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Fact and Fiction of “Translators” in the Greek Papyri: Question of Interpretations

The purpose of this article is to present and discuss the double status of translators-interpreters (ἑρμηνεῖς) in Graeco-Roman Egypt through the analysis of their attestations in the papyrological sources. The discussion will first take into consideration their historical role, which went beyond the purely linguistic field that nevertheless was a pivotal function in a multilingual and multicultural country such as Egypt under the Ptolemaic and Roman rule. Indeed, it has been ascertained that the skills of the people called “interpreters” encompassed a wider area of “mediations,” even including the conversion between measure units. The picture that emerges is that of what we may call “cultural mediators.” Then, the discussion will consider their fictional role, which reflected their real function and adapted it to literary translations that were cultural mediations as well.

Keywords: ancient translators; ancient interpreters; multilingualism in ancient Egypt; Greek papyri

The Greek papyri from Hellenistic and Roman Egypt form an invaluable corpus of ancient texts that allow for direct, unmediated glimpses on Graeco-Roman Antiquity from the privileged viewpoint of everyday life, society, and culture.¹ Translation is one of the countless aspects of the daily activities revealed by those sources.² During the centuries, in the history of ancient Egypt, the need for interacting – more

¹ Papyri are cited according to the *Checklist of Editions*, <https://papyri.info/docs/checklist>.

² Reggiani, *Papirologia*, 352-368; Reggiani, *I papyri greco-egizi ed Erodoto*, 302-321.

or less peacefully – with neighbouring people favoured the development of the special linguistic skills of the interpreters. Since Egyptians felt their own language was “the” language *par excellence*, foreigners were forced to learn Egyptian and they became the “interpreters.”³ A relevant turnaround happened under the reign of Psammetichus I (664-610 BC), when Greek mercenaries were allowed to keep their linguistic independence as a reward for the crucial help provided in the process of unifying the country again. A special category of interpreters, which already Herodotus calls ἐρμηνεῖς, was then settled, and for the first time ever they were Egyptians who learnt the foreign language.⁴

There is no substantial reason to think that the situation was different after Alexander the Great conquered Egypt in 332/1 BC and the Ptolemaic dynasty was established, with Greek becoming the dominant and official language of public administration and culture in a country that, consequently, soon became bilingual. Then, it was the Egyptian people in need of learning the rulers’ tongue, not the other way around. The everyday witnesses of the Greek papyri mention plenty of ἐρμηνεῖς, though most of the attestations consist of individual entries of accounts or lists without further context. Where a context is preserved, scholars have reached the impression that such “translators,” central characters in the multilingual environment of ancient Egypt, may be better understood under the definition of “interpreters,” “mediators,” or even “regulators,” as long as their sphere of competence transcended the purely linguistic field.⁵

Enough, so far, has been written about the extra-linguistic tasks of the Egyptian ἐρμηνεῖς. The interpretations given by modern scholars are necessarily reconstructed presumptively, at least in part, based on the hints uneasily deduced from the fragmentary sources at our disposal. From this viewpoint, it could even be argued that the historical character of the ἐρμηνεῖς is deeply intertwined with a sometimes “fictional” interpretation of a role that was certainly complex and not

³ Reggiani, “Rovesciare la lingua”, 128-129.

⁴ Reggiani, “Rovesciare la lingua”, 129-131; Reggiani, “Multicultural Education”; Reggiani, “Diritti linguistici”; Bernini and Reggiani, “Multilinguismo”, 50-51.

⁵ Mairs, “Interpreters”; Reggiani, “Rovesciare la lingua”, 130-134; Mairs, “*Hermeneis*”; Reggiani, “Tradurre”; all with references to previous literature.

yet understood in its entirety: were they professional translators, public or private interpreters, commercial agents, brokers, official regulators of measures? All of such or something more?

One of the few staples of the modern interpretation of ancient ἑρμηνεῖς is that, even when they carried out a purely linguistic work, they were never involved in literal translations, but rather in conceptual adaptations from one language (Egyptian, later also Latin) to the other (Greek). The recurring formula κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν (“as best as possible”) is often attached to official translations of legal acts like contracts and trial proceedings, as a sort of “disclaimer” of professional accuracy.⁶ This formula is limited to Greek documents from Egypt over a long time span – from Ptolemaic to Roman age – and “shows that there was at least some awareness that translation was not an exact science, the simple rendering of information in one language into another, but had the potential to introduce errors or differences in emphasis.”⁷ Its Egyptian specificity⁸ is likely due to the rooted local feeling that Greek language (and perhaps even Greek script) was inadequate to render the original Egyptian concepts.⁹ On its turn, the Greek concept itself of ἑρμηνεία did not point to a literal translation aimed at rendering the original text word by word (conversely called μεταγραφή), but rather to a conceptual adaptation, a decoding process, which explicates and re-articulates the information contents of the source language through the passage to the target language¹⁰ – in the terms sometimes described as “belief ascription”,¹¹ that is what Paul Ricoeur used to call *hospitalité langagière*.¹²

⁶ Mairs, “κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν”.

