

# Differing skills of interpreters in Portuguese India

GARRY MULLENDER

Freelance interpreter

## ABSTRACT

*By piecing together the many but scattered references to linguistic and cultural mediation in contemporary sources, some of which were first-hand accounts, we can build a picture of interpreters and interpreting during the Portuguese voyages of discovery and their early quests in India and the East. Linguistic and cultural mediators were not held in high regard, with convicts or slaves, regardless of whether or not they possessed the requisite language skills, often being forced into this role when it involved dangerous tasks such as gathering intelligence and making the very first contact with new peoples. They thus developed survival skills, in particular, to tread a fine line between the two camps, which in turn aroused suspicions about their loyalty, a prime consideration for the Portuguese. Subsequently, with the increase of missionary activity, another group of interpreters developed with quite different characteristics: they had to be Christian and of good moral standing, have a good grasp of Portuguese and be eloquent speakers of their native languages, in which they had to express novel religious concepts. Even though the Jesuits paid attention to their technical abilities and provided training, like the Portuguese administration, they also judged their interpreters' effectiveness on the extent to which their substantive goals were achieved.*

## Keywords

Interpreting in Portuguese India, historic, linguistic and cultural mediation.

Vasco da Gama's discovery of the sea route to India in 1498 was a defining moment in Portuguese history and the culmination of almost a century<sup>1</sup> of maritime exploration that had brought the Portuguese navigators into contact with a plethora of hitherto unknown peoples and lands. The goals of the Portuguese venture had been clearly set out by the mastermind of the Discoveries, Prince Henry the Navigator, and were faithfully recorded by the royal chronicler, Gomes Eanes de Zurara (1841: 44-47) in his *Crónica da Guiné*, written in the mid-1450s, as the following: to gather knowledge of the lands beyond the Canaries and Cape Bojador; to bring back merchandise; to know the strength of the Moors; to find Christian kingdoms which would make allies in the war against the Moors, and to bring more souls into the Christian faith.

These aims would dictate the areas of intervention of linguistic and cultural mediators, as Portuguese expeditions gradually progressed further down the West coast of the African continent. They contributed to overcoming geographical and psychological barriers<sup>2</sup> and obtaining valuable knowledge of their surroundings. Initially, the Portuguese had adopted a belligerent stance towards the people they encountered, seeking to capture slaves by force; thus their verbal interaction and negotiation were limited, although they generally had Arabic speakers on board with a view to facilitating communication, but whose effectiveness soon became minimal along the coast of Guinea.

The Portuguese strategy underwent substantial change from the mid-1440s onwards, when Prince Henry issued an order to the explorers to pursue commercial aims above all and to refrain from killing the Africans they encountered along the coast<sup>3</sup>. This shift occurred shortly after Antão Gonçalves' 1441 expedition had captured 13 natives and brought them back to Portugal. At least two historians (cf. Newitt 2005; Roland 1999) have claimed that the purpose of this exercise was to train the captives as interpreters, but through earlier research, I have attempted to demonstrate that this was not Gonçalves' intention nor were deliberate attempts made to teach the captives how to speak Portuguese, let alone train them as interpreters<sup>4</sup>. They were enslaved, learned some Portuguese

1 There is wide agreement among historians that the Conquest of Ceuta in 1415 marks the beginning of the Portuguese Discoveries, although maritime voyages of exploration had been undertaken in previous decades.

2 In particular, Cape Bojador.

3 "Seguidamente, o senhor Infante, no seu conselho, dizia que daí em diante não travassem luta com a gente daquelas partes, mas fizessem aliança e trocassem mercadorias e assentassem paz com eles, pois a sua intenção era fazê-los cristãos. E mandou que as caravelas fossem de paz e não de guerra" Gomes de Sintra (2002: 63). Our translation: "Then on his advice, the Prince said that henceforth, we should not fight with the people from those parts, but make alliances and exchange merchandise and make peace with them, since his intention was to make them Christians. And he ordered the caravels to go in peace and not in war."

4 My argument was based on there having been a misconception that the word *língua* has always been a synonym of *interpreter*, whereas early textual references in the fifteenth century suggest that it was actually used in the sense of *informant* or *information*.

through immersion in the language, with the authorities' interest in them being limited to extracting whatever information they could from them about the (human and material) resources in their lands. Some subsequently re-embarked and played a useful role as guides and informants contrasting greatly with Portuguese contempt for their safety and well-being. Linguistic mediation, in the sense of facilitating a dialogue between two linguistically diverse groups, was only a subsidiary task and considered by many as just another method of securing the Portuguese goals: information or mercantile goals.

