



Mediterranean Programme

10th Mediterranean Research Meeting

Florence & Montecatini Terme 25-28 March 2009

Workshop 3

***Language and Cultural Mediation
in the Mediterranean, 1200-1800***

Translators, Interpreters and Cultural Mediators in Late Medieval Eastern Iberia and Western Islamic Diplomatic Relationships

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ROBERT SCHUMAN CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES

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Abstract

The wealth of records of the former Crown of Aragon have for years allowed extensive studies of its late medieval relationships with Granada and North Africa, mainly focused on commercial and diplomatic contacts. But hitherto no special attention has been paid to the individuals who made it possible to achieve these links, nor to their helpers and assistants as translators and interpreters. Many of these characters are anonymous, and their real involvement and commitment in contacts, as well as their language and inter-cultural skills and the achievement of their linguistic competence, seem difficult or even impossible to establish.

Nevertheless, a careful analysis of already known data, together with supplementary research and findings, provide some guidelines to be taken into account, not just from the Christian point of view -where comparisons between Castile and Aragon are possible-, but also from the Islamic one (as far as the widespread outlook of the Christian records permits).

It is clear that cross-cultural characters like Muslim Mudejares or merchants living or dealing with Islamic lands (and even Jews when considering earlier periods) were appointed by the Catalano-Aragonese and by Muslim powers as diplomatic interpreters. In many cases they must be considered cultural mediators, not merely language translators. Relating to the importance of the mission and to the faithfulness devoted to them, they could play the role of true ambassadors as well. However, when supposedly acting just as language translators, interpreters could spontaneously arise as cultural mediators as well. They could try to help diplomats to act right and proper when crossing cultural boundaries, and to prevent rulers from misunderstanding their counterparts.

Although linguistic competence and language knowledge was essential, rulers often looked for the cultural aptitudes of their official translators to guarantee the success of the diplomatic missions. Nevertheless, as shown by travelers and pilgrim writings, the awareness of the importance of good translators was everywhere and in any case recognized.

The learning of the "the Other's language" is not easy to be illustrated, but some practical examples can be shown. Even if in the Crown of Aragon some Arabic schools seem to have been encouraged by rulers and by the Church, little is known about them. However, far from bilingual boundary-characters like Mudejares, some examples of the real and practical learning of merchants, captives, slaves and other boundary-crossing men can be provided, showing that desire or necessity could teach them in very short periods of time.

¹“He who translated this letter says that (...) in many cases he was unable to translate the verbs, as they do not exist in Romance, and he had to translate the idea”.

Although on this occasion, they may be referring to a particularly complex text, because it seemed to have been written “with great mastery [of Arabic] in verses versified with great subtlety”, these words that head the translation from Arabic into Castilian of a letter that, in 1330, the sultan of Damascus sent to James II of Aragon offer a perceptive view of the arduous task translators often face. However, it is due only to this added complexity that, exceptionally, the translator felt the need to emerge to justify himself, to make himself visible from time to time behind the smokescreen that usually hides him. And this, to demonstrate that, although the maxim *traduttore traditore* may be true with respect to the literal nature of the words, it does not have to be as regards the content and intentions of a good translator.

The Latin etymology of *traducere* refers us semantically to the movement implied by “transporting” from one language to another. The fact is that, currently, contemporary society has become aware that “translation is intercultural communication in its purest form” and of “its power in forming and/or deforming cultural identities”². But, in past societies, those accustomed to dealing with truly different realities and those who put them in contact were also aware that the translator’s task was not exclusively that of translating. And that, as someone supposedly very familiar with the two realities that he was putting in contact, his task was closer to that of an interpreter or cultural mediator than to that of a mere language translator.

With regard to the sphere of trade, the well-known fourteenth-century Florentine manual *Prattica della mercatura* by Francesco Balducci Pegolotti (on the first pages of which the author considers it necessary to include a small list of abbreviations accompanied by an also brief vocabulary with definitions and even linguistic equivalences of terms he considers useful for merchants) defines dragomans – *turcimanno in più linguaggi, calamanci in tarteresco* – as *gente che temperano e dànno a intendre linguaggi da uno linguaggio a un altro che non si intendessero insieme* (Pegolotti 1970, 19). And he then considers, without a

¹ This paper is part of the research project approved and financed by the Spanish Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia, entitled “The Crown of Aragon in the Medieval Mediterranean: Bridge between Cultures, Mediator between Christendom and the Islamic World” (HUM2007-61131).

² From the dust jacket of *Cultural Encounters in Translation from Arabic*, ed. by Said Faiq, Clevedon – Buffalo – Toronto, Multilingual Matters Ltd., 2004.

shadow of a doubt, that it was not worth his while trying to save money when hiring them, because the difference in price between a good translator and a bad one was more than made up for³.

The account of the Flemish merchant of Genoese stock Anselmo Adorno's pilgrimage to the Holy Land seems made to measure to illustrate just how far Pegolotti's last statement was true. He contrasts the bad experience with a Muslim dragoman from Granada who spoke Castilian, who swindled him buying provisions, with that of a monk from Sinai, honest but very expensive, who got him out of more than one difficult spot and saved him having to pay a lot of taxes. This enables him to claim that, in order to cross the desert, the first thing one had to do was hire a good dragoman or loyal prudent interpreter and pay any price for him, as the quality of his services made it worth your while and you ended up saving money in the long run (Heers – de Groer 1978, 210-212 / 211-213).

Adorno illustrates to perfection what he considered were the three characteristics a dragoman had to have in order to be good: mastery of the language, loyalty, and experience of the way of life and the country.

