

First Encounters: From Sign-language and Pantomime to Translation and Interpretation: The First European Attempts at Verbal Communication with the Amerindians

Smatie Yemenedzi-Malathouni

Possession of the New World began with the Europeans' refusal to accept the Amerindians' linguistic and consequently cultural otherness. Amerindians were, therefore, expected to be totally conversant with the European languages and culture. When they failed to be so, they were considered to be "virtual blanks," ignorant savages in need of European acculturation, religious conversion and total assimilation. Within this ideological frame, the Europeans being self-consciously "civilized" people refrained from learning the Native Americans' languages, but "kidnapped" Indians, with comparatively superior intellect, and took them to Europe. There, these miserable people, who were stripped of their cultural conscience, were taught the European ways and, of course, a European language. The early colonial discourse is replete of incidents of natives who after being captured and alienated from their kinsmen are taught the languages of their captors and are then used as interpreters for the further exploitation and possession of the New World.

This article is an attempt to describe the first verbal encounters and establishment of communication between the American Indians and the European conquerors, during what is usually called the colonial period of the United States, or more precisely what has actually been the period of invasion of the Indian societies by the Europeans. More specifically, it demonstrates that the Europeans intentionally ignored the linguistic "otherness" of the Amerindians in the beginning as it served their purpose for land dispossession and its subsequent appropriation by the Europeans. In turn, territorial appropriation, eventually, led to cultural suppression and more often to cultural assimilation. The use of interpreters by the Europeans

was limited and aimed at the manipulation and exploitation of the Indians rather than at the development of trans-cultural relations. The discussion of the first communicative/interpretative encounters is limited to the first three centuries of the invasion because the Modern American Society is considered to have evolved from the complex web of interrelationships of this period.

Sign Language and Pantomime

When Columbus, during his third voyage to the American land, reached the island now known as Trinidad, he encountered people who looked different from the islanders he had encountered so far.¹ Perceiving in them characteristics he had long anticipated in the previous Indian encounters but had not found, he attempted to make contact with them especially since, they, too, appeared at that moment to be sharing the same desire. They were shouting something to Columbus' men which neither he nor any of the European sailors could understand. The tone of their utterances, however, revealed neither aggression nor hostility. Then, as Las Casas notes in his description of Columbus' third voyage to the American land, Columbus ordered his men to signal the Indians to approach; but, they did not move an inch. To make his good intentions clearer, Columbus ordered some shiny pans and bright objects to be brought and displayed, but even this friendly demonstration of potential friendliness did not convince the natives to come closer much less aboard, so that he could "have a speech with them." He then had an idea which he thought would dissolve any doubt in the minds of these people of the newcomers' intentions. He "caused to be brought up to the castle of the poop a tambourine, that they might play it, and some young men to dance believing that they would draw nearer to see the festivity." He hoped to coax the Indians into contact by displaying a cultural event which in Columbus' culture stood for a "token" of peace. At this sight, however, the Indians "dropped their oars and lay hands on their bows and strung them, and each one of them took up his shield, and they began to shoot arrows (ii14-16)."² What in the European culture would have been

1. As is known, Columbus was convinced that he had discovered a westward approach to the great Khan's land, the land which Marco Polo had described in his own travels. During his first two trips, he was disappointed to find out that what he had discovered was not actually Khan's mainland, but obviously close-by islands. In his third trip, he was almost certain that he had eventually reached what he had long been searching for. One of the reasons he thought so, besides his wishful desire, was the lighter complexion of the people of Trinidad, as well as the fact that they were wearing cotton scarves around their waists, which resembled the elaborate silk or cotton strips which according to Marco Polo's writings people in the East wore either as turbans on their heads or as loin-cloths.

recognized as a graceful friendly gesture, in the Trinidad culture it was obviously a declaration of war. Obviously the different cultural medium of the Amerindians had rendered European mimicry totally incomprehensible.

Unfortunately, this small "fiasco" in communication, the failure to insert the European self into the sign system of (an)other, did not indicate to Columbus that different peoples read the same signs in a different way and that signs are not intra-cultural representations of words and expressions. Yet, communication "by conjectures" is the colonial way of discourse Columbus and almost all other early voyagers and explorers follow as the most convenient, although they realize its inadequacy to help them. Most probably, they have all been sharing St. Augustine's conviction according to which there exists a universal language of expressions of the "face and eyes, gestures and tones of voice," which can enable people to communicate at a simple level.³ But any game of pantomime such as the one Columbus was attempting to play with the natives, presupposes a shared gestural language which replaces actual speech until other more complex modes of communication are established. A communicative gestural process though, can only be effective if it is carried out in a "shared cultural medium." Columbus and most of the other explorers motivated by a complex nexus of ideological and cultural contingencies interpreted Indian signs as transparent within the frame of the European representational system and its linguistic counterpart. The cultural displacement of the natives' signs, however, reduced them to incomprehensible pantomime which hampered communication and more often than not proved dangerous. For Columbus signs were the equivalent of words and words were stable associations between two entities; the presence of one inferred definitely the existence of the other. But in the case of human signs, i.e., words, Columbus failed to realize that they are not simple associations interlinked directly but associations loaded with intermediary meaning which in this case depends on an inter-subjective reality; a reality which was very different in the two cultures but which Columbus intentionally ignored.