Interpretation was, therefore, characterised by improvisation, both in terms of: its performer, someone who was drafted into the role without any specific preparation, guidance or appropriate selection procedure; and the way in which it was performed, with there being frequent references to the *línguas* (see footnote 6) claiming that they did not understand the African languages encountered, as described in first-hand accounts such as Cadamosto's (a slave-trader of Italian origin, who left us an account of his voyages to the River Senegal area in 1455 and 1456, under Pero de Sintra's command):

I, wanting to know more of these people, had them speak to my interpreters: (but) none of them could understand what was being said to them, neither could those in the other caravels, something which greatly annoyed us. We eventually left without being able to understand them. On seeing, hence, that we were in a new country, and that we could not be understood, we concluded that it was useless to go any further, because we assumed that we would find ever newer languages and that if we could not understand them, we would not be able to do anything<sup>5</sup>.

When such difficulties occurred, sign language and mimicry could be employed in an attempt to achieve at least some rudimentary communication, but such initiatives were only partially successful:

Os cristãos faziam-lhes sinais de paz, mas eles não entenderam. Mandaram-lhes os cristãos mercadorias que tinham trazido com eles a terra, mas eles receberam-na sem se disporem a falar (Gomes de Sintra 2002: 63)<sup>6</sup>.

Even with decades of experience, little appears to have changed by the time Da Gama embarked: he did of course have what he considered to be linguists on board. Hein (1993) makes the exaggerated claim there were seventeen of them, but many of them were convicted criminals, being sent into exile to gather information as commutation of a death sentence. Da Gama and other explorers sought people who were easily dispensable, as they would be charged with the dangerous tasks of fighting in the front line if necessary, disembarking to reconnoitre the area and establishing initial contact with the native peoples, which was indeed a moment of high tension.

5 Our translation from the Portuguese version in Peres (1988: 172).

6 Our translation: "The Christians made signs of peace to them, but they did not understand. The Christians sent them wares they had brought ashore with them, but they took them without wishing to talk."

Once Da Gama's fleet rounded the Cape and sailed northwards along the Indian Ocean coast of Africa subsequently reaching Calicut in 1498, such encounters became even more fraught with danger, for in many cases, these lands had Muslim rulers, who the Portuguese considered to be their mortal enemies. Moreover, the lack of interpreters for Asian languages forced him to rely on Muslim linguists (with Arabic being used as the pivotal language), a situation which he was far from at ease with. In fact, we can posit that an interpreter's religion was a primary consideration and would underpin his relationship with his Portuguese masters, a subject we shall return to hereunder.

## 1.2 Building a picture of interpreting in Portuguese India

The history of the Portuguese Discoveries in general is well-documented by virtue of the painstaking efforts of royal chroniclers, but there are also a number of valuable documents which were produced by seafarers themselves, who provide us with first-hand accounts of some significant encounters between the Portuguese crews and native peoples. Neither are directly concerned with recounting the history of interpreting and thus references to linguistic mediation are somewhat scarce. Yet, from Zurara's warning not to trust *turgimães*<sup>7</sup>, following an interpreter's betrayal of Gonçalo de Sintra which led to his death in an ambush, and to Álvaro Velho's log of Da Gama's voyage to India<sup>8</sup> in which he furnishes us with vivid descriptions of how communication was attempted on stop-off points, we can follow the progression of linguistic mediation through the voyages of exploration, the position or consideration given to interpreters, and the varying degrees of success of their endeavours. Some sources were clearly more aware of, or sensitive to, the issues of language and communication and thus supply us with more information in this regard, notable examples being those of Cadamosto, who was not a native speaker of Portuguese, and Álvaro Velho, who concluded his diary with a Portuguese-Konkani<sup>9</sup> glossary and could have acted as an interpreter himself.

We encounter the same pattern of sources concerning linguistic mediation in India itself, following Da Gama's inaugural voyage. There are three major coeval histories of the Portuguese presence during the sixteenth century: Fernão de Castanheda's *Historia dos Descobrimentos e da Conquista da Índia pelos Portugueses*; Gaspar Correia's *Lendas da Índia*; and João de Barros' *Décadas*. All of them are monumental works with several weighty volumes. Rocha built a corpus of references to interpreters by name in the *Décadas* (Rocha 2011), which above all were significant for their paucity in comparison to the magnitude of the work, and one would expect parallel exercises to yield similar quantitative results. Fortunately, those serving in India were prolific letter-writers, in particular to their

7 *Turgimão* an old Portuguese term no longer in use, meaning interpreter or *língua*, derived from the Arabic *tarjuman*. cf. Dalgado (1919: 393) for examples of its use and different spellings.

