Interlingual Configurations:

Who Does The Work of Translation?

Einar Wigen

University of Oslo

International and interlingual relations are separate but related phenomena. Because boundaries in interlingual networks partially follow the political boundaries dividing the world into territorial states (often legitimized as ethno-linguistic communities), they sometimes overlap. Yet interlingual relations is a more common phenomenon than international relations and includes a broader scope of exchanges. In order to get a better understanding of what interlingual relations is, we need to disentangle them from relations between states, specifying what different roles are played by those who are tasked with the job of mediating across linguistic boundaries.

While a turn to interlingual relations in the study of global politics could easily slip into a mode of focusing on relations between diplomats and state leaders, it is important to note that these networks involve a great number of other individuals who engage in translational practice in other capacities - as traders, as travellers, employed in NGOs, as professional interpreters, or simply helping family members interact with authorities. From an interlingual perspective, it is not given that the people with the most formal political power are the most interesting for understanding what is going on or explaining political outcomes. Moreover, an interlingual network is also interesting as a whole, because the existence and practices of the others in the network shape the scope of action that political actors have. The interlingual relations at the top is not fully understandable without also getting a sense of how they are embedded in a wider network.
In this essay, I take the multi-lingual Ottoman Empire as a case of how mediation happens in different roles both within the empire and in the center’s interaction with other politics. The aim is to catalogue the different interlingual mediators at work in the running of the Ottoman Empire, focusing on six different roles for intermediaries interacting across linguistic boundaries.

The first group is that of envoys sent by the sultan to other courts over whom the Ottoman sultan had no formal authority. The second is imperial middlemen within the Empire, people who set themselves up as provincial power brokers and mediated between the Ottoman court and provincial subjects. The third is that of the arzuhalci: professional translators of petitions from subjects to the sultan or other Ottoman officials. The fourth is that of merchants whose trade extended either between imperial peripheries within the Empire or between the Ottoman polity and polities further afield, and who used multiple languages to conduct their affairs. Penultimately, I describe the most famous of these roles, namely that the role of the dragoman, the translators used by both the Ottoman court and foreign ambassadors in Istanbul. Finally, I look at the role of intellectual, man of letters, or scientist, engaging with foreign texts as a matter of learning and observation. It is important to note that although these are six different roles of intermediaries, and that individuals frequently played more than one such role in their careers.

Brokerage and the Boundaries of Meaning

Language is humans’ primary medium of social interaction and it is difficult to envision a relationship between humans without some mutually intelligible meaning-making practices. Speaking about something as interlingual presupposes that languages are concrete things that can have relations. They are not (Derrida 1985, 225). Languages are abstractions, having no existence prior to our grouping different lexa together and calling them ‘language x’. The obvious move is to go straight for a ‘speakers before languages’ approach to
interlingual relations (Jackson and Nexon 1999), acknowledging that languages in themselves are not things or actors that can have relations. Individuals engage in relations with other individuals; they are the ones who make meaning.

Linguistic boundaries are based on mutual unintelligibility between speakers. They may simply emerge because a group of people over time does not interact with another because of geographic distance and physical isolation. But unintelligibility may also be produced deliberately as a means of segmenting populations. The most blatant example of the latter is the unintelligibility between Arabic and Hebrew, which Lital Levi (2014) argues emerged through deliberate Israeli nation-building that sidelined the language of Arabic-speaking Israelis (see also Abboud et al. 2018). Although it is also a Semitic language that could potentially have had many commonalities with Hebrew (depending on how Hebrew was shaped in Israeli nation-building) and many Jewish Israelis have or had Arabic as their mother tongues, Arabic is associated with Israel’s Other. Arabic, one of Israel’s two official languages, is not just ‘unimportant’, it is politically expedient to police the boundary that keeps it keep distinct and separate from Hebrew.