With respect to the mediaeval Western Mediterranean and, particularly, the old Crown of Aragon, there is a long tradition of studies of the contacts between the Christian world and the Western Muslim world⁴. These studies are based on the very rich archive sources conserved, and they have been focused above all on commercial and diplomatic relations. But, to date, little attention has been paid to both the individuals who made possible and structured these contacts and those who helped and assisted them as translators and interpreters.

Many of these figures are anonymous. And, when they are not, they are little more than a name; in other words, we cannot know anything, or hardly anything, about them. If we can see them in action more than once and follow their activity minimally then we are quite fortunate. Their true involvement in the contacts, then, and their linguistic skills, their

³ Pegolotti is referring, specifically, to its use on the overland route that, from Tana, on the Black Sea, led to China: "E vuoi fornire alla Tana di turcimanni, e non si vuole guardare da risparmio dal cattivo al buono, che il bono non costa quello d'ingordo che l'uomon non-s'ene migliori via piu". And he even considers that it was advisable for the servants to have a good command of the Cuman language: "e oltre a' turcimanni si conviene menare per lo meno due fanti buoni che sappiano bene la lengua cumanesca" (PEGOLOTTI 1970, 21).

⁴ Here is not the place to list that long list of historical works, but some of the more significant monographs can at least be mentioned: GIMÉNEZ 1907-1908, ALARCÓN – GARCÍA 1940, MASÌÀ 1951, DUFOURCQ 1966, FERRER 1988, MASÌÀ 1989, LÓPEZ 1995, SALICRÚ 1998.

intercultural flair and their process of acquiring linguistic competence are difficult and even, almost always, impossible to establish.

In any case, a careful analysis of some already-known records, combined with the discovery of other new ones, enables us to point out certain traits that may be taken into consideration. And not only with regard to the behaviour of the Christian side, but also, as far as the Christian sources permit, of the Islamic one.

We must not forget, in any case, that intercultural communication problems were not, by any means, exclusive to the contacts between groups separated by religion and culture. Because they appear and surprise us, even, between people who apparently shared the same cultural codes and a comparable social level in the context of Western European Christendom.

The narrative accounts bequeathed us by some Northern European travellers who came to the Iberian Peninsula during the second half of the fifteenth century demonstrate this⁵. The clearest example is, possibly, in 1484-1485, when the Silesian nobleman Nikolas von Popplau failed to kiss the hand of King John II of Portugal. The first time Popplau met the Portuguese monarch he did not kiss his hand, as he was unaware of such a practice. And, when he withdrew, he was harshly reproached because of it by the Portuguese courtiers. The second time they met, despite having been informed, he again did not kiss the king's hand, because he waited in vain for him to extend it. And only after a second rebuke did he understand that it was he who had to take it and kiss it. Logically, Popplau said in his own defence that, in his country, anyone who took hold of the hand of the Emperor or a governor without it being outstretched would be considered an animal, so that, in his opinion, he had not been disrespectful to the Portuguese king because very often, what in one place was considered respectful, in another was unseemly⁶ (García, 1999 [1952], 294).

To avoid this kind of misunderstanding, the thing to do was to allow oneself to be advised by those who knew the ways of the "Other". And, although we have very few irrefutable examples of people carrying out this function, the advice that the Genoese rulers gave to an ambassador sent to the Nasrid sultanate in 1479 could not be clearer: as the king of Granada was an infidel, his nature, customs and way of speaking were very different from

⁵ Furthermore, they also make it clear that, already by then, there existed codes or guidelines of different conduct and bodily expression in southern and northern Europe, particularly in relation to the form and intensity of eye contact or to the greater custom of and predisposition to direct physical contact (SALICRÚ forthcoming B).

⁶ Although there are those who consider the existence of an "aptitude of interaction" of the nobility (KINTZINGER 2002, 455), the fact is that, like Popplau, Olivier de la Marche also stated, in the middle of the 15th century, in his memoirs, that *chascune nation a sa maniere de faire* (HUESMANN 2002, 313).

Genoese ones, so he had to be treated differently to the way one would treat a Christian, and the Genoese merchants living there, practised in the country and familiar with its ways and customs, would know how it had to be done; therefore, the ambassador would have to act as they told him (Salicrú 1997).

There can be no doubt that, historically and almost universally, direct contact with the “Other” was the principal way of getting to know him. Sought after and therefore conscious and voluntary in some cases, and circumstantial or merely forced in others, authentic intercultural contact and, if there were any, authentic dialogue, was left to the merchants, Mudejars, Jews, mercenaries, diplomats, but also to the captives, slaves and renegades, who may be considered real transverse figures (Salicrú 2008a), groups bridging the gap between two worlds (de Bunes 1989) or, simply, cross-cultural characters.

Often then, these figures played the part of mediators or cultural translators rather than mere linguistic translators (Salicrú 2005a). Nevertheless, it is clear that, even when they were given solely the role of linguistic translators, they could also emerge spontaneously as cultural mediators. Or, at least, try to help the diplomatic agents to act correctly and properly, and to prevent rulers from misunderstanding their counterparts.

