



# Looking for Interpreter Zero: The Ancient World I – Cicero and Caesar on Interpreters

Interpreters are rarely mentioned in sources on Ancient Rome, but they were certainly needed. Rare references to interpreters appear in Cicero's letters and in Julius Caesar's 'The Conquest of Gaul'

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Christine ADAMS.

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*If the gods send us these unintelligible and inexplicable dream-messages they are acting as Carthaginians and Spaniards would if they were to address our Senate in their own vernacular without the aid of an interpreter.* Cicero [\[1\]](#)

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*The use of interpreters by the Romans must have been very common from the earliest times, since Rome in her early days was surrounded by peoples which spoke languages and dialects different from Latin; and as her power extended, she was constantly brought into contact with nations speaking foreign tongues.* J.C. Rolfe [\[2\]](#)

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*The problem of interpreters in the ancient historical sources – and, indeed, inscriptions and papyri – is that they are too often invisible, mentioned only under exceptional circumstances.* R Mairs [\[3\]](#)

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**It is a commonplace in the working life of interpreters today that they are behind the scenes, most successful when unnoticed.** That invisibility can characterise the historical record too: the interpreters who are known to us are the exceptions; the others are an assumed presence. That is certainly true of Ancient Rome. Interpreters are rarely mentioned in documentary or epigraphic sources for a number of reasons. Their role in everyday transactions was not often recognised; record-keepers may have been reluctant to digress in order to acknowledge their role, or their presence was simply taken for granted. [\[4\]](#) There was clearly a need for interpreters, not just to enable communication but because Romans in official positions preferred to work through interpreters - even if they did master their interlocutors' languages - in order to mark the prestige of Latin.

## Ambassadors addressing the Senate would have needed interpreters

We have very little information on how these intermediaries worked. That is why references to interpreters in Cicero's letters and in Julius Caesar's *The Conquest of Gaul* in the 50s BCE are valuable. Cicero (106 BCE – 43 BCE), the Roman orator, philosopher, lawyer and statesman, had dealings with interpreters both as a senator and as a lawyer. His references to interpreters in the

Senate – which he entered in 74 BCE - give some substance to the sense many scholars have that senators did use intermediaries when foreign envoys, say, took the floor. In addition to the mention of Carthaginians and Spaniards above, he intimated in *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* that interpreters appeared regularly:

Thus just as in the senate there is always someone who demands an interpreter, so we must use an interpreter when we give audience to your school. [5]

Ambassadors addressing the Senate would have needed interpreters. In Cicero's time, those who travelled to Rome from all over the Mediterranean would not have been able to address that august body in Latin strong enough to make any impression.

Hence, there must have been an interpreter corps in the service of the Roman state, made up of trustworthy persons who had a good command of one or several foreign languages. [6]

Cicero's writings also seem to indicate that the use of interpreters was well-established by the time he was in the Senate. He refers to one Publicius Menander "from the time of our ancestors" who was to accompany an embassy to Greece, [7] and tells the rather compelling story of the senator Acilius who in 155 BCE volunteered to interpret three eloquent Greek philosophers - Carneades of the Academy, Diogenes the Stoic, and Critolaus the Peripatetic - sent to appeal to the Senate to write off a fine imposed on the Athenians for the sack of Oropos. [8]

Cicero had other occasions to deal with interpreters. As the prosecutor in the case against the corrupt Governor of Sicily, Verres, in 70 BCE. He had occasion to point out one of Verres's interpreters at the trial:

Do you see that man there? – with curly hair, dark complexioned, the one who's looking at us as if he thinks himself very clever. The one who's holding writing-tablets, who's writing, who's prompting him, who's right next to him. That's Claudius, who in Sicily was counted as [Verres'] agent, his interpreter, the one who transacted all his business for him ... [9]

## **Messenger, mediator, envoy or military adjutant**

This description brings up yet another difficulty in understanding the role of interpreters in Ancient Rome when the context is other than formal meetings and oratory. The term *interpres* covered many sorts of intermediary roles: it could mean messenger, mediator, envoy or military adjutant. Claudius may have helped Verres communicate with people, but he could also have played a role in his plunder of Sicily. Whatever his responsibilities, he did not impress Cicero.