⁷ Mairs, “κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν”, 216.

⁸ Mairs, “Interpreters”, 460 n. 8.

⁹ Assmann, “Sapienza”, 465-466; Torallas Tovar, “Linguistic Identity”, 22-23.

¹⁰ De Luna, *La comunicazione*, 166 ff.; Erto, “Il verbo μεταγράφω”, 76-78; Reggiani, “Rovesciare la lingua”, 134-141.

¹¹ Bettini, *Vertere*, 21r.

¹² “Il me semble, en effet, que la traduction ne pose pas seulement un travail intellectuel, théorique ou pratique, mais un problème éthique. Amener le lecteur à l’auteur, amener l’auteur au lecteur, au risque de servir et de trahir deux maîtres, c’est pratiquer ce que j’aime appeler l’hospitalité langagière” (Ricoeur, *Sur la traduction*, 32). In general, on translation as mediation and overcoming of

A wonderful example of this concept is offered by the multiple copies of a sale contract agreed upon by two Egyptian priests from the village of Soknopaiou Nesos in the Arsinoite district (modern Fayum oasis) on 21 November 11 AD.¹³ The original text (P.Dime III 5) was composed in Demotic Egyptian and followed by the customary Greek summary subscriptions, though the purchaser's one is written in Demotic, surely because he was an illiterate of Greek (see below). The seller, Chairemon son of Herodes, bears the titles of prophet and chief-stolist of the twice great crocodile-god Soknopaios, as the Greek προφήτης καὶ [ἀρχ] ιερολιτικής | Cούχου θεοῦ μεγάλου μεγάλου (ll. 6-7 of the subscription) renders the original Demotic *hm-Ni.t rpy (h)tpy [hm-ntr] sz hm-ntr* “Servant of Neith, Chief, Prince, Prophet son of Prophet” (l. 1 of the text; the god is mentioned in the Demotic subscription: *hm-ntr Sbk*). Conversely, the Greek copies (CPR XV 2-5; SB I 5231 and 5275), introduced by the heading ἀντίγραφον [συ]γραφῆς Αἰγυπτίας πράξεως Ἑλληνιστὶ μεθρημηνευμένης κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν (CPR XV 3, 1) “copy of an Egyptian contract of sale translated into Greek as best as possible,”¹⁴ record a phonetic transliteration of the Egyptian priestly titles except for *prophet*: ἐμνίθης ὀρπᾶις τοπαίις προφήτης | ἐκ προφήτου (CPR XV 3, 1-2). The same is done with the titles of the purchaser, Satabus son of Heriopsemis, in Egyptian *nb w^cb hry šy [wzd-]wr N3.w-nfr-š[ty.t]* “Lord of Purity, Head of the Lake ‘The Great Green One of Nephersatis’ (= Lake Moeris)” (l. 2 of the text), in Greek νοιβουάπει ρεισεῖ ρεισιγέτου νεφερνάτι (CPR XV 3, 2). This is a perfect example of a “translation” κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν!

As historical characters, the ἑρμενεῖς played a vital role in the multilingual society of Graeco-Roman Egypt, though remaining mostly “invisible,” i.e. implicit:¹⁵ several anonymous hundreds of bilingual documents and of Greek translations of lost originals give us a still partial and incomplete idea of how much pervasive were the linguistic

linguistic boundaries in the attempt of fixing the primeval fragmentation of human languages, see Astori, “Le lingue”.

¹³ Keenan, Manning, and Yiftach, *Law*, 111-115.

¹⁴ SB I 5275, 1 exhibits the variant ἀντίγραφον ἀπ’ ἀντιγράφου κτλ (“copy from a copy etc.”).

¹⁵ Mairs, “Interpreters”, 461.

issues in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt.¹⁶ We will never exactly know how many Greek documents, either private or public, were in fact composed by “interpreters” based on an Egyptian source. In their interpretive efforts, the position of the ἑρμηνεῖς was strong, and even dangerous. A letter from the famous early-Ptolemaic archive of Zenon from Philadelphia (Arsinoites) contains a striking reference to the legal potential of a “translator,” evoked to harm a bothersome petitioner (P.Ryl. IV 563, 23 May 250 BC):