A clear example appears, once again, in one of the translations of Arabic letters into Romance language from the reign of James II kept in the Archive of the Crown of Aragon. In 1316, Pere Robert, dragoman and royal “gatekeeper” (messenger)⁷, took the liberty of adding a personal comment to the handwritten translation he had done of a letter in Arabic from the King of Granada. In it, the Nasrid was replying to a complaint that James II had made to him with regard to the capture of booty and people on the frontier telling him that he had rejected it, seeing as the Granadans had taken the prisoners in retaliation for Christian attacks. And, once the translation was finished, the dragoman felt the need to emerge to point out: “Now, sire, I wish to certify to you that you may justly demand the people and the cattle, because it is not true, but false, that before they were captured your subjects had attacked Granada. Against what the king of Granada is hoping for, then, the Granadan reprisals are in no way justifiable. Moreover, you should also know that when the king of Granada was enthroned, he issued a general safe-conduct in favour of all your subjects. You should have its translation in

⁷ He appears mentioned this way in both the letter in question (Arxiu de la Corona d’Aragó [ACA, Cancelleria, Cartes Àrabs, box 1, letter 12) and in others of 1323 and 1324 relative to the freeing of Catalan-Aragonese captives in Granada (FERRER 1988, 123 and MASIÀ 1989, 533). However, for the moment, this is all we know about him.

your archive. However, if you do not find it, the merchants of Valencia also have one, and they can show it to you”.

Here, then, the translator, almost always someone anonymous who, in the written translations of diplomatic correspondence, remains invisible⁸, not only exceeds his linguistic functions, but, due to the knowledge associated with his work, he feels both legitimated and obliged to give the king advice.

Although linguistic competence and knowledge of the language were, then, supposedly fundamental to the translator’s task, in diplomatic contacts the rulers chose and consciously sought diplomats and translators also according to their experience and their cultural *savoir-faire*, with the aim of guaranteeing the success of the diplomatic missions or, at least, of giving them greater guarantees of success.

In the case of the Crown of Aragon and Islam, who were these diplomatic agents?

Despite the fact that the research is still in progress, it may be said, generally speaking, that, in contacts with Western Islam, the Crown of Aragon was aided preferably by all kinds of transverse characters, living between two worlds: officials near the frontier and, therefore, familiar with the Islamic world; merchants who did business or resided in the lands to which the embassies were destined, or who had direct access or fluid contacts with their court circles; mercenaries established in Islamic countries; and *Mudejars* – that is, the Muslims who, after the Christian conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, remained under Christian rule, keeping their language and religion – that they trusted who, moreover, besides mastering the language, might have the power to arouse religious solidarity among the Muslims receiving the embassies⁹.

In the same way, and with the same objective, in some cases the Islamic powers also sent as ambassadors to the Crown of Aragon and to other Western Christian lands or states (like Castile, Genoa, Majorca, Naples or Sicily) people connected to the reality of frontier life, but in many others Christian merchants and mercenaries in their confidence established there (numerous examples included in Salicrú 2005b, 180-181, Salicrú forthcoming A). On the

⁸ The two cases mentioned are the only two exceptions that, to date, I have been able to find among the contemporary translations of Arabic letters conserved in the Archive of the Crown of Aragon. Despite the fact that it could be a first-rate source for analysing the adaptation of Islamic terminology, rhetoric and discourse to the Christian reality, this kind of translation, which is usually kept attached to the original texts in Arabic, has never been taken into consideration. In some cases, the publishers of the Arabic letters, ALARCÓN – GARCÍA 1940, do not even mention their existence.

⁹ Previously, the Jews, possessing a transverse culture, had also developed this role (ASSIS 1997).

other hand, the diplomats were, comparatively, hardly ever Muslim subjects of the Islamic powers (Valérian 2008).

In the heart of Christian Europe and in both cultivated circles and contexts of less enlightened speakers, Latin, not only written but also oral, could work as a *lingua franca*¹⁰. Thus, in 1494, in Granada, the humanist from Nüremberg Hieronymus Münzer got on perfectly with governor Íñigo López de Mendoza in Latin. He points out, moreover, that the Catholic Kings understood it perfectly, although they rarely wished to speak it. That their children also knew it. And that, due to the great similarities between Castilian and Latin, the subjects understood it so easily that they took no interest in improving it (Münzer 1991, 93, 271, 275 and 277)¹¹.

Despite unforeseen occurrences and exceptions¹², for the European Christian world, Latin or not, it was relatively easy to gain access to translators. Ehingen was assigned a herald who spoke many languages (García 1999 [1952], 229-230). The nobleman León de Rozmihal, brother-in-law of the king of Bohemia, travelled in the company of a Burgundian herald offered him by Philip the Good who, seeing as he had visited all the Christian

¹⁰ Although, above all if their mother tongue was not Romance, Latin did not always guarantee understanding between interlocutors. Whereas in the context of the Christian captives in the North African regencies in the Modern Age, the linguistic difficulties of the Europeans speaking non-Latin languages can be detected perfectly (PLANAS 2004, 250-251), at the end of the 15th century, a merchant from Bruges who was travelling around the Peninsula also complained – hyperbolically in this case – of the problems he encountered by not knowing Castilian (AZNAR, PICO 2000, 66). On exceptional occasions like the one I mention below, they resorted to communicating with gestures, but the possibilities of sign language were not only limited but they often gave rise to misunderstandings and ambiguities (as we have seen above with regard to Popplau not kissing the hand of John II of Portugal). In the reign of his father Alfonso V the African, on the other hand, the Swabian knight Jörg Ehingen, who did not understand Portuguese, states that he was able to show his reverence for Alfonso V with gestures, after the monarch had welcomed him with very affable words that he did not understand; the letters of recommendation that he carried were written and read to him in Latin, but in order to be able to converse with the king they had to resort to an interpreter “who expressed himself in the language used in Brabant, in the Low Countries” (GARCÍA 1999 [1952], 231). Another example of sign language in Ibn Battuta, DOMINGO 1993, 325.