Columbus' peculiar views on the versatility of cultures and languages were rather naive and predisposed. A polyglot himself, although according to Todorov his knowledge can be seriously questioned, he seems to be paying

2. Noted in Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions* 91.

3. *Confessions* (Penguin) 29. Noted in Greenblatt 180. Augustine's assumptions were preceded in late antiquity by Quintilian, who had written of a "law of gesture," a "chironomia," and had sketched the range of bodily motions and expression which can be used effectively "without the aid of words"(93).

very little attention to foreign languages. He fails to recognize the diversity of languages and when he confronts a foreign language he either acknowledges it as a language but refuses to accept that it is different or he acknowledges its difference but refuses to admit it as a language (Todorov 30). For him linguistic diversity does not exist since language is natural. For him words are the image of things and for Columbus this image of the things he encounters has already been specifically defined in the writings of the Scriptures and the writings of Marco Polo and Pierre d' Ailly. Columbus interprets signs in such a way as to confirm the beliefs and hopes he expected signs to confirm. "Columbus performs a 'finalist' strategy of interpretation, in the same manner in which the Church Fathers interpreted the Bible: the ultimate meaning is given from the start (this is the Christian doctrine); what is sought is the path linking the initial meaning (in other words, the apparent signification of the words of the biblical text) with this ultimate meaning" (Todorov 17). Columbus is interested in the interpretation as long as it fulfils his own regard; linguistic accuracy and proximity is not his main concern. There cannot be any misunderstanding because experience only confirms what knowledge of the Scriptures has primarily stated. After all, what had originally led him to the American continent, as Todorov notes, rested on a specific linguistic misunderstanding (29).⁴ Columbus' religious beliefs influence his interpretation of the sign language he encounters and bias extensively distorts his account of the people and their culture. He does not care to understand more clearly what the Indians are saying, because he claims he already knows in advance what he will encounter. The presence of the Indians and the concrete experience serve only to confirm what he thinks he already knows; the truthfulness of this experience need not be sought any further nor confirmed scientifically because for Columbus it is axiomatic. His perception of the experience is based upon a structure of prearranged expectations rendered in the writings of Marco Polo and the doctrine of predestina-

4. The common belief of his time held that the earth is round but supposed with reason that the distance between Europe and Asia by the western route was almost impassable. Many "scientists" of the time had calculated the distance, but Columbus took for his authority the Arab astronomer Alfraganus, who indicated the earth's circumference with admirable accuracy; he expressed himself, however, in Arab nautical miles, which are about a third greater than the Italian nautical miles familiar to Columbus. In accordance with his convictions, Columbus could never have imagined that the same term might have had different significations in different traditions (or languages or contexts) and translated Alfraganus' calculations into Italian miles, which of course rendered the distance within the measure of his powers. So, as expected, Columbus was not able to find Asia at the calculated distance but found America instead (Todorov 29-30).

tion as far as his role in the whole scheme is concerned. Signs simply confirm the beliefs and hopes he has entertained in his own regard. Greenblatt notes that Columbus attempts an *enfranchisement* of the signs, as he incorporates them in his own gestural tradition and eventually in his own language. So, it seems that Columbus overcomes the opaqueness of his eye's experience, i.e., the incomprehensibility of the signs and subsequent inability to communicate, by reducing the signs to transparency and depriving them of their original meaning. His individual ideological obsession not only falsified experience but eventually helped him to displace reality. Once he had reached a land, Columbus was determined to have found what he had set out to find. In a 1492 entry of his *Diary* we read: "I saw some [Indians] who had marks of wounds on their bodies and I made signs to them asking what they were; and they showed me how the people from other islands nearby came there and tried to take them, and how they defended themselves; and I believed and believe that they come here from *tierra firme* to take them captive" (*Diario* 67).⁵ As Greenblatt notes, one finds it very difficult - especially considering the episodes quoted earlier - to imagine that the Indians were able to render through mimicry complex concepts such as invasion, resistance and capture, much more so for Columbus to understand them.

Because of his strong religious convictions, and individual expediencies, Columbus himself in the beginning underestimated the difficulties of communication between the Europeans and the American natives. His first reports state clearly that there hasn't been any significant barrier in communication. "We passed through many and dissimilar tongues. Our Lord granted us favour with the people who spoke them for they always understood us, and we them. We questioned them, and received their answers by signs, just as if they spoke our language and we theirs."⁶ Verbal communication or sign language, nevertheless, seems to have been equally unsuccessful in most cases and the reports based on these testimonies inaccurate and dangerous. The following example demonstrates the communicative gap that existed between the Europeans and the natives.