[[Παταικίων]] Ζήνωνι χαίρειν. προσεβαλόμεθα εἰς τὸ Ἀριστοδήμου ὄνομα | οἰκίαν
Σοκέως τοῦ Νεχαίου μαχίμου ἐν Αὐήρει· ἀκηκόαμεν δὲ καταπεπλευκέναι ὅπως
ἐντευξίν ἐμβάλῃ[ι Ἀπ]ολλωνίω περὶ ἡμῶν, παραλιπὼν τὸν | τε ἀποδόμενον καὶ
τὸν ἀγοράσαντα, οἰόμενος ἡμᾶς διασεῖς(ε)ῖν ἐὰν | Ἀπολλωνίω ἐντύχη. καλῶς
οὐδὲν ποιήσεις, εἴ σοι εὐκαιρὸν ἔστιν καὶ ἂν ἐν δυ|νατῶι ἦι, μετελθεῖν τὸν ἄνθρωπον
ὅπως μὴ καταγινωσκώμεθα ὑπὸ | τῶν λοιπῶν. γεγράφαμεν δὲ καὶ Ἀπολλωνίω
τῷ ἑρμηνεῖ περὶ τούτων, | ὅπως ἂν καὶ ἐκεῖν(ος) κακώσῃ αὐτὸν καθὸ δύναται. |
ἔρρωο. (ἔτους) λς Φαρμουθι α.

[Pataikion to Zenon, greeting. I assigned to the possession of Aristodemos a house of Sokeus son of Nechais, a native soldier, in Aueris, and I have heard that he has sailed down to present a petition to Apollonios about me, ignoring both the seller and the buyer, with the idea that he will discomfit me if he appeals to Apollonios. If, therefore, you have an opportunity and if it be practicable, will you please take action against the fellow, in order that I might not be discredited by the rest of them. I have written also to Apollonios the interpreter requesting him also to do the man as much damage as he can. Farewell. Year 36, Pharmouthi 1.¹⁷]

An interpreter named Apollonios occurs elsewhere in the Zenon archive: if he is always the same individual, then we find him delivering fish to Apollonios the landowner on behalf of the sender of the letter P.Cair.Zen. I 59065 (ll. 1-2 ἀπεστά[λκαμεν |] Ἀπολλωνίου τοῦ

¹⁶ On the issues of Egyptian bilingualism from a papyrological viewpoint, see the first two chapters of Vierros, *Bilingual Notaries*.

¹⁷ Translation adapted from Papyri.info.

έρμηνέως θρίσσι[α, 257/6 BC) and involved in sending calves to an Alexandrian festival (PSI IV 409a, 15 παρ' Ἀπολλωνίου τοῦ έρμηνέως, ca. 250 BC). These may well have been occasional duties, but other interpreters mentioned in the Zenon archive clearly offer their linguistic competences to relevant commercial tasks. A certain Glaukias is paid 12 copper drachmas for generic market purchases in P.Col. IV 63, ii 7 (Γλαυκίαι έρμηνεῖ εἰς ἀγοράματα χαλ(κοῦ) (δραχμὰς) ιβ, 257 BC); an unnamed interpreter is paid 3 obols for having guided a commercial expedition “towards the garlic” in PSI IV 332, 6 (έρμηνεῖ τῶι ὁδηγήσαντι ἐπὶ τὰ σκόρδα (τριώβολον), 257/6 BC). The latter document is historically important because it attests to the introduction of garlic cultivation in Ptolemaic Arsinoites (or, at least, in Apollonios' estate at Philadelphia).¹⁸ It is not clear whether such garlic was acquired at Alexandria (as κατὰ πόλιν at l. 11 could suggest) or from the Trogodytes, non-Egyptian inhabitants of the Eastern desert (as Τρωγοδύτηι at l. 14 might hint);¹⁹ in either case the έρμηνεύς could have deployed his expertise to conduct an economic negotiation, just as some much later colleagues of theirs equally attested in the papyri.²⁰

Later than the Zenon archive, an “interpreter of the Trogodytes” is recorded in UPZ II 227, an acknowledgment of payment from the royal bank of Thebes on 18 August 134 BC:

Ἀπολλώνιος έρμηνεύς | τῶν Τρωγοδυτ[υ]ῶν | Διογένη (= -ει) τραπεζίτη χαιρείν.
| ὁμολογῶ κερηματίσθαι | διὰ σοῦ ἀπὸ τῆς ἐν Διδὸς πόλει | τῇ Μεγάλῃ τραπεζῆς
| χαλκοῦ τάλαντα δύο (= δύο) | (γίνεται) (τάλαντα) β. | ἔγραψεν Πτολεμαῖος
Πτολεμα(ίου) | Πτολεμαῖεὺς ἡγεμόνος ἔξω τάξεων | ἀξιωθεὶς ὑπ' αὐτοῦ διὰ τὸ
φάσκειν | αὐτὸν μὴ εἰδέναι γράμματα. | (ἔτους) λς Ἐπειφ κς.