8 cf. Fontoura da Costa, A. (ed.), (1960).

9 Konkani is a language spoken along the West coast of India, especially in the area of Goa.

superiors back in Europe, namely the Portuguese kings and religious authorities, with large quantities of their missives having been conserved in archives and expertly transcribed. Their authors include employers and users of interpreters, such as Afonso de Albuquerque, Captain of the Fleet of the Arabian Coast and subsequently governor of India from 1509 to 1515. He was criticised by some for being influenced by his own interpreters of Jewish origin, but who voiced his suspicion of those in the employ of local potentates, Saint Francis Xavier and other Jesuit priests, who frequently bemoaned poor linguistic skills and thematic knowledge among their linguists.

Yet, the significance of the absence of references to interpreters, whom we know to have been present, and the documents not intended for our information (cf. Alonso 2008) should not be underestimated. Whilst it is frustrating that Luis de Fróis', Jesuit priest and one of the first European Portuguese-Japanese interpreters<sup>10</sup> should have barely mentioned his activities in his *History of Japan* (Fróis 1976), that no record of interpreting at the first European embassy to Siam led by Duarte Fernandes should have survived, or that the anonymous interpreter who authored a diary of an expedition to the Irrawaddy delta in 1521 should have omitted almost all of his linguistic mediation activities from his account (cf. Bouchon/Thomaz 1988), these silences certainly indicate that interpreting did not figure among the prime concerns of the Portuguese in the Orient. Interpreting was no more than a means to other ends and interpreters did not enjoy any glory, but rather were stigmatised by many of their contemporaries.

## 2. Interpreting in the East

As already mentioned in the introduction, the fields in which interpreters worked for the Portuguese in India were determined by the main objectives of the Age of Discoveries and largely correspond to those mapped out by Bowen *et al.* (1995). Prior to the Discoveries, Portuguese experience of linguistic mediation had primarily occurred in contacts with Arabic-speaking Moors, whom they fought to expel from the Iberian peninsula after several centuries of occupation and then to conquer their territories in North Africa. Prolonged contact between these two peoples had enabled a pool of potential interpreters to develop, ranging from members of the Mudejar communities living in the re-conquered territories to Portuguese soldiers who had fought and possibly been taken prisoner in North Africa. Not only could they act as envoys or messengers and participate in peace negotiations, but also broker the release of prisoners from enemy territory, as *alfaques* by royal appointment, and be provided with guarantees of safe passage to perform their task.

Those who served on the voyages did not enjoy any such security and that is why valued compatriots were spared from the dangerous mission of establishing first contact with a new people. Instead, returning native Africans, convicts, Jews

<sup>10</sup> Notably, he interpreted for the head of Mission, Cabral and the visitor Alessandro Valignano in meetings with the warlord, Hideyoshi.

or new Christians could be *lançados* (a term meaning *thrown ashore*) and would thus have had to develop survival skills, notably through cultural assimilation, adopting local dress and customs, hiding their religious affiliation or apostatising and providing intelligence to local rulers, which in turn frequently led to their being accused of treachery by the Portuguese. Similar skills were also required during the initial stages of Portuguese presence in India, with the significant difference being that the Portuguese could not always rely on the interpreters they had brought with them, for they did not possess the necessary language skills, with even Arabic of the North African dialectal variety, being of little use.

The Portuguese explorers were particularly suspicious of foreign interpreters and intermediaries, and thus the latter had to strive to overcome this distrust, particularly if they were Muslim and thus identified with Portugal's traditional enemy. One can certainly draw the conclusion that interpreters faced similar hostility from other parties too, and some of the best-known figures, such as Alexandre d'Ataíde, Francisco de Albuquerque, Gaspar da Gama and João Machado apostatised more than once as they changed employers and also adopted new identities in a bid to assuage misgivings about divided loyalties. This pattern of behaviour was reproduced in Senegambia, both among the *tangomaus* (mulatto offspring of *lançados*), who were commercial and linguistic intermediaries for local leaders, and among Africans who learned Portuguese and dressed in Western style to facilitate their dealings with Portuguese traders.