One of the Indians [whom Columbus sees facing him] advanced into the river near the prow of the barge [Columbus is preparing to land with his men], and delivered a long speech which the Admiral failed to understand [at which we are not surprised]. But he observed that the other Indians from time to time raised their hands toward the sky

5. Noted in Greenblatt 80.

6. Cabeza de Vaca, *New American World*, ii. 51. Noted in Greenblatt 95.

and uttered a great shout. The Admiral surmised that they were assuring him that his coming was a welcome event [typical example of wishful thinking], but he saw the face of the Indian whom he had taken with him (and who understands the language) change colour, turn yellow as wax, and tremble mightily while saying by signs that the Admiral should leave the river because they sought to kill him. (Todorov 32)

A year later, Columbus admitted that he could not understand the natives' language "save by conjectures," but he, still, seemed not to realize how completely untrustworthy this method had proved.

Reading all these reports of the first European encounters with the American natives, one is amazed at the inherent inconsistencies and inaccuracies, all examples of the failure of these early attempts for cross-cultural communication. The narratives are overwhelmed with expressions of uncertainty such as "we do not know [. . .]," "we could not explain [. . .]," "we could not understand [. . .]," "yo crey," closely interwoven with confident assumptions, but without any sign of doubt or of the writers' apparent awareness of contradiction (Greenblatt 80).

Most of those who sailed to the New World after Columbus, with very few exceptions, undermined the linguistic obstacle and compiled reports on the basis of "gestural" testimony with a lot of "filling in the blanks," according to individual expediencies.⁷ Amadas and Barlow, for example, who were sent to locate a "promising territory" for an English colony, make a very alluring report of the colony of Virginia on the basis of alleged testimonies they have collected. But from their narrative it becomes clear that they have not understood a word of what has been said to them. All signs are read in the most promising light - in almost the same spirit that Columbus' have been - as their report is a lure for potential investors for future voyages. Profit contingencies necessitated carefully calculated accounts in which more often than not those who compose them report what they understand or think they understand or think the others back in Europe would like to read.⁸ The early discourse of the New World is fraught with

7. Las Casas, for example, is one of the very few Europeans who attacks, for his own reasons, the generally accepted belief of the cultural transparency and complains about the fact that complex negotiations are conducted on the basis of two word phrases such as "gimme this [...] take that."

8. The very name of the country known to us as Yucatan is a symbol of the misunderstanding that prevailed at the time. Todorov notes that at the shouts of the first Spaniards landing on the peninsula, asking them where they were or what the name of the place was, the

resolutely blunt falsifications designed to serve either the writers' ideological perspectives or their materialistic expectations or even their country's imperialistic aspirations so as to justify the forces of domination, constriction, repression and extinction at work in the practices of the aggressive and intolerant European cultures of the time. To paraphrase Edmundo O'Gorman's comment, Europeans had to invent an America since the first explorers had been reluctant to explore it.⁹ Indeed, all these "cynically calculative" reports noted above and thousands of others were primarily made possible through the European reluctance to acknowledge the Native Americans' cultural specificity. The Europeans' refusal to acknowledge the opaqueness of the Indian signs of communication and the intentional inscription of these signs within their own culture indicates the Europeans' own cultural stance. In the spreading of their representational system and in the blocking of the free movement of alternative symbolic systems, the Europeans conceptualized the potentially unlimited expansion of their own sphere of influence. Possession in the New World began with the construing and appropriation of the Indian sign language by the Europeans. The inscription of the Indian sign-language within the European representational system rendered the first inferior and ineffective and consequently rendered the culture it had generated also inferior to that of the Europeans. What Columbus and the other invaders saw when they come to America is a collection of vulnerable peoples who cannot even interpret the European gestural system - as if it were they who needed to do so - naked and transparent, who rendered themselves easy to exploit, to convert, to assimilate, to possess and eventually to absorb completely. Depending on the explorers' different contingencies, the Indians are imagined either as "virtual blanks," ignorant savages, "naked in culture as they are in body," or they are imagined as the Europeans' "virtual doubles" expected to be fully conversant with the European languages and culture (Greenblatt 95). These two tendencies which apparently appear to be versions of one another make it very clear that the Europeans annulled the Amerindians as ethnic entities to justify the suppression of their culture and the effacement of their history. Peter Martyr the chronicler notes:

For lyke as rased or vnpaynted tables, are apte to reeaue what formes soo euer are first drawne thereon by the hande of the painter,

Mayans answered, "*Ma c' ubah than*," meaning "we do not understand your words." The Spaniards, faithful to Columbus' example, heard "Yucatan," and decided that this was the name of the province.

9. Noted in Jennings 58.

euen soo these naked and simple people, doo soone recaeue the customes of owre Religion, and by conuersation with owre men, shake of[f] theyr fierce and natiue barbarousness.¹⁰

One moment the Indians have no culture, the next they get rid of their own inferior one and adopt the European.