¹¹ Popplau’s account, on the other hand – which, it must be said, is at all times seen to be full of prejudices –, points out that, with rare exceptions, the clergy of Seville (i.e. Castilian or Iberian) did not even know how to speak Latin (GARCÍA 1999 [1952], 301). In actual fact, Latin was even useful for communication purposes in the heart of Mongolia in the middle of the 13th century, as the Flemish Franciscan Guillermo de Rubruck attests (GIL 1993, 333 and 334).

¹² HUESMANN 2002, 312-313, refers to the reception, in 1463, at the Burgundian court, of an imperial embassy whose emissary spoke a High German that none of those present could decipher.

kingdoms, knew seventeen languages (Letts 1957, 39; Contamine 1982, 81)¹³. When the Catalan knight Ramon de Perellós travelled to Saint Patrick's Purgatory, the Earl of March lent him a squire who spoke Irish in Dublin. And in Drogheda, the archbishop of Armagh gave him an interpreter so that he could go to meet the king (Perellós 1988, 40, 41).

However, outside the Christian area and in contact with the infidels, it was not always possible to have someone available who had minimally sufficient knowledge of the two languages between which one had to mediate and, moreover, one often had to resort to third languages so that the interlocutors could communicate with each other, something that hindered and made difficult the transmission of knowledge.

When disembarking on the island of El Hierro, at the beginning of the fifteenth century, the conquerors of the Canary Islands regretted not being able to have a dragoman to enable them to understand the indigenous peoples, which would have made their conversion easier (Pico, Aznar, Corbella 2003, 77). On his journey to Mongolia in the middle of the thirteenth century, Giovanni di Pian di Carpine hired a Russian interpreter in Kiev who was later unable to translate a pontifical missive that he was carrying with him into Russian, Persian and Tartar (Gil 1993, 228, 230). Rubruck had to interrupt a theological debate about divinity with some Mongolian Buddhists because his interpreter, unable to translate his reasons, silenced him (Gil 1993, 348). In the middle of the fifteenth century, in Florence, Poggio Bracciolini managed to make himself understood to a Nestorian from Upper India thanks to an interpreter from Armenia who knew Turkish and Latin, but, seeing as both knew only how to speak of the matters that interested the learned Italian (customs, rites, plants and animals) in their own languages, he had to make do with asking him only about the distances and places he had visited on his journey. Bracciolini also tried, unsuccessfully, to interview various Ethiopians through an interpreter who knew only Arabic and who therefore found it impossible to talk about trees and transmit exactly what they were saying (Bracciolini 2004, 164-165, 170-171; Conti 2004, 121, 124).

Logically, when the diplomatic agents did not master the language of the land they had been sent to, they could travel accompanied by dragomans.

In the Crown of Aragon, in the embassies bound for Islamic countries the latter were often of Mudejar extraction, given that, having kept Arabic as their mother tongue, some of

¹³ As CONTAMINE 1982, 380-381 points out, in 15th-century Europe it was customary to refer to the seventeen kingdoms of Latin Christendom and, therefore, by extension, to its seventeen languages.

them were completely bilingual¹⁴. But there were also many Christian dragomans, merchants or not, who mastered Arabic.

In the Middle Ages, knowledge of languages – oral at least – was acquired fundamentally through practice¹⁵. Therefore, true mastery of a language was only possible in cases of authentic inter-cultural exchange¹⁶, if one came from frontier areas or where linguistically different populations lived together¹⁷, or if one resided abroad for a long time.

Occasionally, travellers, pilgrims chiefly but also, as we have seen, merchants, could get hold of small emergency vocabulary books, eminently practical in nature, produced according to their most immediate needs. A clear and quite early example of this is the short Latin-Basque glossary that, in the twelfth century, was included in the pilgrim's guide to Santiago de Compostela, restricted to words like God, Our Lady, bread, wine, meat, fish, house, church, priest, wheat, water, king or Saint James (Vielliard 1969, 28-29), which were those the pilgrims really needed. We also know of two eleventh-century Greek-Latin glossaries for crusaders or mercenaries bound for the Byzantine world (Ciggaar 2002, 165-178). And Pegolotti only considers, in various languages and with a small explanation in the style of the one that has been pointed out for dragoman, taxes, weights and measures of

¹⁴ With regard to the bilingualism or diglossia of the Catalan-Aragonese, and particularly the Valencian, Mudejar element, BARCELÓ 1984, 136-151 is still required reading.

¹⁵ BISCHOFF 1961, 215, points out that, in order to achieve mastery of languages like Hebrew or Greek, useful for Bible studies and which had a special consideration for having appeared in the inscription on the cross of Christ, even learned mediaeval men did not learn them as dead languages, but living in contact with Jews and with southern Italy or with Byzantine Greeks. Some emblematic mediaeval cases, like the 13th-century Florentine Dominican missionary Riccoldo de Montecroce or like Ramon Llull, show that Arabic was also learned in the same way. The former may have had direct access to the Qu'ran thanks to the knowledge he picked up on his travels in the East (MONTE CROCE 1997, 17), while the latter learnt it in his native Majorca, but from a Muslim slave.

¹⁶ Like that of the protégé of the Parisian master goldsmith Guillermo Boucher who was living in Karakorum in the service of Mangu Khan in the time of Guillermo de Rubruck and who was considered an excellent interpreter (GIL 1993, 369). It is also recorded, according to the will of Diego de Haedo in the last quarter of the 16th century, that in Algiers, the children of renegades spoke the language of their parents as well as if they had been born in Spain or Italy (PLANAS 2004, 249).

¹⁷ "The natural home of interpreters and translators" according to BISCHOFF 1961, 211. We have just referred to the Mudejars, but some Valencian Christians were also in the same situation. The travels of Rubruck and Pian di Carpine are once again another good source of examples (GIL 1993).

interest to merchants, or terms like porter, freight, boat, warehouse, market, ingot, bundle or guard (Pegolotti 1970, 14-19)¹⁸.