The tasks of translation and interpretation typically fall to someone who has some bilingual proficiency, who ends up playing the role of mediator either by design or by default. This is in some ways a privileged position in that it typically entails being a bridge tying together network clusters, giving the mediator competitive advantage through brokerage (Granovetter 1973; Burt 2010). It is also a position fraught with risk, since mediators and translators are easily represented as liminals and potential traitors. Finally, although merchants use their role as intermediaries specifically for profit and some actors use theirs’ for political gain, it is seldom translation itself that is profitable, and the labor of interlingual mediation is seldom recognized.
Types of Ottoman Intermediaries

For much of world history, empires have been the dominant form of political organization (Cooper and Burbank 2010). Empires are configured as a hub and spoke network of segmented peripheries, and characterised by rule via intermediaries (Nexon and Wright 2007). Linguistic boundaries is one way of segmenting peripheries, but there can also be linguistic boundaries between the center and at least some of the peripheries. In the Ottoman Empire, the center operated in Ottoman, a primarily written language that was distinct from the everyday affairs of subjects and largely exclusive to the elite. The Ottoman language has been claimed to be intrinsically linked with ‘a worldly, belletristic tradition . . . embracing what the Turks ultimately came to refer to as both edeb, “good breeding,” and edebiyat, “literature”’ (Findley 1980, 9). Taking part in the Ottoman belletristic tradition was part of elite status across much of the Empire and these elites used Ottoman to communicate with the center.

The Ottoman language was in many ways connected to the operation of the state itself. It emerged alongside the development of the dynastic state and it also disappeared soon after the abolition of the sultanate. Rather than being a case of the political center conceiving the community in terms of linguistic similarity, the Ottomans developed their own ‘high register’ of Turkish, a feature that they shared with all other languages within the empire (Strauss 1995). While Ottoman was based on Turkish grammar and syntax, the language was suffused with loanwords and formulations that were incomprehensible outside the Ottoman elite. This meant that the imperial center interacted with a broad range of actors through a network of interlingual relations that involved translation at multiple levels.

Envoys
In addition to being the apex of a linguistically diverse imperial network, the Ottoman Empire also had interlingual networks reaching beyond the Sultan’s realms. Since the foundation of the Ottoman polity in Anatolia in the thirteenth century, political elites in the Ottoman Empire and various European states were never isolated from one another. There was continuous interaction across various linguistic and cultural boundaries. Relatively thinner networks between Ottoman elites and, say, French elites, may have as much to do with relative geographical distances, as it has with cultural difference or reciprocal boundary-making. Networks seldom tied the Ottoman state elite directly to its peers in polities beyond the Balkans and the Adriatic littoral (Wigen 2018: 57). Yet there also existed a wide network of weaker ties made up of merchants, renegades, and go-betweens (Windler 2001; Philliou 2011; Gürkan 2017).

From the early eighteenth century CE, the Ottomans increasingly started sending their own statesmen as ambassadors to Christian European states, and from the 1790s, they established permanent embassies in key European capitals (Yurdusev 2004). These embassies were also used to train individual statesmen in European languages, most notably French, so that they could interact competently with their interlocutors without the need for further intermediaries. This was a move to centralize control over how the Ottoman polity interacted with other polities, which had paradoxical consequences for how the polity was run, since it made translingual practice with cultural and political foreigners part of the job of statesmen with prestige and power. While this may not have made the practice more visible, it was no longer the domain of liminals.

*Imperial Middlemen*

The relationship between Ottoman subjects and the imperial suzerain was a hierarchical chain of patron-client relations. At the top stood the sultan and at the bottom were the lowly subject. Since the Ottoman center worked in a language not used outside formalized
setting - and one whose existence in spoken form is questionable - any and all interact between the palace or its scribal service and the subjects involved some form of interlingual practice. In the case of Turkish-speaking Muslims living just beyond the palace walls, this would entail translation into vernacular Turkish. Further afield, it might involve multiple nodes of translation in a hierarchy of imperial middlemen, from the lowly subject’s village headman or sheikh, via a provincial notable, to a governor and so on all the way to the palace or Porte. Most of this hierarchy would largely operate orally and only at the higher levels would there be written interaction in the form of letters. An example could be a Syriac-speaking villager interacting with a Syriac/Arabic bilingual headman, and the headman could be speaking Arabic to the provincial notable, who would then use Ottoman in his interaction with the governor, and from the governor on up, the chain would function in Ottoman. The linguistic make-up of Ottoman imperial hierarchies and the extent to which “domestic politics” involved interlingual relations is too broad a question to cover exhaustively here. Suffice to say is that what we have is a network: a chain of interlingual relations that do not transcend formal political boundaries.