Unlike the Europeans, the majority of the Indians on their part seem to depend less on such interpretative limps for their communication with the newcomers, and at a lesser loss to realize that the sign-language the newcomers are using does not relate directly to the conjectural system of their own culture. Having come in contact with other tribes, for barter reasons in the beginning, the Indians seem to have acquired the notion of “otherness” in social, cultural and communicative context and show great consideration for the Europeans’ cultural and communicative “otherness.” Hernando de Escalante Fontaneda, a Spaniard who had survived a shipwreck and had become proficient in the native languages of Florida, narrates an incident in which some European captives are saved from execution when the Indian chief realizes that their refusal to obey his orders was not a sign of disobedience but of lack of understanding. “The cacique, discovering the truth, said to his vassals, that when they should find Christians thus cast away, and take them, they must require them to do nothing without giving notice, that one might go to them who should understand their language” (12).¹¹ The cacique seems to accept the cultural and linguistic difference of his captives and makes some effort to overcome this obstacle which hampers communication. Unlike the particular cacique who in prospect of economic profit or barter trade is interested in establishing a line of communication with the newcomers neither Columbus nor the early European voyagers seem very willing to take these cultural and linguistic differences into consideration. They consider the act of translation to be taking place on a vertical axis between the source and the target languages and cultures and mistake equivalence for sameness.

“Kidnapping the Language”: Linguistic Appropriation of the Land

Despite his conviction that he has found an earthly Paradise described by Pierre d’Ailly in his *Imago Mundi*, or the eastern parts of the Great Khan’s land described by Marco Polo, Columbus undertakes a process of

10. Peter Martyr, *The Decades of the Newe World (De orbe novo)*, trans. Richard Eden, decade 3, bk. 9, in *The First Three English Books on America*, ed. Edward Arber (Birmingham: Turnbull & Spears, 1885), 117. Noted in Greenblatt 95.

11. Noted in Greenblatt 97.

naming or rather re-naming of the places he encounters, although he knows that they already have one. He gives them the “right” name, following the intentions of Divine Providence, which designates the names of people and things to their qualities and uses. His act of “nomination” is rather extended and is enacted sometimes in terms of the importance the places occupy in his discovery, sometimes in terms of the Spanish royal hierarchy; sometimes he draws names from the Scriptural repertoire or even renames the various places by applying to them a Spanish name of direct resemblance. This act of re-naming the rivers, mountains, bays and sights in general signifies the “linguistic appropriation” of the land which gives way to a conscious effort of assimilation and eventual possession (Greenblatt 103). More than a century later, Captain John Smith in his exploration of the upper Chesapeake in 1607, notes that his party enacted the same process carried out by Columbus a century earlier, that of giving names to rivers and land formations, on the basis of the impression they made upon them. Moreover, Smith adds that “In all those places and the furthest we came up the rivers, we cut in trees, wherein we writ notes, and in some places crosses of brasse” (Smith 57). And he explains that they did that to give proof to any other English people who might pass by these places that they have already been there. What Smith attempts to accomplish with the inscription of the various signs, meaningful only to the European representational system, and of the English names on the trees is simply to cancel the Indian language and consequently their territorial rights, and assert European possession and cultural presence. Ziff notes that all Europeans were terrified of being lost in an unfamiliar land which did not have any names and therefore created the notion of unfamiliarity and cultural estrangement. Consciously enough, all voyagers and invaders do not make any effort to transcribe the Indian name in English or in Spanish; nor do they try to find the English or Spanish equivalent to create the desired notion of familiarity; they bluntly displace the Indian name, thus symbolically annulling the cultural background which had generated it in the first place. By attributing names to the land formations, the colonists achieve three things: they appropriate the land, they displace the already existing names which adumbrated the natives’ conception and replace them with their own, and finally they define their ownership rights. Intentionally or subconsciously, Smith’s soldiers conceptualise conquest by naming just as Columbus had done the previous century.

Linguistic Appropriation and Cultural Suppression

Eventually, by the fourth voyage, Columbus will be forced to acknow-

ledge the Indians' foreignness of language. In his *Diary* Columbus notes that "of all these lands and of all that which there is in them, *owing to the lack of an interpreter* [my italics], they could not learn very much" (102).¹² It is now clear to him that the early discourse is full of questions that have not been answered and the need to move on from mute wonder and individual guessing to communication becomes pressing. In accord with the idea he has formed about the Indians, though, Columbus and all the other voyagers do not make any effort to overcome the language barrier and learn the language of those they come in contact with. With very few exceptions, almost all the interpreters of the time from Melchior to Squanto and from Malintzin to Pocahontas are natives who learn the language of the Europeans who settle in their area. The Europeans claim that the Indians have a flair for mimicry and thus they are fit to learn the invaders' language, rather than they the Indians'.

