and Marseilles,
c.1650 - c.1830

The topic

Completely new subject for me, as I wrote my PhD on the Greek communities on Venice, Livorno and Marseilles, 1770-1830s.

While doing this research, I came across different series of documents which I was only able to use marginally within the framework of my dissertation: these included police records, court records, commercial papers and notarial archives involving foreigners in Livorno, Venice and Marseilles from the 17th to the early 19th century.

In a significant share of these documents, the issue of linguistic diversity was made explicit:

- either through the **mention of interpreters**
- or through series of **signs and “clues”** (for instance the use of a distinctly “Oriental” terminology, or the signature in Greek or Arabic writing).

At the start of this new research, the paradox I am facing might be summed up quite simply: **namely, I entered “from the archives” a topic which has a very elusive archival reality.**

- > First of all, **studying language in the Early Modern period means dealing with a mostly oral phenomenon**, which (by definition) has left few written traces and evidence.
- > Second, the **documentation is scarce and very scattered**
- > Last, there is little (if at all) thematic unity: **if you go to the archives, you'll almost never find registers or entries of catalogues on "interpreters"**. And if you do, they'll mostly concern those interpreters that we know the best (for instance official dragomans of the Venetian republic), while I am primarily interested in informal/unofficial forms and actors of linguistic brokerage.

Basically, what I have been doing at the Academy for the last 4 month is to compensate for this archival challenge, by reading [reading, reading] as much as possible of the literature on the topic.

[Briefly sketch a first] State of the art

Briefly point to three directions

1) First direction: **Hegemonic model of literary translation**

Promotes 2 main approaches to on translation:

- **Linguistic approach:** topos of the « *traduttore/traditore* », namely a view on translation as an exercise in fidelity or faithfulness.
- **Semiotic approach:** insightful analysis of Umberto Eco, who dismisses the traditional « fidelity vs. betrayal » paradigm, and argues that **translation is a form of "negotiation" between texts and cultures alike.**

2) Second direction: **Influence of the postmodernist theory**, which focuses on translation and interpretation as forms of cultural adaptation and appropriation.

3) Third direction: **Historiography**

- **Long interest in the issue of literary production and circulation:** in these 2 processes, translation plays a decisive part.
 - > Although I do not consider in my paper and my talk the issue of literary translation, it constitutes a sort of wider “cultural backdrop” of my analysis, all the more since many of the linguistic brokers I came across in my research were involved in both literary translation and day-to-day interpretation.
- Recent interest in the figures of **interpreters as auxiliaries in the process of European political and cultural enterprises.** For instance in the case of:
 - Spaniards in South America
 - > La Malinche **[DIAPO]**, a Mexican slave who acted as a translator for Cortés.
 - Portuguese in South-East Asia
 - Jesuits in China
 - Britons in North America
 - Europeans in Orient
 - > **[DIAPO]** Venetian Great Dragoman Tarsia.

Unlike much of the work that has been carried out before, my project could be dubbed a **social history of interpreters and interpretation.**

And in this presentation, I will try to elaborate a bit further on the 3 themes I suggested at the end of my paper. Namely **[DIAPO]**:

- 1) **The reality of “Oriental” presence in Early Modern Europe**
- 2) **The trends in linguistic brokerage in the Early Modern Mediterranean**
- 3) **The issues of trust and danger in cross-cultural communication**

As both my paper and presentation elaborate on issues such as “the Orient”, “the Ottoman Empire”, “the Maghreb” and “the Mediterranean” [DIAPO], I found it fitting to start my talk by taking you to some truly “exotic” place, namely Switzerland.

The episode I want to tell you takes place in the early 1730s, and involves a young music teacher from Geneva, along with an “Oriental” character, namely a Greek-Orthodox priest from Jerusalem.

In his memoirs, the young man recounts an episode that happened to him while in Boudry, a small Swiss village near Neuchatel [DIAPO]: “One day, being at Boudry, I went to dine at a public-house, where I saw a man with a long beard, dressed in a violet-colored Grecian habit, with a fur cap, and whose air and manner were rather noble. This person found some difficulty in making himself understood, speaking only an unintelligible jargon, which bore more resemblance to Italian than any other language. I understood almost all he said, and I was the only person present who could do so, for he was obliged to make his request known to the landlord and others about him by signs. On my speaking a few words in Italian, which he perfectly understood, he got up and embraced me with rapture; a connection was soon formed, and from that moment, I became his interpreter.”

In my opinion, this simple anecdote tells us a lot about what I call “informal or occasional interpretation”, and which constitutes the focus of my research.