It could be that Cicero's disregard for one interpreter informed his admiration for another. In a letter of 50 BCE, he sings the praises of Marcilius, his interpreter when he was proconsul of the province of Cilicia (on the Mediterranean coast of modern Turkey). He was writing to recommend Marcilius's son describing the young man's father as:

*amici atque interpretis mei ... quod in longa apparitione singularem et prope incredibilem patris Marcilii fidem, abstinentiam modestiamque cognovit.* ("my friend and interpreter ... in a long course of his service as *apparitor*, I have found his father Marcilius peculiarly and almost incredibly trustworthy, disinterested, and scrupulous.")

[10]

Marcilius appears to have had occasion to work as an interpreter in the strict sense of the term: *longa apparition* is a reference to his long-held position as attendant or interpreter. In Cilicia, he may have

helped Cicero through his command of the dialects of the province as well as being able to interpret Cicero into Greek, so he could stick to Latin as required.

## **Reliability, objectivity and confidentiality**

Cicero set great store by reliability, objectivity and confidentiality – and clearly felt that his long acquaintance with Marcilius made a difference. Julius Caesar showed similar priorities in his occasional references to the interpreters who served him during his conquest of Gaul. The first occasion involves the Adeui people (in the area of modern Burgundy) when Caesar had dealings with two brothers, Dumnorix – who was showing signs of ambition and disloyalty and Diviciacus, who was “an enthusiastic supporter of Roman interests”, but understandably reluctant to see his brother executed. [\[11\]](#)

Accordingly, before taking any action, he sent for Diviacus, and dismissed the ordinary interpreters talked to him with the assistance of Gaius Valerius Trucillus, a prominent man in the Province of Gaul and an intimate friend of his own, in whom he had entire confidence. [\[12\]](#)

After discussing the case with Diviciacus, Caesar summoned Dumnorix and simply cautioned him – and kept him under surveillance.

## **A man who could be trusted**

The second time Caesar used an interpreter occurred during his negotiations with the German king, Ariovistus. The two leaders had met (in what is now Alsace) to negotiate over Ariovistus’s ceasing hostilities against the Adeui or their allies, restoring their hostages and deterring more Germans from crossing the Rhine. Discussions were interrupted when Caesar heard that his men were being taunted by Ariovistus’s horsemen; when it was suggested that talks resume, he decided not to expose a Roman officer to any risk from those “savages” but to send Gaius Valerius Procillus [\[13\]](#), whose father had been granted Roman citizenship.

Procillus was a man who could be trusted. His knowledge of the Gallic language would be useful, since by long practice Ariovistus had learnt to speak it fluently; and in his case the Germans would have no cause for foul play. [\[14\]](#)

Caesar was wrong. Ariovistus did have cause for foul play as he assumed the Latin-speaking Gaul was an enemy. Procillus was accused of spying and put in chains. It was Caesar himself who rescued him during the battle that ensued: he was with his cavalry when he came upon Procillus being dragged along by his guards. He rejoiced at having saved the “worthiest man in whole Province” who was luckier than his patron realised:

Procillus recounted how, before his very eyes, the Germans had three times cast lots to decide whether he should be burnt to death at once or reserved for execution later, and how he owed his life to the way the lots had fallen. [\[15\]](#)

## **These middlemen were usually unmentioned**

Caesar’s reference to ‘ordinary interpreters’ implies that he used them regularly. This is borne out by a later reference to interpreters when his men Sabinus and Cotta were engaged in a bloody battle with the Eburones, settled “between the Meuse and the Rhine” [\[16\]](#) when

Sabinus was so much alarmed by these events that on catching sight of Ambiorix, who

was addressing his troops at some distance, he sent his interpreter Gnaeus Pompeius to ask for some quarter for himself and his soldiers. [17]

In this instance, the interpreter was named but these middlemen were usually unmentioned and assumed to have been present: even Goscinnus and Uderzo included a hapless interpreter, Rhetoric, in *Asterix and the Goths* [18]. Scholars who have combed through the record have concluded as much for the all of Ancient Rome. We also have to bear in mind while some of the sources are lost to us, there are some stories that were never written down.