They should be good and intelligent servants for I see that they say very quickly everything that is said to them; and I believe that they would become Christians very easily, for it seemed to me that they had no religion. Our Lord pleasing, at the time of my departure I will take six of them from here to Your Highnesses in order that they may learn to speak. No animals did I see on this island except parrots. (*Diario* 67-9).¹³

The comment is not to be taken as a compliment as the natives' talent is dismissed as "parroting." The diminishing way in which the natives' linguistic skills are depicted, undoubtedly relates to the Europeans' attitude to the natives themselves and their culture. It is usually the conqueror who is obliged to learn the language of the conquered, thus acknowledging the cultural existence of the other and signalling the beginning of the acculturation process. But in the case of America, the European invaders insist on rendering the Indian culture as non-existing especially in terms of its inhabitants' foreignness of the language and that of religion. Learning a language involves immersing in the cultural milieu which has given rise to this language and that would involve a relative degree of submission to it. However, not even for a minute did the Europeans accept the existence of the Amerindian culture, much less its potential superiority. As Greenblatt notes from the very beginning the Indians' nakedness not only rendered all of them equal to the eyes of

12. Noted in Greenblatt 92.

13. Noted in Greenblatt 90. Todorov notes that these terms seemed so shocking to Columbus' French translators that all of them changed the statement into "so that they may learn our language" (30).

the Europeans, but it also signified the Indians' literal physical vulnerability and therefore their inferiority. On the contrary, Europeans were "civilized" enough to disguise their own "nakedness" under garment and armour and that gave them automatically a sense of superiority in terms of physical condition (90). The European concept of themselves as a superior / dominant culture enforced a contradictory notion of the true nature of the peoples they encountered in the New World, prevented them from viewing the Indians as cultural others and consequently from acknowledging the existing linguistic opaqueness. To many Europeans, the Indians' "appropriative mimesis," to use Greenblatt's term, that is their fragmentary reproduction of commonly heard words and phrases clarified with gestures, created an illusion of adequate communication and the conviction that the linguistically transparent Indians were apt to pick up the simplest forms of the elaborate European linguistic idioms. Very often these negotiations, in which the Indians indulged in hope of acquisition or more profitable barter trade, were supported by mimicry and ended up in apparent misunderstandings and embarrassing situations for the Indians. This embarrassing situation, and the apparent incomprehension that ensued, did not seem to annoy the Europeans; yet, the experience created in the Europeans' mind a model of a man acting like a child. The model of the "infantilised" Indian which was very popular among Europeans automatically designated the constrictions of his culture and the restrictions of his "otherness" (Greenblatt 105). In addition to their virtual "blankness" and cultural nakedness, noted before, imbecility and infantilization were also considered as the Amerindians' character attributes, a view which confirmed the idea that the Indian culture was transparent and an easy prey to their schemes. The newly discovered inhabitants fit exactly the pseudo-mythological representations of the colonists' discourse and render themselves vulnerable, naked, dark savages and ignorant heathens in need of civilization. After all, the European invaders and colonists understood or thought they understood what they wished they had heard or what suited their aspirations and desires. In this way they created a pseudo-colonial discourse of their invasion of the Amerindian societies which preserved "the absolutes of predator and prey" and maintained the "sanguinary radiance" and grandeur of the invasion and massacre (Jennings 6).

Moreover, their heathenism sanctioned the Europeans' superiority and legitimized all measures taken towards the Indians' conversion, including those of kidnapping, enslaving and eventual extinction in case they refused to convert. So, religious instruction becomes another means to cancel the Indian languages since understanding the Christian doctrines required proficiency in English, Spanish, or French. All attempts to erase the Indians

from the New World begin from or aim, primarily, at the dismissal of their language and subsequently at the annulment of their culture. The lack of written language was another factor which justified the Europeans in ranking the Indians as “savages,” a very flexible term, which each time took the form most convenient to the European who was using it. After all, as Greenblatt notes, from ancient times “self-consciously civilized people” have dismissed the value of other cultures on the basis of their foreignness of their language despite the fact that these cultures had often given proof of an equal level of “civilization.” The term “barbarians” invented by the Greeks for their non-Greek neighbours was a term which was adopted by subsequent “civilized” nations and had acquired gradations in Europe during the period of the colonial enterprise, varying from savagery, to barbarism, and to civilization. In the same spirit, Europeans adopted their predecessors’ stance and enhanced it with the foreignness of religion; “civilization” became pretence of attack rather than a standard of measurement. “The Christian Caucasians of Europe were not only holy and white but also *civilized*, while the pigmented heathens of distant lands were not only idolatrous and dark but *savage*” (Jennings 6). So they attributed the term “savages” to the American natives originally on the foreignness of their language and then extended it over onto the foreignness of their religion and eventually on that of their culture. Thus, blunt conquest and imperialism were invested with “sanguinary radiance” and land usurpation and massacre with holy expediency and glory.