For the sake of clarity, I shall limit myself to 3 brief remarks:

- **First:** If meeting a Greek priest in an early 18th-century Swiss tavern was a rather unusual experience, the contact with “otherness” did not always lead to a cultural shock or clash, and one should therefore beware not to overemphasize the “dramatic” nature of such encounters.

- **Second remark:** When it came to assessing one's identity, language was only one of several markers, other markers being one's costume, manners, and appearance.
- **Third remark:** Cross-cultural communication happened through a variety of means and strategies, including gestures and faulty "two-tier translation" (here through Italian, which none of the two actors spoke very well).

As it appears, **agreeing on a communication strategy was only a first (yet necessary) step towards further (and sometimes unexpected) exchanges.**

As a matter of fact, the young man of this story agreed to accompany the Greek priest on foot to Jerusalem, but actually left him in another Swiss village only 45 miles away from Boudry – Luckily, some might think, as the young man in question, named Jean-Jacques Rousseau [**diapo**], was destined for a more successful career than that of interpreter.

As for the Greek priest, we know nothing of what happened to him, as he probably joined the anonymous crowd of travelers and vagrants (some of them distinctly "Orientals"), who criss-crossed Europe in the Early Modern period.

1. “ORIENTALS” IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE: AN ELUSIVE PRESENCE

In my paper, I have already dealt at some length about the issue or “Oriental-ness”, and I shall briefly summarize my approach to the **question of “Oriental” as both an administrative and an analytical category.**

First and foremost, **the category of “Oriental” collectively refers to cultural, ethnic and national groupings of people who did not necessarily identified themselves as associated.**

Yet, one cannot simply dismiss altogether the category of “Oriental”, as it also referred to a form of cultural “Otherness” that was central to Europe’s perception of the wider world in this period.

And for all its broad and encompassing character, this category left space for a more specific approach of the different components of the “Oriental” populations.

A good example of this **pattern of “diversity-in-unity”** is the *Livornina* charter of 1593 [**DIAPO**], by which the Grand Duke of Tuscany granted political protection and religious tolerance to non-Catholic (and especially Jewish) merchant minorities coming to settle in Livorno. The *Livornina* opens with the following form of address: “*A tutti uoi mercanti di qualsiuoglia natione, leuantini, e ponentini spagnioli, portoghesi, Greci, todeschi, & Italiani, hebrei, turchi, e' Mori, Armenij, Persiani, & altri saluto*”

In the following centuries, the abundant European commercial literature bears the mark of a rising awareness of cultural differences among “Oriental” traders – not only between Arabs, Turks, Jews, Armenians, and Greeks, but also within each of these groups.

This somewhat fragmented picture of “the Orient” is somewhat reflected in the presence of “Oriental” populations in Venice, Livorno, and Marseilles.

I have **no time here to elaborate on the specific context** offered by each of the three cities that I have chosen to study. Rather, I shall try to **group my observations thematically**, and point to three aspects in particular:

A first aspect is the scattered nature of this presence

The various components of the so-called “Oriental” population did not live together, but tended to form small groups based on ethno-religious identity, regional origins, professional activities, etc. Therefore, we are mostly dealing with a variety of small groups and communities, numbering from a dozen to a couple hundred individuals – possibly with the exception of the Jews, who formed larger communities, but who were themselves divided.

A second aspect is the striking over-representation of non-Muslim ethno-religious minorities

Due to their involvement in trading activities with the Levant, Jews, Greeks, and Armenians formed the vast majority of the populations dubbed as “Oriental”.

This granted them a form of visibility within the urban space, which in turned prompted cultural mechanisms such as the (explicit or implicit) association between these minorities and activities of cross-cultural brokerage **[this is a point I made earlier in my paper]**.

A third aspect of the “Oriental” presence is the monitoring of the Muslim minority by Venetian and Livornese authorities, as well as the fact that yhe Muslim presence remained almost invisible in Marseilles.

The early seventeenth century witnessed a significant effort from the side of the Venetian and Livornese authorities both to accommodate and control the Muslim presence.

2 institutions are especially important here:

1) The *Fondaco dei Turchi* in Venice [DIAPO].

Founded in 1621, it was designed to accommodate the so-called “Turkish” merchants, who were compelled to live and carry on their business in the same place [DIAPO].

By “Turchi”, Venice in fact meant all Muslim populations, and the Venetian authorities faced difficulty to house together such a heterogeneous group (for instance the Persians refused to go and live in the *Fondaco*).