It is not just that we are dealing here with part of the submerged illiterate majority of the ancient world; but many of these native languages would have had no written form at all and *could* not have made it to the written record. [19]

The examples we have from Cicero and Julius Caesar are of particular interest not just because of their scarcity value but because of the way they highlight the strong emphasis on trust. It is not just that Cicero admired Marcilius for his loyalty, or that Caesar entrusted sensitive missions to respected friends like Trucillus and Procillus; their accounts also reveal how easy it was to cast aspersions on the middleman's honesty. Sometimes this may have been tactical: it may have suited Cicero's argument in court to denounce Claudius. At other times those intermediaries could pay a heavy price if they were deemed untrustworthy by one side.

Thus the expression "Traduttore, Traditore" includes oral translation too. This view has a long history which – in Europe - goes back at least to accounts of Themistocles's treatment of an interpreter for a Persian embassy to Athens in 491 BCE, to be covered in my next piece.

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You can find all chapters of *Looking for Interpreter Zero* [here](#).

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## References

- [1] Cicero De div ii.64.131
- [2] Rolfe, J.C. 1911 Did Liscus Speak Latin? The Classical Journal, Vol 7. No. 3. pp 126-129, p. 127
- [3] Mairs, R. Translator, Traditor: The Interpreter As Traitor in Classical Tradition. Greece & Rome, Second Series, Vol 58, No 1 (April 2011) pp. 64-81. p 66
- [4] Mairs ibid
- [5] Cicero De fin v 29 89
- [6] Pina Polo, F. 2013 Foreign Eloquence in the Roman Senate in Steel, C Steel & van der Blom, H eds Community and Communication: Oratory and Politics in Republican Rome. pp. 247-266 p. 253
- [7] Cicero Pro Balb II.28
- [8] Cicero Gell. VI.14.1
- [9] Cicero Verr II.2.108
- [10] Cicero Fam XIII.54
- [11] Gardner, J.F. ed. 1982 Caesar, The Conquest of Gaul. Penguin, London. p. 37
- [12] ibid p. 38
- [13] Some scholars believe Trucillus and Procillus to be one person. Mairs, ibid p. p. 73 FN 18.
- [14] Gardner p. 54
- [15] ibid p. 56
- [16] ibid p. 115
- [17] ibid p. 121
- [18] <https://bit.ly/2DwoNYy>

[19] Beard, M. 2014. *Confronting the Classics*. London. Profile Books. p. 214.

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Recommended citation format: Christine ADAMS. "Looking for Interpreter Zero: The Ancient World I" Cicero and Caesar on Interpreters ". aiic.net. November 19, 2018. Accessed March 3, 2020. . Cicero is fortunate to have found in Everitt one who is at home in the ancient world and able to communicate to readers of the present time. "The Seattle Times/Post Intelligencer "Brilliant" not only deeply and carefully researched but well-crafted in a style that should appeal to a wide variety of readers. A staunch defender of the Roman Republic, Cicero spent his career battling foes such as Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. Everitt does a superb job of bringing the last days of the Roman Republic to life, and he accurately portrays the tenuous political situation that marked the times. Most important, he creates a sympathetic portrait of Cicero. And, in terms of interpreting work, he was an English interpreter for the late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping. In the 1980s, Deng was the most important person in the world! Gao says that Deng was very small, around 152 cm tall and that he was a man of few words. His speech wasn't sophisticated and he conveyed his ideas very clearly, which made it easy to understand him. Interpreter Elena Kidd, currently course director of the MA interpreting and translating programme at Bath University, worked for Mikhail Gorbachev back in the 90s. She gave an interview to The Guardian about it. She says Gorbachev was friendly and had an accent that was easy to understand.