Kidnapping the Language and the Indians: First Translation Attempts

Despite their prescribed need for communication with the natives, most of the Europeans in general and the English in particular demonstrate very little interest in learning the Indians’ language, much less in immersing into the Indian culture. As a matter of fact, those very few who withdrew from the “civilized” settlements and lived in isolation were lamented as having given into “savagery” or as having become “moral misfits” and they were simply not counted as “bona fide” members of the English society (Axtell 315).

When forced to adopt some more reliable form of communication, Europeans mostly resorted to techniques characteristic of their imperialistic mode; namely, that of kidnapping Indians to teach them their language and introduce them to their culture in their own milieu. In October 1492 Columbus promises himself: “If it please Our Lord, at the moment of my departure I shall take from this place six of them to Your Highnesses, so that they

may learn to speak.” Todorov notes that these terms seemed so shocking to Columbus’ French interpreters that they changed the statement to: “so that they may learn our language” (30). In another instance he suggests to the Spanish king and queen that they, “the men and women and boys and girls” that he had captured, be placed in charge of persons so that they may be able to learn the language better, employing them in forms of service, and ordering that gradually greater care be given to them than to other slaves, so that some may learn from others” (Greenblatt 107). There in Castile, he continues, if they are kept separate from each other and they do not speak between them “they will learn more quickly there than here, and they will be better interpreters [. . .] there learning the language, they will much more readily receive baptism and secure the welfare of their souls.” The eastern conquerors of America have always glorified the devastation and misery they had “wrought in visions of righteousness and allusions of metaphysical justification.” Incidents of involuntary interpreters, the most unfortunate victims of European imperialistic expediency are very often noted in the diaries and reports of numerous voyages and explorers. De Sotto also notes how much he has been helped by an interpreter in his most difficult journey and how much he has been relieved by a young captive who spoke Spanish. “After that, a youth who had been seized in Cutifachiqui, and who knew something of the language of the Christians, served as an interpreter” (*New American World*, ii. 137).¹⁴ The early colonial discourse is fraught with similar incidents of natives being captured and after being alienated from their kinsmen to be taught the language of their captors, more often than not to be converted to Christianity and then to be used as interpreters for the further exploitation and possession of the New World.

So, after the dispossession of the land from the Indians the Europeans proceeded to the dispossession of the Indians from their land by kidnapping natives and teaching them their own language in a European cultural milieu. The immersing of the natives into the European culture is a kind of “enfranchisement” which would temporarily relieve the pressing needs for communication and at the same time would curb the Indians’ ethnocentric resistance. Moreover, communication in a “civilized” tongue would not only reduce the potential misunderstanding, but it would also reduce the “savage mind to ‘civilized’ modes of thought” (Axtell 317). Furthermore, by distancing the kidnapped natives from their land and their language, Europeans practiced psychological pressure on them and those left behind. Distance and language alienation rendered Indians willing disciples of Christianity to

14. Noted in Greenblatt 109.

which they turned in the strange land as a last resort for comfort and relief. The period of training having passed, they were baptized and soon afterwards they found themselves on a ship taking them home. The memory of the pain and misery they had suffered when they were “eradicated” from their families and places, the terrible sense of isolation and alienation as a result of their inability to use their own language discouraged them from going over to their people once they found themselves back on the American land. And if they attempted to do so, they often found out that they had already been wiped out as in the case of Squanto, or in other cases the suspicion with which they were faced discouraged any thought of return. They had become strangers in their own land.

The colonists did make some effort to encourage professional interpreters to learn the Indian languages, by sending young boys to live with the Indians, or later by placing “apt” students in schools with Indian students who were expected to reach a linguistic reciprocity by teaching each other their language. Yet, later, those who followed the first explorers found themselves in need to compile a list with the most frequently used Indian words in their territory, phrase books and small dictionaries, books in the example of Williams’s *A Key Into the Language of America*. (The title itself indicates the English reluctance to acknowledge the linguistic and cultural variety of the American peoples.) Yet, in the long process of “transculturation.” Algonquian names of places, wildlife, and native artefacts or native material culture entered the mainstream of Anglo-American speech. Yet, these words were used in distinctive ways, mainly when there were no English equivalents for them, as in the case of the various animal and plant species indigenous to North America, of local dishes, or of social occasions and religious rituals. In these cases, more often than not these words were “Englishized,” cut down in fewer syllables to make them easier to pronounce until colonial experience displaced them with “newly coined” English words (Axtell 318).