2) While the Venetian *Fondaco* was meant to host Muslim merchants, **the Livornese *Bagno delle galere***, built in the early 17th century, was primarily intended to accommodate slaves, a majority of which were Muslims from the Ottoman Empire and North Africa.

A fortified edifice halfway from the city center and the harbor [DIAPO], the *Bagno* had a capacity of no less than 3000 people, and actually housed residents ranging from galley slaves to criminals and political prisoners [DIAPO].

Recent research on both the Venetian *Fondaco dei Turchi* and the Livornese *Bagno* has shown that they shared a common characteristic: namely the fact that **although they were initially intended to be closed spaces, they were sites of active cultural exchanges, which took place both within and outside the walls of each of the two buildings.**

Like its Livornese counterpart, the Arsenal of Marseilles [DIAPO] was also intended to accommodate slaves, many of whom were Muslims from North Africa, and it has even been assumed (yet, never really proven) that it housed a small mosque.

However, and although this Muslim presence is ascertained by scattered archival evidence, it remained extremely elusive and almost invisible all along the Early Modern period, and one does not find trace of a structured Muslim community or group in Marseilles before the 19th century. To find evidences of cross-cultural contacts and brokerage taking place in Marseilles, one therefore has to look at a variety of other places such as the port, the taverns, the inns, etc.

2. LINGUISTIC BROKERAGE IN THE EARLY MODERN MEDITERRANEAN: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

What has emerged so far from my research (and, I hope, from the paper you've read), is a series of points which I'll summarize briefly as follows:

2.1. THE "THREE ILLUSIONS" OF LINGUISTIC BROKERAGE IN THE EARLY MODERN MEDITERRANEAN

First illusion: Pure language

Namely, the **assumption that each language is the exclusive and distinct product of a given culture.**

This might be the case in some cases, for instance that of the relationship between Arabic language and Islamic culture.

Yet, we should beware not to fall into some kind of **"cultural fetishism", in which language would play the role of an abstract unifying entity:** just as groups and societies accommodated linguistic plurality, most of the European and "Oriental" languages we come across on all shores of the Early Modern Mediterranean, still obeyed to rather flexible rules, and referred to somehow elusive cultural traits.

Second illusion: First contact

That is to say, the temptation to somehow **model encounters in the Early Modern Mediterranean on those taking place in other contexts, in which "the Other" is also "the unknown" or "the savage".**

> In this respect, the example of the Spanish conquest of America appears to be especially particularly influent.

On the contrary, **cross-cultural encounters taking place in the Early Modern Mediterranean were the product of centuries of contacts, conflict and cooperation**, and this long coexistence in turn had allowed for a certain familiarity to develop among the actors of these encounters.

Third illusion: Pure interpreter

It consists in seeing interpreters in the Early Modern period in the light of today's ones, namely as **highly-specialized professionals, possibly with a strong literary background, who exclusively dedicated themselves to the task of translating.**

In reality, most of the interpreters we come across in the archives only **occasionally performed** this function, and often did it **along with others activities**, of which interpretation sometimes formed part and parcel – most notably long-distance trade, but also spying, etc.

2.2. TRENDS: STATE INTERVENTION AND AUTONOMIZATION

To be sure, **interpreters have existed since Antiquity**, as ancient states and societies had to accommodate linguistic diversity.

Suffice it to think here of the Rosetta Stone, which bears a decree by Egyptian king Ptolemy the V written in 3 languages: Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, Egyptian demotic script, and Ancient Greek. **[DIAPO]**

So, what makes the specificity of this Early Modern period I keep telling you about?

Basically, I would put forward two arguments:

The first has to do with the role of the state in accommodating language diversity

I already said in my paper that between the 16th and the 17th centuries, the European powers that were most involved in trading with the Levant, **started to train their own interpreters in “Oriental languages”, as well as to rely increasingly on official brokers who worked for them in Istanbul, Izmir, Tunis, or Tripoli.**

In my opinion, this effort is consistent with another one that was produced at the same period in Europe itself, namely the effort to **accommodate multilingualism “at home” through a set of initiatives and structures** – and here, I am referring for instance to the hiring of interpreters by the public administration or the courts of justice of some of the major European cities (and especially port-cities).

My second point is that from the 17th century onwards, interpretation became an increasingly autonomous function.

To be sure, all linguistic brokers occasionally serving in Venice, Marseilles, and Livorno did not become professional interpreters from one day to the next.

Yet, interpretation established itself as a crucial tool for long-distance economic and political exchanges, and linguistic training was increasingly regarded as an essential element in the education of young traders and diplomats alike.

This shift is especially visible in the case of small foreign communities in Europe, which demographic growth allowed for a better specialization (or division of labor) among its members.