Influential figures would have been the godfathers of Christian converts who passed on their family names, thereby creating a new Christian identity such as Afonso de Albuquerque who was the Portuguese governor of India and employer-godfather of Francisco. Likewise Vasco da Gama had Gaspar christened in the Azores on the return voyage to Lisbon so that his interpreter could safely disembark in Lisbon (from where Jews had been banished) and be presented to King Manuel, whom he then entertained with tales (tall tales in fact) of fabulous riches awaiting the Portuguese in India. Machado, the only native Portuguese among the examples given, whose death sentence for murder was commuted into exile and to be *lançado* onto the shores of Mozambique, took the Muslim name Çufu when in the service of the Sultans of Bijapur. Incidentally this was also one of the pseudonyms by which Ataíde (of Jewish origin but captured from an Arab trading vessel) was known to the Portuguese prior to his christening. Meanwhile, a rather mysterious character called João Ferreira married into a West African royal family (the Gran-Fulo empire) and became known as *Ganagoga*, the master of all languages<sup>11</sup>.

11 "Este lançado português se foi ao Reino do Gran-Fulo ... e na corte de Gran-Fulo se casou com huma filha sua, da qual teve huma filha... E chama-se João Ferreira, da nação, e chamado pelos negros o Ganagoga, que quer dizer, na língua dos Beafares, homem que falla todas as línguas, como de feito falla a dos negros" (Kopke 1844: 15). Our translation: "This Portuguese *lançado* went to the Gran-Fulo kingdom... and in the Court of the Gran-Fulo married one of his daughters, with whom he had a daughter... And his name is João Ferreira, from Portugal, and called Ganagoga by the blacks, which in the Beafar language means the man who speaks all languages, as he indeed speaks the language of the blacks."

The level of suspicion tended to be most acute between Christians and Muslims, which in fact served to enhance linguistic mediators' survival skills, in particular through the provision of additional, connected services, such as commercial brokerage and intelligence, at the same time, bringing them extra income. The irascible Afonso de Albuquerque, who had Francisco put in chains at one point lest he desert (with valuable information) to the enemy, on more than one occasion complained bitterly to King Manuel about the devious Cidi Ali, yet also rewarded him for his services as informant about the intentions of his official employer, the King of Cambay (cf. *Cartas de Afonso de Albuquerque* 1903: 332-334). The Jesuits complained of the treachery of an interpreter called Dadagi. Following an audience with King Manuel, in which he promised to adopt Christianity, he was given a lifetime appointment as the Governor's interpreter, but failed on his religious promise and was considered the biggest thorn in the Missionaries' sides<sup>12</sup>. Thus, linguistic mediators were constantly treading a fine line as they sought to avoid alienating either of the parties they were in contact with. Frequently, they were unable to provide the unwavering loyalty desired by their employers and thus moved along several peripheries, inhabiting an inter-cultural space or no man's land. In fact, in some cases they even created their own meta-culture woven with strands of various influences, such as the *tangomaus* who would come to live apart from the rest of the village and the Luso-Asian community of Christian Siamese subjects concentrated in the Portuguese village in the imperial capital, Ayutthaya, a distinct group that monopolised interpretation between the Siamese and Europeans until the first half of the nineteenth century.

In the early days of the Estado da Índia, foreign and Portuguese interpreters participated in the attempts to gain special protection or royal patronage, alongside many working for the Crown. Locally, their position was precarious on several levels. Leading figures such as Gama and Albuquerque greatly doubted their loyalty in view of their access to intelligence on both sides, leading to a striking discrepancy between the circles they moved in and their social status. They were in all essence prisoners or even slaves and their employers wilfully maintained them in this condition. Others in the Portuguese administration begrudged them their ready access to viceroys and governors (they accused the

12 cf. Wicki (1948: 69) Letter from Miguel Vaz to Dom João III, late 1545: "O bramene mais prejudicial e contraíro há christandade de Goa hé Dadagi, filho de Crisnaa, que quá veyo a este Reino e recebeo muitas mercês e omrras d'el-Rey dom Manuel, voso padre, que sancta gloria aja, e lhe prometeo de ser christão tamto que tornase há India, com toda sua familia, por cujo respeito lhe foy feito mercê do officio de tanadar-moor e limgoa do Governador em sua vida, e elle nunca se fez christão, antes elle e o filho sam os mores adversarios da nosa sancta fee que há em Goa". Our translation: "The main Brahmin opponent who does most damage to Christianity in Goa is Dadagi, Crisna's son, who came here to this kingdom and received many rewards and honours from your father, King Manuel, may he rest in holy glory, and promised him that he and all his family would become Christians as soon as he returned to India, out of respect for whom he was rewarded with the post of chief tax-collector and *limgoa* to the Governor for the rest of his life, and he never became a Christian, rather he and his son are the greatest adversaries of our holy faith in Goa". See also Wicki (1948: 744-745) Letter from Pedro Fernandes Sardinha to Dom João III, late 1549, with a similar complaint.