The written testimony left us by some missionaries, pilgrims, or travellers in general of their great adventures allow us at times to glimpse their process of practical language learning, or at least the process of acquiring the minimum rudiments that allowed them to understand the language and, perhaps, get by with a minimum of autonomy¹⁹. Rubruck, for example, who travelled accompanied by an interpreter about whom he was constantly complaining, points out that, when he had learnt a little of the language, he realised that at times the interpreter was translating exactly the opposite of what he was saying (Gil 1993, 315)²⁰. It seems also that, after his travels, Ibn Battuta ended up learning some Turkish and Persian (Domingo 1993, 324).

In any case, the true learning of a language was above all possible when one resided abroad. Of course, it might be more or less rapid and more or less efficient according to everyone's innate skills, but also to their will and motivation, as well as the degree of insertion or real immersion in the society they lived in²¹.

Emmanuel Piloti, for example, lived in Egypt for over four decades; the Mameluke sultan entrusted him with several diplomatic missions; and, nevertheless, he points out on one occasion that, in order to address him, he needed to use a dragoman (Dopp 1958, 207). On the other hand, the merchant Niccolò de Conti learnt Arabic first in Damascus, where he went as a young man to trade, and then Persian, as for this purpose he lived for a while in the kingdom of Ormuz (Bracciolini 2004, 80-81, Conti 2004, 91-92). Anselm Turmeda, a Majorcan who converted to Islam, did not know Arabic when he reached Tunis, but he assures us that he learnt it perfectly in just one year by being at the customs post and dealing with Christians and Muslims there (Epalza [2004], 234-235). It also seems that a Muslim slave from

¹⁸ Later, *ex professo* books may appear, like the Italian-German of the late 15th century written in the circles of the prosperous Venetian Fondaco dei Tedeschi (BISCHOFF 1961, 211).

¹⁹ Although whenever possible we ought to try to distinguish between the comprehension of a language and the fact of speaking it, there are very few occasions in which this nuance can be established. Rubruck says that, at the Mongolian court, there was a Hungarian who had received instruction in Latin and who understood all they said to him without missing a word, but he did not know how to reply to them (GIL 1993, 333).

²⁰ On the deficiencies and problems of this interpreter, GIL 1993, 311, 315, 322, 348, 338.

²¹ In this respect, and much more precisely than BISCHOFF 1961, 215 (see note 14), MUSUMECI 1992, 339-349, makes it clear that learning a second language takes place when it is used for the purpose it was created for, namely, communication; that a language is truly learned as a living language, and that motivation is essential for the learning process.

Cherchell, who was held captive in Valencia at the beginning of the fifteenth century, acquired a good command of Catalan in just under a year; he assures us that he spoke it quite well, seeing as he understood it when he was asked questions and was able to answer (Marzal 2007, 1054).

Whether it is a case of captives or merchants or any other kind of individuals with contacts or living abroad, explicit information about their linguistic competence in foreign languages emerges only on odd occasions.

The explanations may appear, for example, more or less systematically, in judicial interrogations of slaves, where inevitably the use, or not, of an interpreter, and therefore the level of knowledge, or not, of Catalan by those interrogated had to be recorded (Marzal 2007, 1052-1055)²². However, the references to the language are often merely incidental. Thus, only very occasionally do we find cases like that of the Granadan convert Pedro García who in 1419, before going to Castile, where he had lived for many years, thought it necessary to ask for a safe-conduct because he considered that he did not speak the language well and was therefore afraid of being taken for a captive²³. Or even anecdotes like the one told in the second half of the fifteenth century by the Egyptian traveller Abd al-Basit ben Halil about his passage through Tunis. While he was there a couple of Christian ships arrived with Muslim captives to be ransomed, and he saw that only one of them remained to be ransomed. Apparently, he had been taken for a Christian because he did not know a single word of Arabic and could not reply to the interrogations; but Abd al-Basit discovered that he was an excellent Turkish Muslim who besides Turkish also mastered “the language of the Franks” perfectly, as he had been held captive in their lands for over twenty-five years (Brunschvig 1936, 73).

Possibly due to the lack of direct references to linguistic phenomena and to the ability of those who were installed or normally did business with Islamic countries, little attention has been given to the mastery of Arabic by Europeans. And even, at times, in the case of merchants who remained there for decades, it has been only doubtfully considered likely that

²² To the case of the slave from Cherchell who, apparently, was eventually able to express himself in Catalan in less than a year, we can add others of slaves who, upon reaching Valencia, already mastered the language perfectly, because previously they had spent some time as captives in other territories of the Crown of Aragon or in other parts of the kingdom of Valencia. Nevertheless, there are also examples of slaves who, despite spending several years in Valencia, did not even understand Catalan.

²³ *Hesitet ne, ex eo quia plane non loquitur linguam nostram, perturbaretur per aliquos qui forte crederent aut eum dicerent esse servum* (SALICRÚ 1999, doc. 55).

they understood and/or spoke Arabic (Gourdin 1989, 374; Gourdin 1990, 166; Balletto 1995, 105; Petti 2000, 136).