Indian Interpreters: From Don Juan de Castilla to Pocahontas

The role of the interpreters has been decisive in the European colonial enterprise. And that because they did not function as translators only between the Indian idioms and that of the Europeans. They established a dialectical relationship between two quite different systems as they moved from one representational form to another and most important they conceptualised the transcultural process between them. Often they helpfully suggested what alternative concepts could be implied in the foreign language other than

those available in the chosen translation and helped overcome the blockage which the different cultural system may have created, thus initiating a slow acculturation process. Despite their contribution to the early phases of colonization, all these interpreters - for they weren't mere translators - have been approached with scepticism and doubt as to their truthfulness and motives on the part of the invaders, and with hostility and contempt on the part of their countrymen. Despite their direct involvement with language, none of them left anything written behind, providing an alternative for the conquerors' testimony. The first two Indians kidnapped by Columbus' men, Don Juan de Castilla and Don Fernando de Aragon may be the first but certainly not the most famous. They were the first ones to be brought from Castile and were renamed by Columbus in his long cascade of renaming. One of them escaped and joined his countrymen soon after his return from Spain; the other stayed with the Spaniards and offered them invaluable services. Among the list of Indian interpreters the most famous are Squanto, Somaset, Hobomok, Malintzin and Pocahontas, although the latter's role in the success of the colonial enterprise has been blurred by the romantic fancies of Captain John Smith. They became the protagonists in the dialectical relationship between the "grafted" European cultural systems and the indigenous ontology, and initiated the creation of an independent local identity. Accounts of their personality are sparse, quite contradictory and always indirect. Ironically, those who helped lift the linguistic barrier between the two cultures and effected communication did not leave any individual account of their contribution to it; not even are they quoted directly, talking, or expressing their views. They oscillate in this mid-zone of contest, the living ghosts of what they could have been but never were, hated and envied by their own people, approached by suspicion and looked down by the Europeans. They undertook the errand to place the unfamiliar within a familiar context, to merge the "self" with the "other," or to reconcile the "self's" potential "others." Cultural hybrids themselves, they were forced to act as unwilling intermediaries in the larger process of violation of their society.

All interpreters noted in the European's records of the colonial discourse were almost as sophisticated as their English "allies." Squanto and Hobomok, for example, were both eminent members in their tribe, shamans to be or pines. Their sophistication can only be deduced from various sporadic comments, apparently unrelated among them, while the characteristics attributed to them fall within the general European concept of the Indian temperament: Ambition, greed and "infantalization" are their personality attributes, while their contribution to the establishment of sustained

communication is usually underrated. Despite the negative comments which Bradford makes about Squanto, for example, accusing him of seeking "his own ends," and "playing his own game [. . .] to enrich himself," the accusation proves rather of little importance, especially in relation to the Europeans' colonial aspirations, but also in relation to his contribution to the colony's welfare. Squanto contributed immensely to the welfare of the colony of Plymouth by initiating language contact and diplomatic relations with the other Indians. Moreover, he lent the colonists items of native culture to help them adjust to the American environment and saved them from starvation when he showed them how to "set" the Indian corn and how to "dress and tend it".¹⁵ In various other cases Squanto's contribution to the Pilgrim's safety is deduced rather than being clearly stated. On the contrary, the negative attributes of his character are briefly but clearly noted, not allowing any space for doubt or different interpretation. Despite the human weaknesses which Squanto may have had, his negative representation in the Plymouth narrative may as well have been another case of "misunderstanding." Arrogance and racial prejudice had kept the English from coming to terms with elements of the Indian culture such as social classes and rank or even with more abstract ones such as the Indian oral tradition, mythology and religion. The English were obsessed with the effort to create replicas of their own culture and when they did they failed to see its drawbacks and attributed them to the Indians' defected nature.

Two other interpreters and cultural mediators as famous as the aforesaid are Malintzin and Pocahontas. Both women were of noble origin. Malintzin's father was "casique" of the entire area of Coatzacoalcos and Matoaka as Pocahontas' real name was Powatan's favourite daughter, an Amerindian princess herself. They were both exploited by their own community, suffered betrayal and rejection and proved invaluable to Hernando Cortes' expedition and the conquest of Mexico and to John Smith and the settlers of Virginia respectively.

Pocahontas, the young Amerindian princess, functioned as an interpreter between her father, the powerful Powatan and the Virginia colonists, desperately trying to maintain the proper balance between the "self" and the "other." A victim of her father's ambitions, of John Smith's romantic fantasies and eventually of the colonists' assimilating process, she was baptized, named Rebecca and given to marriage to John Rolfe, a widower and much

15. Bradford specifically notes that with the exception of corn, none of the other produce they had sowed "did well." The Plymouth colonists would have starved to death had it not been for Squanto and his instruction on the way the Indians grew corn.

older than her. She became a cultural “half-breed” inhabiting the contested middle zone of no man’s land and functioned as the “go-between” in the dialectical process of the European and the Indian culture. Ironically enough, Pocahontas’ “immortality” has been based on a cultural misunderstanding. She too, like Squanto and many other anonymous Indian interpreters, was caught in a false situation, which quite dramatically she never exited from and which was the result of the Europeans’ insistence to ignore the native’s culture and to inscribe foreign representations within their own cultural scheme.¹⁶