Petition writers

Petitions are a way for subjects to short-circuit the hierarchies used to rule an empire and to appeal directly to someone further up the hierarchy, such as the Sultan, without the mediation of the headman, chief, sheikh or even governor (see Ben-Bassat 2014; Sievert 2014). While the individual scribes and the organs of the state using their services may have been multilingual, the Ottoman scribal service as such operated in their own narrow conception of the Ottoman language (see Topal and Wigen 2019). Exceptions might be made for letters from the Safavid Shah, who sometimes wrote in a different kind of Turkish (Floor and Javadi 2013), but not for lowly subjects. Even if they knew how to write, subjects petitioning their higher-ups, including the Sultan, would have to have their requests and
complaints translated into the highly formulaic and convoluted proper Ottoman of the scribal service. In fact, there were so many people specializing in petition writing - what were called arzuhalcis - that they had their own guilds. Their job involved listening to the complaint in whatever vernacular language the complainant used (and typically the arzuhalci worked in), rephrasing it, probably censoring the contents (though we do not know how exactly this worked) and writing it in a language that could be understandable and legible within a scribal context. Petition-writers can therefore be seen as freelance imperial intermediaries who make their services of translation available to common subjects for a small fee.

*Merchants*

Where most of this catalogue deals with intermediaries acting in hierarchical relations, merchants typically connected peripheries and polities in a lateral manner. Moreover, while trade requires a certain degree of trust, at least for generic goods it is largely transactional and does not necessarily require a great deal of mutual understanding. Therefore, it easily transcends linguistic boundaries in ways that perhaps other types of relations do not. However, as these relations were sustained over time in the Mediterranean, they gave rise to a specific historical language called *Lingua Franca* (Dakhlia 2008).

Ottoman merchants have traditionally been divided into two groups; Ottoman non-Muslims who traded goods over longer distances and Ottoman Muslims who traded mostly within the Empire and with polities to its east. The supposed reason for this was that the non-Muslims were more cosmopolitan and outward-looking and Muslims were more centered on ‘their own world’. The reason may be something else - namely that Muslims traded in European ports such as Marseille, but that this was made difficult because of the locals’ distrust of Muslims. Hence, Ottoman Christians profited from their acceptability in both sets of ports, and because they were Christians they could also set up trading houses further afield,
thus keeping the long-distance trade within the family and could mediate at both ends.¹ This is a type of trading network that seems to have dominated in much of the Eastern Mediterranean for centuries, and were backbones of the Genovese and Venetian maritime empires. Such trading families could also be called upon for other services, such as acting as envoys or relaying news about other polities (Windler 2001; Philliou 2011).

**Dragomans**

Early modern Ottoman diplomacy generally relied on actors outside the palace for its conduct of foreign affairs. Translators known as dragomans were used both by the palace and the various organs of the emergent Ottoman state, and by European embassies in Istanbul who had their own dragoman. These were first primarily Italian-speaking Peraiots² and later Greek Phenariots.³ There are also some Armenians, most famously the Swedish dragoman Mouradjea d’Ohsson. Dragoman typically served as oral interpreters in meetings between diplomats, or they acted as literal go-betweens, relaying messages between embassies and government offices in Istanbul. All European embassies and since the position typically required language skills and networks that were easily passed on from father to son, it was not uncommon for sons to follow in their father’s footsteps. Furthermore, the specific linguistic skills and networks ties were also useful for other purposes, and hence there was a part of the Ottoman elite that was able to variously play roles of merchants, middlemen and dragomans (Philliou 2011).