But, can we believe that these “Christians of the *rabat*”, or area outside the walls, that Adorno describes for us in Tunis in the second half of the fifteenth century, saying that “they could not be distinguished in any way from the Moors, either by the language, or by the customs and ways of life, (...) despite the fact they observed the Christian faith” (Heers – de Groer 1978, 108-109), were so extraordinary with regard to the linguistic factor? Can we truly consider the possibility that Christian mercenaries like the Castilians who, at the beginning of the fifteenth century, we see living with their entire families, of several generations, and with their own priests, in the Merinid world and closely linked to power (Salicrú 2002) did not know Arabic? Is it likely that the merchants who lived in North Africa and Granada only had dealings with their counterparts in the context of the corn exchange and the customs house (Valérian 2005), or that they had to depend on linguistic intermediaries to carry out their professional activity and for any activity in their everyday lives²⁴? Of course not. It was probably like that for those who visited Islamic lands more sporadically. But it is unthinkable for those who were living among Muslims, for those whose contacts were more fluid with the authorities and, above all, for those whom the Islamic authorities placed at the head of diplomatic missions.

In actual fact, and irrespective of cases that could be linked to particular situations like that of the Mudejars²⁵ or to that of the captives enslaved in Christian lands²⁶, it is more difficult to prove competence in a Romance language by Muslims than a command of Arabic by Christians. Hypotheses have been made, for example, about the possibility of Ibn Battuta having minimum knowledge of some Latin language (Domingo 1993, 321-322). We know that when Anselm Turmeda reached Tunis he asked the Christian merchants living there if there was anybody in the house of the sultan who knew how to speak the Christians’ language

²⁴ In this respect, we have to distinguish between what would be the post of dragoman, a publicly appointed functionary who took part officially in mercantile exchanges, who made sure they were legal and who, as a result of that, was paid the dragoman’s tax (MANSOURI 1999, 149-154; SALICRÚ 1997), and the dragoman, a translator or interpreter who, principally as a linguistic mediator, was able to intervene in any situation or sphere of everyday life to facilitate the speakers’ understanding.

²⁵ Regarding their role as dragomans in the kingdom of Valencia in the interrogations to determine the birthplaces of the Muslim captives who were taken prisoner and to find out if they had been captured legally, HINOJOSA 1971, 113-127, HINOJOSA 1979, 23, BARCELÓ 1984, 147.

²⁶ Also in Genoa, there are some examples of the linguistic integration of slaves who managed to speak in a way *intelligibile et in lingua ianuensi*, URBANI 1976 198-199; for Tuscany, FERRARA 1950, 320-328.

well, and that he was directed to one of the highest dignitaries at court, Yusuf the Doctor (Epalza [2004], 234). We know that some Muslim ambassadors also understood *linguam nostram*²⁷. And we sense that, although they were few in number, possibly the Muslim merchants that traded with Christian lands may also have managed to master it²⁸.

Nevertheless, it is obvious that the fact that the Christians travelled more often to Islamic countries than Muslims did to Christian lands, and the fact that there were far more Christians living in Islamic countries than Muslims living in Christian countries explains that there were more Christians who learnt Arabic than Muslims who mastered Romance languages. And it also explains why those bilingual Christians were employed as diplomatic agents from both sides of the Mediterranean²⁹.

Although in this case there are not too many examples either referring directly to linguistic competence in Arabic by Christian ambassadors or translators, some of them are very explicit.

In 1432, the Valencian Pere Giner was working as a dragoman or interpreter *alguarabie barbareae et catalanis ydiomatibus* (Sanchís 1936, 679). We know that, around 1444, the Majorcan Miquel Rovira, alias Desde, served for many years as a dragoman to an ambassador that the king of Tunisia had sent to Alfonso the Magnanimous. We also know that in 1449, the same monarch appointed his subject Manuel de Atienza as an interpreter *internos et affricos sive serracenos quoscumque, ex quo vos [Manuel] linguam affricam habetis quasi maternam* (Salicrú 2005a, 424). Or that, in 1477, an ambassador of Ferrante of Naples asked to be supplied with a Christian worthy of the confidence of the Hafsid monarch and who spoke Arabic so that he could translate his peace proposals (Cerone 1913, 76). In the middle of the fifteenth century it is also claimed that the Genoese Nicolò de Tacio *ex partibus illis [Constantina] practicus est et linguam habet* (Petti 2000, 136; Gioffrè 1982, 101). The notary and priest of the Venetians in Tunis was able to guarantee the authenticity

²⁷ Sidi Elyagi Mayamet ben Ysarb Adar, sent to Sicily by the king of Tunis in December 1440 (TRASSELLI 1952, 53).

²⁸ The most emblematic case in the Catalan-Aragonese area is, without doubt, that of Cacim Brancero, from Málaga, who at the height of the 15th century penetrated firmly in Christian Valencian mercantile circles (SALICRÚ 2008b, 125-126).

²⁹ That these Christians lead embassies both Christian and Islamic and work as trans-cultural diplomats is obvious. The degree of dependence or decision-making autonomy granted them (VALÉRIAN 2008, 896-900) would be another discussion, still to be held also, on the Christian side. In the end, at times the room for manoeuvre of Christian representatives in Islamic countries could also be minimal (it is clear from the failure of the truce between the Crown of Aragon and Granada in 1418, SALICRÚ 1998, 155-164).

and correct translation of a missive sent by the Hafsids to the *duca* of Milan (Petti 2000, 131). At the end of the fourteenth century, the Genoese Tommaso Leccavello was *scientem ydioma illud* [Arabic of Tunis] (Jehel 1997, 566, Peláez 2008, 155). And in the last quarter of the thirteenth century and repeatedly, the Genoese merchant Giovanni Dachirida acted in Tunis as a dragoman *qui torcimanavit de ara[bico in] latino* (Pistarino 1986, Peláez 2008, 155).

In other cases, the clues to linguistic ability may be more circumstantial³⁰, but their value for understanding, at least in the case of Granada, how the diplomatic contacts functioned is incalculable.