latter of too willingly heeding their advice), never forgetting their non-Christian non-Portuguese origins, as they reviled them for performing spying missions and denouncing petty corruption and clandestine trading which defrauded the authorities of tax revenue. Interpreters reacted by addressing their complaints, including about death threats, low pay and prolonged compulsory service, directly to King Manuel and at least three of them travelled to Portugal and enjoyed audiences with him. In fact, certain extensive letters to the sovereign were conserved and subsequently published, providing us with an invaluable albeit partisan insight into the work and abilities of these linguistic and cultural mediators from the first half of the sixteenth century, a topic which we shall return to in the next section.

Let us now turn our attention to the other significant group of interpreters working in India at this time, namely those that were sought out by missionaries to aid them in their conversion efforts. Although priests accompanied the voyages to the East right from the outset, their prime concern was the spiritual well-being of the crew and nascent settler communities, with only limited attempts at the conversion of locals. The main missionary activity began with the arrival of the Jesuits, in particular, Saint Francis Xavier, in 1543. He and his fellow brethren were painfully aware of their reliance on interpreters to convey their message to the population and hence, through the education of boys and young men at the seminaries, they strived to train their own mediators, with a number of references in the correspondence between them being made to the fact that those who did not make it into the clergy could at least assist them as *topazes*<sup>13</sup>. This system held advantages for them in that it avoided the need for them to pay for interpreting services and also allowed them to vet their interpreters' character. Whereas those working with the explorers were prized for their quick-thinking and self-reliance, with scant regard being paid to their morality, the religious orders were restricted in their scope for recruitment, since they required Christians of good moral standing, who were willing to forego personal gain or interests.

We shall see below that it was not only in these qualities that we can perceive a stark contrast between the two sets of interpreters, but that the same is also true of the tasks they performed and their use of language. Whilst working for one employer did not automatically preclude an interpreter from working for another, such transfers were only possible when the mediator's particular qualities and skills became relevant, the most obvious example being the state's use of members of the clergy to act as interpreter-envoys to local courts, in the knowledge that men of the cloth were recognised for their integrity and also for their superior eloquence (and could work towards economic and political goals and religious aims at the same time).

13 According to Dalgado (1919: 381), the term *topaz* originated in Southern India from the Dravidian etimon, *tuppasi*, which in turn was derived from the Sanskrit, *dvibhasya*, literally "two languages" meaning bilingual or interpreter, but also used to describe those who dressed in Portuguese fashion, spoke Portuguese and identified themselves culturally with the Portuguese. It was used in India, Ceylon and Malaysia until the 18<sup>th</sup> century.



## 2.1 Language

Considering that the Discoveries were in essence a first meeting of peoples, cultures and languages, it was quite impossible for adequately prepared interpreters to have been present, leading to the imperious need to improvise a communication solution. As a result, the mariners' logs which we referred to above, vividly describe gestures and mimicry being used to try and engage the other party in addition to curtailed attempts to overcome the language barrier by virtue of cognates and common languages. Such situations were reproduced throughout the fifteenth century as the progression of Portugal's sea-voyages brought mariners into contact with new peoples and tongues.

Given this experience, it should come as no surprise that the explorers and subsequently the Portuguese authorities in India should not have been overly demanding with regard to interpreters' fluency and accuracy. What was important to them was to gain information (or intelligence) and to achieve strategic and economic goals: linguistic mediation was merely a means to an end. One of the most striking examples of such improvisation concerns the deportee whom Vasco da Gama sent ashore in Calicut upon his arrival at the end of his maiden voyage to India. He was given instructions by the captain to walk around town to gather as much information as possible using his eyes and ears, but not to utter a word, for his understanding of Arabic was extremely limited and he could not speak it at all. Dressed as a Muslim, he was taken to the house of Bontaibo, originally from Tunis, whose grasp of Spanish (learned some twenty years previously) caused much rejoicing amongst Gama's crew: Castanheda describes their wonderment that someone so far away should speak *their* language (cf. Castanheda 1833: 40). Gaspar da Gama, mentioned above, has frequently been given the accolade of the finest interpreter the Portuguese had during their early days in India, yet when they encountered him, he did not know any Portuguese, but made himself understood using a Genoese or Venetian dialect. Even stilted Arabic as a bridge to get from Malayalam and other Indian languages through relay interpreting was used.