The case of Malintzin or La Malinche, or Dona Marina is similar to that of the other two interpreters. Her historical life takes up that mid-zone where different cultures contest for primacy, the Mayans and the Aztecs, the Aztecs and Cortes’ Spain. She stands between Montezuma and Cortes and concentrates all communication between the two conflicting cultures. Malintzin, a princess herself, was initiated into the Aztec education at an early age until she was displaced on her mother’s request in favour of her new-born brother and sold as a slave to the Mayans. It seems, however, that by the time she was sold as a slave she had already acquired the linguistic excellence, which differentiated the Aztecs from the other tribes. The Aztec culture demanded its potential public figures to be trained not only “to govern well but also to talk well” and speak many different languages; obviously unrestrained communication was of primary importance for the Aztecs.¹⁷ When she is given to Cortes as a gift, she is already proficient in many Indian idioms and her linguistic training enables her to learn Spanish very

16. As is well known, Pocahontas, after having been converted to Christianity, married John Rolfe and travelled to London to be presented to the Queen. Political expediency and probably capitalist interests necessitated her presence in England, which proved fatal. Pocahontas died at the age of twenty (of a lung inflammation) on the boat which had just started the voyage back home. She was buried in England.

17. Todorov claims that one of the reasons Montezuma was defeated by Cortes was that he made the same mistake Columbus had made. Cultural arrogance inherent in a highly “civilized” culture such as that of the Aztecs prompted Montezuma to inscribe the new comers’ set of representations within his own. Thus, Indian communication proved not only ineffective but disastrous as well, since it brought about their downfall. For example, in order to convince his visitors to leave his country Montezuma loaded them with gold. But each time he did that, he increased their greediness and persuaded them to stay. The same thing happened when the Spaniards were offered women with the same intent. And when Cortes’ men became witnesses of their comrades’ brutal massacre, this too, had exactly the opposite effect Montezuma expected it to have. All these incidents become additional justification for conquest - both defensive and offensive - and committed the Spaniards to fighting with all the more determination (88).

quickly. She immediately becomes Cortes' interpreter and mistress and gives birth to his son. But most important, she becomes Cortes' principal interpreter to the Aztec and the other tribes' languages, as well as his main access to the Indian system of representations Cortes had no idea about. Cortes, whose strategy depended on rhetoric as much as on force, found in Malintzin an agent who could not only fortify his military strategy but also explain to him the Aztec set of cultural representations.¹⁸ With her help, Cortes is initiated into an acculturation process which undoubtedly proves to his benefit and which no other interpreter would have accomplished. Moreover, Malintzin being respected and loved by her own people, becomes an agent of a subtle process of linguistic and cultural assimilation incurred upon both the Amerindians and the Spanish soldiers, especially when she gives birth to Cortes' son. She embodies effective, decisive action in "the feminine form but most important the syncretization of two opposing worlds in a new emerging one," and yet Malintzin's name is a mirror of the history of the appropriation and eventual possession of the American land, as well as of the ideological basis embedded in the colonial discourse of appropriation and conquest. The Spaniards adjust her name to their own linguistic set and change it to "La Malinche." When she is baptized, she is given the name of "Dona Marina" to denote her own cultural insignia. Her closeness to Cortes and her share in the success of his plans for conquest, render her as an image of Cortes himself. Bernal Diaz notes that Cortes was addressed as Malinche both by the natives and the Aztec court. Malintzin appears to eventually evade the contested mid-zone the other interpreters found themselves in, since the two cultures symbolically merge in this image of dual identity where the "self" and the "other" do not conflict but oscillate in it. Moreover, Malintzin's body becomes literally and symbolically the locus of reciprocity between the Indian and the European cultures. In the course of history and with the development of cultural studies and the emphasis on lost ethnicities, however, Malintzin acquired another name, which indicated the ethnic bitterness for the miscegenation process she had also initiated and has been called the "Chingada" meaning the "penetrated."

Conclusion

In the colonial discourse of the conquest of America, it becomes clear that the Europeans employed language not only to appropriate the newly

18. Greenblatt notes that one of the reasons Cortes managed to subdue the powerful empire of the Aztecs was that he became familiar with the Aztec set of cultural representations and inscribed the Spaniards' arrival within the Aztec culture and its identity myths (145).

explored lands, but also to establish their territorial rights, to assimilate the natives and eventually to annul their culture. In their refusal to accept the foreignness of the “others” language, one notes their refusal to accept the natives’ ethnic ontology. It becomes evident, then, that the Europeans in general and the English in particular, tried to keep translation as limited as possible. And when they were forced to resort to it for fear of extinction, or for economic expediencies, or conversion policies or for expansion schemes, it is always controlled and supervised and always under the pretence of Christian holiness and glory. Although most of the Europeans’ translators-interpreters are carefully selected among the Indian elites, they are never approached as their equals, and in the European records of the American experience they are always rendered as weak, fallen and hardly capable of substantial improvement and change, but most of all as “mute” and culturally transparent.

*Aristotle University
Greece*

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