The extraordinary degree of interrelation and cultural exchange that, in many ways, existed between the Nasrid sultanate of Granada and its Castilian and Catalan-Aragonese neighbours throughout the Middle Ages is perfectly well known (Arié 1997 [1994], Salicrú 2007). And one of the most patent expressions of it could be the fact that the Nasrid chancellery even sent, on occasions, letters written directly in Romance language to the Crown of Aragon and to Castile. The examples of these letters, technically Arabic but linguistically in Romance, and validated with the sign of validation, in Arabic, of the Nasrid chancellery, are not very abundant. They co-existed with the letters sent directly in Arabic and, although there are some examples from the first half of the fourteenth century, it seems that the practice was spread, above all, in the fifteenth century³¹.

The letters in Romance that were known of until very recently, all written on pink paper, with the validation of the Nasrid chancellery and, in some cases, not of the sultan but high-ranking officials from his closest circles, containing the handwritten signature of the

³⁰ Continuing with a practice that in his native Castile must have been more widespread than in his adoptive Crown of Aragon (as there, unlike in the Crown of Aragon, they do not seem to have resorted so habitually to Mudejars), Ferdinand of Antequera repeatedly used Christian Castilian translators, both with Granadan ambassadors (SALICRÚ 1998, 88) and in his embassies to Morocco (ARRIBAS 1963-1964, doc. 4, ARIBAS 1956, docs. 1 and 2).

³¹ It seems significant that if dozens of Granadan letters in Arabic and none in Romance have been conserved from the 14th century, in the collection of Arabic letters in the Archive of the Crown of Aragon in Barcelona (ALARCÓN – GARCÍA 1940), the only Granadan letters that have been conserved from the 15th century are in fact written in Romance and there are none in Arabic. However, and logically, what we do have are indirect references to the sending of letters in Arabic (mentions of “Moorish letters” or “a Moorish letter on red paper” from the king of Granada in SALICRÚ 1999, docs. 286-287 and 327). The insistence on reddish or pink paper appears even in the Castilian chroniclers’ sources: in 1463, for example, during a burlesque theatre play, two supposed emissaries of the king of Morocco handed over a *carta bermeja* (HECHOS, 99).

sender, were from a palaeographic point of view clearly written in Castilian style³². And although nothing was known about the conditions in which they might have been written, and whether their material authors were Granadans or Castilians, both possibilities seemed feasible, namely, that some Nasrid scribes were able to write in Castilian or that in the circles of the *kitabā* or Granadan chancellery there were Castilians writing them.

The recent discovery of some new Granadan letters written in Romance that, to date, had gone unnoticed³³, offers us a clear and practical example of the procedure that might have been used sometimes. Among these new letters there are two written in Catalan and which, moreover, also have the palaeographic characteristics typical of the Catalan-Aragonese world. One of them contains the handwritten signature in Latin letters and in an unsure hand, of King Yusuf III of Granada. The other is signed by a Valencian captive, Pere Marrades, whose adventures are well known to us, as he appears repeatedly in the diplomatic correspondence of the early fifteenth century (Ferrer 1988, Díaz 1998): his family upheld that he had reneged or that he had been kept in Granada under duress, while the Granadan authorities assured that he had done so of his own free will. Whatever he did, what is interesting to point out is that, in the letter he signs by hand, with an inscription in Arabic that also seems handwritten and which indicates that he sent the letter himself, Marrades certifies that it is he, by his own hand, who is writing his own letter directly in Catalan. And moreover, he also declares that it is he who, by his own hand, wrote the letter later signed by Yusuf III of Granada. And that he wrote the letters in Catalan so that the addressee, a Valencian knight, would understand them better.

If we look at what Marrades says, then, behind the letters written and sent in Romance by the Nasrid chancellery there was a deliberate wish to make it easier for the addressee to understand. But, at the same time, it seems that the writing of the same could remain habitually in the hands of Castilians or Catalan-Aragonese passing through or living in the sultanate, employed as amanuenses. Of course, they had to be trusted in court circles, as Marrades must have been, who, renegade or not, says he is a subject of the Nasrid king.

In any case, the comprehension of oral Arabic and the ability to transcribe it in writing translated into their own vernacular language does not imply in any way that this kind of

³² Examples in CASTRILLO 1961 and SALICRÚ 1999, docs. 34, 39, 50 and 51.

³³ Presented in SALICRÚ, forthcoming C. They are half a dozen that had gone unnoticed because, by considering that the whole collection conserved had already been published by ALARCÓN – GARCÍA 1940, historians had not consulted it directly, while, at the time, these Arabists would have ignored them, considering that, as they were not written in Arabic, they were worthless.

character had to be able to read or write Arabic, although, of course, it does mean that they were literate in their own language. Nevertheless, the oral comprehension of Arabic, easier to acquire with good will and predisposition, was enough for them to be able to translate and transcribe, to put in writing, what was dictated to them in Arabic.

Whether they acted as dragomans or not, the majority of the Christian, or originally Christian, individuals who spoke or understood Arabic may have merely mastered it orally. There were, of course, exceptional cases like Montecroce, Ramon Llull or Turmeda. But, in any case, we should not forget that the level of understanding and command of a language is always very relative, seeing as being able to understand does not necessarily mean being able to speak, and being able to read does not necessarily mean being able to write

The practical learning of a language entails a limited command of the vocabulary according to the environment and the interests. Quite possibly many of the Arabic-speaking merchants only had limited linguistic resources, the rudiments essential to be able to work, but, on the other hand, they were unable to get by on their own in any situation. Let us remember that the linguistic mediators to which Poggio Bracciolini had access in Florence were incapable of speaking about flora and fauna in a foreign language. Or that, irrespective of his good or bad will, Rubruck's interpreter was also incapable of translating the theological arguments of the missionary, both for the lack of linguistic resources and possibly, of conceptual tools (Gil 1993, 315, 348).