**Intellectuals**

While a handful of Ottoman diplomats received their education in the French language at the turn of the nineteenth century, it was not until the establishment of the *Tercüme Odası* (Translation Chamber) in 1821 that the state institutionalized its training of well-connected

---

¹ This is a point made by Ouchi (1980) in a different context.
² That is, the Genovese colony at Pera, across the Golden Horn.
³ Upper class Greeks living close to the Greek-Orthodox Patriarchate in Istanbul.
Ottomans in French language for the purpose of interaction with other states. This is an important change from exploiting weak ties, because by developing translators in-house, the state not only had less agency problems, it also enabled an important sector of state elites to engage directly in interlingual relations. Possibly because of this, the *Tercüme Odası* fostered some of the most intellectually innovative and influential individuals of the second half of the nineteenth century (Wigen 2018: 120). This made them brokers, not of goods and merchandise, but intellectual networks that enabled them to engage in dialogues across structural holes that few others had access to. These networks and dialogues were crucial for some of the most prolific and influential intellectuals of the final decades of the Ottoman Empire (Çiçek 2011).

**Imperial Transformation**

The Ottoman language had been inextricably tied to exercise of the Ottoman dynasty’s political power and both the response to its decline and its final collapse meant reconfiguring its interlingual networks. One political response to the perceived decline of the Ottoman polity in the early nineteenth century was centralization. In its drastic attempts to limit the role of intermediaries, the Ottoman center also reconfigured its networks of interlingual relations. As the center expanded in terms of personnel and capacity, it encroached first on the local middlemen in the first half of the nineteenth century, who were increasingly replaced by Ottoman governors on rotation, and then on the individual subjects through the expansion of military service and education in the second half of the nineteenth century (Deringil 1998). With the political emancipation and enfranchisement of the 1908 Constitutional Revolution, the Ottoman public sphere blossomed, and individual subjects increasingly interacted with others across the peripheries (Campos 2010). The imperial segmentation largely broke down, which led to conflicts over language in such arenas as the parliamentary assembly (Kayalı 1997). There was also a movement for the vernacularization
of Ottoman, including evocations by Namık Kemal and later the Genç Kalemler (Young Pens) to write in ‘simple Turkish’. This program started as an attempt by intellectuals to translate between Ottoman and vernacular Turkish, and was completed by the Turkish Republic in the 1920s and 30s, when it became a deliberate move to do away with the need for translation in direct state-subject affairs and to expand unmediated access to the public sphere.

With the end of the Ottoman Empire, its successor states all reconfigured according to ‘one state, one language’ ideals, however successfully or partially these reconfigurations have been carried out (Anscombe 2014). A feature of this is that rather than subjects being segmented and ruled, citizens of a nation-state are equal before the law and access these rights in the language of the state, which, in theory should be the same language as they themselves use. This was to some extent a case of trying to make the linguistic landscape fit the political map, but it follows from the ideal that citizens are supposed to have a direct bond to the state, to claim their rights and do their duties unmediated by middlemen, dealing directly with the state and being equal before the law.

**Conclusion**

This catalogue may prove helpful when trying to locate intermediaries at political interfaces that are not necessarily those of state-to-state interaction. If we go for a broader set of questions and a more encompassing take on global politics, we also need tools to make sense of those categories of actors who do mediation at the interface between collectives, groups, cultures or languages, but who are not official state representatives. Attempts at typologies need to be founded on a richer set of empirical cases than a single empire. Therefore, this catalogue of Ottoman intermediaries does not claim to hold any validity for other political contexts but could serve as a starting point for discussing the roles taken by people doing interlingual mediation. The roles of envoy, middleman, merchant, petition-writer, *dragoman* and *homme*
des lettres have all transformed, and few would recognize themselves within the Ottoman catalogue. Envoys, merchants, translators/interpreters and intellectuals are perhaps the most recognisable ones, with imperial middlemen and petition writers being perhaps more problematic. I might also have included jurists, who translate and formulate complaints in a legal vocabulary that a plaintiff or a defendant may not know or understand, even though they may know ‘the language’ in which the legal proceedings take place. Interlingual mediation takes place across the board, and is both a feature of what the polity does, at the interface between the state apparatus and its subjects, and at the interface with other polities.