> For instance, historian Olivier Raveux noted that in the case of the Armenian community in 17th and 18th century Marseilles, some prominent traders increasingly specialized in linguistic brokerage, and worked not only for their fellow Armenians, but also for traders of all “nations” who needed their services in Armenian language.

3. TRUST AND DANGER: CROSS-CULTURAL BROKERAGE REVISITED

The expression “Trust and danger” is somehow reminiscent of the milestone study on “Purity and danger” that anthropologist Mary Douglas published in 1966. In her book, Douglas attempted to analyze the concepts of pollution and taboo in different cultures.

On a much more modest scale, I argue that **these two notions are crucial to the understanding of the wider cultural implications of linguistic brokerage.**

They also allow us to explore a dimension of cross-cultural encounters which is absent from the vignette featuring Rousseau and his Orthodox priest.

3.1. DANGER AND CULTURAL ANXIETY

To start with, we shall consider that the position of interpreter could be at times a rather dangerous one, as those who performed it could be physically exposed to all sorts of threats.

For instance, we know of a series of pictures representing the atrocities carried out by the Ottomans against the Venetian dragomans in Istanbul in times of Venetian-Ottoman warfare [DIAPO]

On a more practical level, we can also consider the risk of contamination involved in having to interrogate, for example, the crews of foreign ships while in quarantine.

But I would like to elaborate here on another type of risk, namely that of cultural contamination involved in the use of foreign languages, and I will focus on the relationship between the so-called “Oriental languages” and Islam.

As a matter of fact, **literate knowledge of “Oriental languages” was often considered as a vector of cultural (and especially religious) contamination.**

For instance, we know of the **efforts made by both the French and Venetian authorities to prevent the personnel of their consular services (and especially the youngest of them, or language youths) from converting to Islam.**

Tellingly enough, **Muslims also shared this fear of cultural contamination, which in turn accounted for a good part of their alleged “reluctance” to travel abroad during the Early Modern period.**

But if **physical proximity of “Infidels” and proficiency in foreign languages constituted a possible vector of contamination,** it should be stressed that **the relationship between Islam and “Oriental languages” was not as exclusive as historians have often assumed.**

For instance, we know that in the 17th-century at least, both the Venetian and the Livornese authorities regarded with suspicion the circulation of texts written in “Oriental languages”.

Yet, it is difficult to determine whether this suspicion was prompted by the fear of Muslim proselytism, or rather by an **implicit belief which implicitly associated Islam and “Oriental languages” with all sorts of heresies, as well as magic and witchcraft**

An early 17th-century anecdote shall serve here to illustrate this ambiguity.

In 1612, a former Muslim slave in Livorno named Iusuf, also known under his Christian alias of Giuseppe Boccarelli after he recently converted, was accused of practicing witchcraft on a Christian woman allegedly possessed by the devil.

Questioned by the Inquisitor of Pisa, Iusuf/Giuseppe explained what his witchcraft consisted in **[DIAPO]**: “In the Turkish [read: Muslim] fashion, as I was then a Turk, I wrote on the right hand of this woman Domenica some words I found in a Turkish book, the meaning of which I did not understand, nor did I know in which language they were written, and I wrote this words twice, but they did not have any effect because she was possessed. I did not understand the words and their meaning, but I saw them in the book and wrote them on her hand”.

As the Inquisitor fra Lelio Marzari (the same who would later trial Galileo) wanted to know the content of the Iusuf’s “Turkish book”, he had slaves from the *Bagno* translate it. The translation, however, showed that the book was not a treatise of witchcraft, and Iusuf/Giuseppe was considered **[I quote]** “slightly suspicious of heresy”, and only condemned to do penance.

In all likelihood, Iusuf’s ignorance of Ottoman Turkish (or Arabic) script was taken as evidence for his innocence: had he known how to read Arabic, he could have been charged with practicing witchcraft, and exposing a Christian woman to the risk of conversion to Islam.

3.2. AN UNEASY TRUST

Due to their very nature, cross-cultural exchanges relied on an essential bond of trust between people who engaged in them, and interpretation appears to be a case in point.

To start with, and I mentioned in my paper, the very social profile of most interpreters active on all shores of the Mediterranean was likely to raise their patrons’ suspicion.

While converts or refugees were commonly considered to be unreliable, Jews, Greeks, and Armenians were often accused of promoting their own (or their community's) interests at the expense of those of their patrons.

In a similar way, interpreters often had a bad reputation, and for instance some of the most widespread clichés about the dragomans in the Levant regarded their alleged incompetence, venality and cowardice.