We can therefore conclude that for functional purposes, the Portuguese were inclined to accept interpretation into any language they could reasonably understand and at the same time considered that their linguistic mediators could interpret from any language they could grasp the gist of. Modern-day concepts such as a fixed language combination or a distinction between active and passive languages simply did not apply as we understand them. Interpreters were viewed as having a function, which was either one-way communication, that is to say, obtaining and relaying information back to their masters, signifying that their knowledge of a given language need only be passive, or two-way communication, mediating a dialogue. How they managed it was of secondary importance to the achievement of other goals. This same approach to languages was actually replicated by some of the interpreters, who were equally more concerned with achieving their personal goals through taking on the role of mediator rather than showing any scruples concerning accuracy. Thus, some made extraordinary claims to being able to interpret from a large number of languages or even having

learned a language within a matter of weeks. Of course, their linguistic knowledge needed only to satisfy the direct and limited needs of their clients, with a small lexical coverage relating to a handful of topics (of which the interpreters had the necessary thematic knowledge). Yet, many general historians have taken such boasts at face value and attributed extraordinary talents to these interpreters, thereby creating a somewhat undeserved reputation.

Meanwhile, the attitude towards language amongst the religious orders active in India was wholly different, for their linguistic mediation needs were far removed from those of the administrative and merchant communities. To begin with, the missionaries were keenly aware of the need for competent linguists, either from among their own ranks or by recruiting locally, particularly from amongst seminarists. Some priests with the greatest gift for learning languages became quite fluent in Persian, Indian or Oriental languages and could perform some of their more routine tasks such as christenings unaided, with the Jesuits notably bringing over young novices who they felt would be more successful in this endeavour. Yet they encountered greater difficulties in preaching in local languages and thus were far more reliant on interpreters and took a deep interest in ensuring their message was conveyed accurately and eloquently, frequently discussing this issue in their letters and its impact on conversion. There could be no approximation in the language used. The priests had to speak Portuguese rather than any other European language for that was the only language that their student-interpreters could readily understand. Indeed, whilst the Jesuits, like the sailors, hailed from various European countries (not least St. Francis Xavier, who was from Navarre), their correspondence warns against sending brethren to India who could not speak Portuguese<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, they had to ensure interpretation into every language of their listeners and that their interpreters were familiar with the concepts of the Christian faith and could express them in their native languages.

With much more rigorous requirements, however, there was more room for failure in the essential objective of the exercise. Not all priests were as fluent as they would have wished in Portuguese and even St. Francis Xavier bemoaned his difficulties. The scarcity of interpreters of sound character and the necessary linguistic skills resulted in complicated improvisation, whereby relay interpreting could be resorted to in order to convey the message to all the linguistic groups present<sup>15</sup>. In addition, there was a testing paradox of adjusting the com-

14 “Si de nosa Companhia vieren algunos estrangeiros que não sabem falar portugues, hé necessario que aprendan a falar, porque de outro jeto não haverá topaz que os entenda” (Silva Rego 1950: 167), Letter from Francis Xavier in S. Tomé, 8.5.1545. Our translation: “If some foreigners, who do not know how to speak Portuguese, come from our Society, they will have to learn it otherwise no interpreter will understand them”.

15 “Isto tudo se lhes dis polo mais fácil modo que se pode, para que elles possam entender, falando-lhes por enterpetres de que há sempre muyta falta polas muytas e diverssas nações que aquy concorrem, porque de quasi toda a nação destas partes vem caticuminos; algumas vezes se acontese que em huma mesma pratica se fala por tres e quatro enterpetres de diverssas linguoas a diverssos” (Wicki 1948: 168), Letter from Brother Emmanuel Teixeira to the Portuguese Company of Jesus, 25.12.1558. Our

plexity of language used to ensure comprehension on the one hand by the interpreters and on the other, by the very simple congregations (see footnote 17), whilst at the same time, finding suitable words to express ideas that were alien to the listeners. In fact, the problem of creating Christian terminology in local languages was, in the eyes of the Jesuits, a major impediment to the successful conversion of the masses.