There is no doubt that, throughout the Middle Ages, many of the attempts to approach the "Other" linguistically and culturally were guided, in the final analysis, by a proselytizing and missionary zeal. Montecroce, Llull, Rubruck, Pian di Carpine or Turmeda are good examples of this, to which others could be added, like Montecorvino in China. The regrets over the lack of interpreters during the conquest of the Canary Isles had the same basis (Pico, Aznar, Corbella 2003, 77), as did the acculturation in France of two Canadian dragomans in the 1530s (Gomez-Geraud 1987, 322-323).

It is by no means surprising then that the attempts in the Crown of Aragon, and particularly in Valencia, to create a school of Arabic were linked *ad fidem orthodoxam augmentandam et sectam Mahometicam penitus confundendam* (Barceló 1984, 143-144).

First news of it comes from June 1414, an initiative of the municipal authorities. And due to its chronological coincidence with the famous Dispute of Tortosa³⁴, it is not surprising that it clearly states that what is sought is *scholas in arabico erigere* with the aim of *legere, docere* and *discere* Arabic, and that its ultimate purpose is *de ipso inter sarracenos disputare pro jam dicta mahometica secta delenda* (Sanchís 1936, 75-76). Apparently, it was already very clear, in 1414, that the Arabic teacher had to be one *Martinus de Vilaroya, fecundus scientia et sermone, qui zelo catholice fidei ab annis citra temporibus in Lingua Arabiga acquirenda institit*.

There is no doubt then that this same Martí de Vilarúbia, a bachelor of arts and medicine, was behind the project, as it was he, in 1421, who presented the bishop of Valencia with a bull issued from Florence by Pope Martin V the year before to promote the creation of the school, pointing out that in the lands of the Crown of Aragon it was necessary to be in contact with the Saracens *in agrorum et possessionum cultura et alis artibus et negotiationibus* (Sanchís 1936, 77).

Some time later, halfway through 1423, Alfonso the Magnanimous declared he had already created, with apostolic privilege, the *studi o scola de aràbich o morisch* of Valencia in the monastery of the Friars Minor in the city. And, seeing as it was incumbent on the prelates of the kingdom to maintain the school and it was short of funds, he had to order all of them to contribute to maintaining the school, so that the people studying there could subsist³⁵.

Although it is by no means clear, then, how far the initiative in the Friars Minors' convent caught on, barely a year and a half later the Pope authorized that, in the Order of Preachers' convent in the city of Valencia, Arabic schools similar to it and in the same conditions should also be founded, that is, maintained by the clergy and with twelve friars assigned (Beltrán 1958, 267, 274-275).

After that the silence is complete and we do not know if or how both schools functioned. But the fact is that, over twenty years later, in March 1447, it is on record, without further explanation, that the prior of the monastery of Natzaret in Barcelona, Antoni Riera, had recommended a learned Parisian teacher to the jurors of Valencia to give Arabic classes (Sanchís 1936, 683, 78-79).

³⁴ Judaeo-Christian doctrinal controversy that took place in the Catalan city of Tortosa between February 1413 and November 1414 and which was called by the Luna Pope, Benedict XIII. The minutes of it are published in PACIOS 1957.

³⁵ ACA, C, register 2786, ff. 69r-70r. 1423, July, 1. Naples.

Without forgetting, then, that in the kingdom of Valencia there lived *infidelium sarracenorum sive agarenorum (...) magno numero*, the ultimate aim of the Arabic schools promoted by the Church and the Crown was preaching for the conversion of the Muslims. At least in theory, the keenness for proselytizing could only be inherent to the proximity of Islam, although the practice imposed fluid intercultural and even uninhibited contacts. On the other hand, in the case of Genoa, of which little more is known than the fact that, in the third quarter of the thirteenth century, it had an Arabic notary's office with a *scriba linguae saracenicae communis Ianue* in charge and, even, a school of Arabic or, at least, a *magister de litteris saracenis* (Surdich 1975, 35; Jehel 2001, 138), unlike Valencia, the school has nothing to do with the presence of Muslims or, consequently, with a supposed desire to preach. And it can only be considered, fundamentally, as proof of the Republic's needs for diplomatic and mercantile relations with Islam.

In any case, it is clear that what the majority of Christians in contact with Islam learnt was the oral language, a utilitarian Arabic that not even all Muslims knew³⁶ but which was all the Christians needed to carry out their basically commercial activities. Some time later, in the time of the Turkish rule and the African prisons, it would turn towards the use of the so-called lingua franca (Bádenas 1995, Planas 2004). However, in the Late Middle Ages, and in the Western Mediterranean, although the existence of a vocabulary-substratum that made comprehension in seafaring and mercantile matters easier for all the groups that sailed the Mediterranean cannot be ruled out, what is clear is that in contacts between Christians and Muslims, basically Arabic and, in any case, the Romance languages were used.

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³⁶ Near Bugia, Abd al-Basit ben Halil had communication problems with Berber Muslims. These Berbers did not speak Arabic nor could they tell it apart from the Latin languages. And, although Abd al-Basit and his companions shouted the double profession of Islamic faith to them to identify themselves as Muslims, they took them for Christians in disguise who were trying to capture them (BRUNSCHVIG 1936, 135-136). See also DOMINGO 1993 and SALICRÚ 2005a, 421 with respect to IBN BATTUTA 1981.

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