In such a context, the establishment and enforcement of trust responded to two basic needs:

- first, to ascertain the linguistic competence of the person who was in charge of interpreting
- second, to guarantee the interpreter's trustworthiness

Yet, we shall keep in mind that most of the time, one had no means to ascertain that a person who offered her services as an interpreter actually had the knowledge and capacity to do so.

In the Early Modern period, **only few schools and universities in Europe could certify one's proficiency in "Oriental languages"**.

And even when one was able to produce some kind of evidence of his literate knowledge in Arabic, Turkish, Persian or Greek, this could always be challenged by those who claimed to have a more practical (and therefore useful) knowledge of these languages, for having learned them directly on the field.

For instance in late 17th-century France, a bitter controversy opposed François Pétis de la Croix, the French court interpreter for the Turkish and Arabic languages, to Laurent d'Arvieux, a traveler who had spent many years in the Levant, and accused Pétis de la Croix of being a quintessential "armchair orientalist", namely one who had no practical knowledge of either Turkish or Arabic.

Interestingly enough, the argument put forward by d'Arvieux seems to have reached the ear of France's high administration, as the latter looked for ways to control the work of the royal interpreters.

On the visit of the Ottoman envoy Soliman Aga to Louis the 14th in 1669, the king was to be assisted by his two interpreters "pour les langues orientales", including Pétis de la Croix.

Yet, a couple of days before the scheduled meeting was to take place, d'Arvieux received the following note from the French Minister of Foreign Affairs [DIAPO]: "Sir, the king wants you to attend the audience he shall give to the Sultan's envoy, so as to observe if the interpreters faithfully repeat everything that is said on both sides".

However, controlling translation appears to have been something of a luxury reserved to a social and political elite, or to circumstances when state interests were at stake.

When "lost in translation", most commoners in need of an interpreter had little choice but to resort to either a person they knew (and therefore trusted), or to someone whom they assumed they could entrust with their case.

Deception and fraud therefore constituted part of the everyday experience of translation, and a certain familiarity between the interpreter and his patron did not always preclude cases of mis-translation (be it intentional or not).

A case in point is that of three men who presented themselves to the Marseillaise municipality, on the 24th of October 1801, to apply for French citizenship: Gabriel Mahana, from Cairo, and Joseph Tati and Michel Cham, from Damascus, had recently fled from Egypt to Marseilles, after having served the French army in Egypt. Out of three, only Michel Cham spoke French, and therefore acted as

interpreter for the two others in front of the Marseillaise authorities. But a year later, Joseph Tati came back to the municipality, and stated that he had been fooled by Michel Cham **[DIAPO]**: Cham, he declared, made him apply for the French citizenship, while Tati only wanted to temporarily stay in France as a refugee, and then return to Egypt.

The case is obscure, and one fails to understand what interest Cham would have had to fool Tati.

Yet, **what I think is interesting here, is the position of Tati himself:**

Namely, the fact that in order to make his second statement to the Marseillaise authorities, Tati resorted to the help of another interpreter, and the person he chose, François Naydorff, was also a refugee from Egypt who arrived to Marseille in the same year as him, Cham and Mahana.

In other words: **after he had been deceived by someone he presumably trusted because of their shared past and experience as refugees, Tati probably had no other choice but to resort to a person with the same social, ethnic, and cultural profile as both himself and the person he thought had fooled him.**

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Saint Augustine famously wrote that **[I quote]** “man is separated from man by the difference of languages. For if two men, each ignorant of the other’s language, meet, and are not compelled to pass, but, on the contrary, to remain in company, dumb animals, though of different species, would more easily hold intercourse than they, human beings though they be” **[end of quote]**

To be sure, linguistic brokerage in the Early Modern period accounted for the wide success of an **ever-increasing number of commercial ventures, political contacts, and cultural exchanged across the Mediterranean.**

In this respect, it can be considered as an **essential tool for enforcing coexistence and cooperation** among people of different ethnic origins and religious beliefs, and therefore as a **means of fostering cosmopolitanism** (understood here as the sense of belonging to a human community that goes beyond political frontiers and cultural boundaries alike).

Yet, **patterns of conflicts and anxiety suggest that it did not constitute some sort of cultural and social equalizer, allowing for universal and pacific cooperation of both individuals and groups beyond ethnic, religious and linguistic boundaries.**

In that sense, **the relationships between multilingualism, interpretation, power relations and strategies of symbolic distinction deserve further attention and research,** and this is precisely the work I intend to carry on in the next months – hopefully with the help of your suggestions, criticisms and comments!