This contrast in approaches between the secular and religious authorities is most revealing. The Jesuits were often fiercely critical of the technical ability of their interpreters, lamenting that their shortcomings in both their expression in their native languages and in their understanding of Portuguese were the root cause of their “poor harvests”<sup>16</sup>. Yet they had learned Portuguese formally in the seminaries, with the Jesuits having eventually established seminaries in four different areas in order to train *topazes* with four distinct Indian languages, which they expressly asserted were not mutually comprehensible (cf. Wicki 1948: 112). The mediators working for the state, meanwhile, boasted of being able to work from and into a very broad range of languages, but it was certainly not their linguistic prowess that underpinned the assessments made of them by their employers, as we shall discover below.

## 2.2 Tasks

The tasks performed by linguistic mediators working for the Portuguese in sixteenth century India were far broader than those undertaken by the modern interpreter, since a *língua* was not defined by the acts he performed but rather the function, still essentially understood in sixteenth century India to be to provide information, not necessarily entailing the translation of face-to-face dialogues. Such information could be gathered and conveyed in a variety of modalities, including informally, by spying or eavesdropping, even by repeating privileged information or confidences to which interpreters were privy given their unique position. The King of Hormuz used Alexandre d’Ataíde, for example, to transmit an important message to Afonso de Albuquerque:

E logo ao outro dia, falando el rey com Alexandre dataide em cousas que lhe ho governador mandava requerer, lhe disse aa poridade que Raix hamet que hi estava ho tinha preso, e fora de todo seu poder que ho dissesse assi a seu pay ho governador (que assi lhe chamava por lhe ele chamar filho) (Castanheda 1833: 338)<sup>17</sup>

translation: “This is all said to them in the simplest possible form, so that they can understand it, speaking to them through interpreters, which we are always lacking because of the many and diverse peoples that seek us here, as catechumens come from almost all parts of this nation; in some sermons we end up speaking through three or four interpreters of different languages to different people”.

16 In their correspondence, the Jesuits often used this term to refer to their success or otherwise in converting locals.

17 Our translation: “And on the very next day, when the King was talking to Alexandre d’Ataíde about things that the governor had sent him to ask for, he secretly told him that Rex Hamet who was there had taken him prisoner and that he should do

For his part, João Machado offered crucial and dissenting advice on military strategy to Afonso de Albuquerque on the Benasteri siege (Goa) in 1512, since it appears that having previously been in the employ of the enemy, the Sultans of Bijapur, he was better informed about their fighting capacity (cf. *Cartas de Afonso de Albuquerque* 1903: 17). Moreover, the Portuguese were acutely aware of the fact that interpreters did not only use their ears but also their eyes to gather information, hence Da Gama's instructions to the deportee (cf. Correia 1858-1863: 78) and conversely Afonso de Albuquerque did not want to meet João Machado, then acting as negotiator for the Sultan's captain in the city of Goa, so that he would not witness the precarious state the Portuguese defences were in and report back on it to the enemy (cf. Castanheda 1833: 53).

Furthermore, this case also points towards another essential difference in the way diplomatic interpreters worked, in that the dialogues they mediated were habitually remote and asynchronous, since the leaders of the opposing camps would not meet but provide detailed instructions to the interpreter-envoy, who would travel back and forth, relaying these messages. Such a method placed much greater pressure on the interpreter's ability to gauge the interests and intentions of his interlocutor and couch his remit in appropriate linguistic formulae, essential not only for enhancing the likelihood of achieving the desired outcome, but also for protecting his own physical integrity. Greater agency could also be attained by performing some of the numerous corollary functions to which we have already referred. In his account of the expedition he guided to Chittagong and Gaur in 1521, the anonymous interpreter acted as spokesperson (or indeed cultural and linguistic mediator) for the group to the Sultan, when the latter was planning to have them beheaded. Rather than merely translate the words of the expedition leader, he produced a statement of his own initiative, for his knowledge offered him an advantage in framing the message appropriately.

Similarly, state interpreters would be entrusted with brokering business deals, their performance being judged on their ability to seal a good price, rather than on their linguistic abilities or faithful rendition of their master's words; that is, their negotiating skills were valued more highly than their interpreting techniques. Indeed, as a result, they could venture to mediate between languages in which they were not fully proficient, especially since only limited lexical and syntactical ranges were required and their clients had few if any linguistic expectations. In other circumstances, the Portuguese and indeed their interlocutors, sought to constrain interpreters' latitude, by preferring to set down their messages in writing. This exercise was performed by a secretary or interpreter (sometimes the same person performed both roles), under the watchful eyes of another. The message was often written in the original language with the sight translation being performed at the destination, again under surveillance, or directly in the target language to seemingly reduce still further the possibility of mistakes<sup>18</sup>.

everything in his power to tell this to his father the governor (as he called him since the latter called him son)".

18 For example, see the letter from the so-called *King of Pepper* (*Rei da Pimenta*) to Governor Dom João de Castro, dated 28.9.1547: "E porque pode ser que não saberão de crar a Vosa Senhoria o que lhe scprevo em hua ola pareceo me bem mamdar scprever esta em

This custom indicates that little distinction was drawn between written and oral linguistic mediation, although the former could only be performed by the literate, such as the Portuguese secretaries appointed to various Ceylonese rulers and the *topazes* educated in seminaries. The latter would assist with the translation of prayers and scriptures into their mother tongue, sometimes working in tandem, with one producing an oral translation and another writing it down. Not only could texts be produced for the purposes of standardisation, but they could also be learned by rote by the European priests, so that they could recite them at gatherings, for they believed, as mentioned above, that they would be more successful if they could avoid interpreters and avail themselves of their oratorical skills. Here too, we see a contrast between interpreting in the administrative and religious fields, for the proselytisers urged the *topazes* to improve their public speaking<sup>19</sup>, whilst this was of no concern to those engaged in commerce, for interpretation was undertaken for a small group of people at close quarters.

Skilful interpreters were capable of working in different arenas: the religious orders were aware of the difficulty in retaining theirs, when they knew that their language skills could be put to more profitable use by working for merchants. Not only were members of the clergy requested to act as ambassador-linguists by the State as mentioned above, but they also came to play a unique and vital role during the second half of the sixteenth century in Japan, by combining their evangelising activities with mediating business arrangements between Portuguese traders (who enjoyed a monopoly) and leading Japanese figures, including warlords. João Rodrigues, sent out to India as a young boy by the Jesuits and a product of their rigorous language-learning regime, became a trusted confidante and commercial agent for Hideyoshi a position which ensured that the latter did not enforce his expulsion edict of foreign missionaries on the Jesuit order. When finally removed from that powerful position by Hideyoshi's successor, the Portuguese also lost their commercial dominance.

portuges pera melhor declaração do que scprevo na ola". Our translation: "And because they may not know how to declare what I write on a palm-leaf to your Excellency, I thought it wise to write this one in Portuguese so that they state better what I am writing on the palm-leaf" (Colecção de São Lourenço 1973-1975: 412).

19 See the letter from Francis Xavier to Francisco Manilhas in Punicale, sent from Manapar, 20.3.1544 (*Obras Completas de São Francisco Xavier* 2006: 154). Our translation: "Tell Mateus to be a good son and I will be a good father to him. Take good care of him and tell him to say out loud what you tell him on Sundays: let everyone hear him, including those in Manapar! This last part was a jest as Manapar was a good twenty miles away".

### 3. Conclusion

Interpreters working for the Portuguese *Estado da Índia* like their predecessors on the voyages of discovery acquired their skills informally, with interpreting techniques being just one of a range of abilities required to mediate between often hostile groups and simultaneously ensure one's own survival. A satisfactory system for recruiting, training and developing interpreters was never put in place by the administration, for it was so concerned with military, territorial and economic goals, that efficiency of communication was not given any real consideration. Furthermore, an inherent distrust of those living on the edge of or between several cultures, who were not unmistakably Portuguese and Christian, induced contempt towards linguistic mediators and the underrating of their activities.

In a sense, religious orders operating in India and the East were more reliant on interpreters, not because the language skills of their own members were inferior, but rather because the spoken word was vital for achieving their substantive goals. They devoted much attention, as reflected in their internal correspondence, to the training and development of their linguists (of both European and Asian origin), going beyond mere foreign language-learning and creating specialised seminaries with a view to producing bilingual brethren and future interpreters. They had different parameters for assessing the quality of interpreter performance, which included public speaking skills, proficiency in both the output in the mother tongue and understanding of the source language, and the ability to grasp and convey specific concepts. In short, they were more demanding on the technical dimensions than the administration and thus entertained considerations that are closer to those expected of modern interpreters.

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