¹⁸ Crawford, “Garlic”.

¹⁹ Crawford, “Garlic”, 352-353.

²⁰ Two έρμηνεῖς ἀγοράς who also sell dresses (BGU VII 1564, 1-2 + BL IX 29 + BL XI 28; Philadelphia, AD 138; P.Graux III 30, vii 3, 11, 12; Arsinoe, AD 155); two έρμηνεῖς through which cattle purchases are made (Stud.Pal. XXII 101, 11; Arsinoe, 2nd cent. AD; SB XVI 13701, 18, 20; Arsinoe, AD 223-235); a έρμηνεύς through which a tax-grain payment is transmitted (P.Würzb. 19, 12; Hermoupolis, AD 622).

[Apollonios, interpreter of the Trogodytes, to Diogenes, banker, greetings. I acknowledge to have been paid through you from the bank in Diospolis Magna two copper talents, being 2 talents. Ptolemaios son of Ptolemaios, commander of the external ranks, wrote it, having been asked by him, because he said not to know the letters. Year 36, Epeiph 27.]

What “external ranks (or troops)” (ἔξω τάξεις) exactly means is still a matter of discussion, though it seems to refer to some military staff with administrative (pecuniary?) duties,²¹ which may fit our context, provided that interpreters had some role in the army. That a Trogodyte interpreter could be employed by the Ptolemaic army is not surprising, since “smaller army camps were set up in the eastern desert and on the Red Sea, notably for elephant hunts and trade.”²² However, the most striking piece of information of this receipt is that an interpreter, who was supposed to translate the “barbarian” language into Greek, did not know the γράμματα, i.e. the Greek letters. There may be different explanations. Apollonios could have known Greek spoken language but not how to write it down: not really a convincing solution, since Greek was taught starting from the alphabet, but he could have learnt Greek outside of school. He could have translated Trogodyte into Egyptian instead of Greek. However, the possibility that ἐρμηνεύς could point to a different profession remains.

The papyri also show us seemingly improvised “translators,” non-professionals who nonetheless have certain competences and use them to facilitate cross-linguistic communication. A very interesting case, unusual in its singular attestation but perhaps not so uncommon in a largely bilingual society, is a private letter from the 2nd century BC, in which a mother cheers up because her son is studying Egyptian so to be able to teach to a physician’s Egyptian apprentices (UPZ I 148, unknown provenance):

πυθανομένη μανθά|νειν σε Αιγύπτια | γράμματα συνεχάρην σοι | και ἐμαυτῆι,
ὄτι | νῶγ (= νῶν) γε παραγενόμενος | εἰς τὴν πόλιν διδάξεις | παρὰ Φαλου. ητι \
ιατροκλυστῆι/ τὰ | παιδάρια και ἔξεις | ἐφόδιον εἰς τὸ γῆρας.

²¹ Cowey, “Der ἡγεμῶν”.

²² Fischer-Bovet, *Army*, 263.

[When I came to know that you're studying the Egyptian letters, I shared your joy, because now at least when you're back to the city you'll teach the apprentices at clyster-doctor Phalou?etes', and you'll have support for old age.]

This papyrus has a great sociolinguistic value, because it is one of the very few attestations of a Greek who studied Egyptian, admittedly with economic purposes.²³ The text, however, deserves further attention in order to understand the facts. On the one hand, the name Phalou?etes – though not completely readable – is certainly Egyptian, so we can exclude that the anonymous receiver of the letter intended to translate the physician's teachings. On the other hand, we may exclude that he wanted to teach Greek medicine to Egyptian apprentices, because in that case he should have been a physician himself, while from his mother's words it is clear that the prospected activity would be his only source of income. I believe that the only explanation possible is that he intended to teach Greek language to the young trainees, so that they would be able to interact also with Greek patients, and he needed sufficient bilingual competence to do so.

Some three centuries later, in another private letter (SB XVIII 13867, unknown provenance, ca. AD 150), the sender asks whoever will read it to please translate the content to the addressees:

τὸν Σάραπιν, ὁ ἀναγινώσκων τὸ ἐπιστόλιον, | τίς ἂν ἦς, κοπίασον μικρὸν
καὶ μετερμή|νευσον ταῖς γυναιξὶ τὰ | γεγραμμένα | ἐν τῇ ἐπιστολῇ ταύτῃ καὶ
μετάδος. (ll. 1-4)

[In the name of Sarapis, you reading this letter, whoever you are, please make a small effort and translate to the women what is written in this letter and transmit (it to them).]

The script is typical of a βραδέως γράφων (“slow writer”)²⁴ of good level: the letters are well-formed, separated from each other, squared, almost completely lacking ligatures and cursive traits. This means that

²³ Mairs, “*Aigyptia Grammata*”; Reggiani, *I papiri greco-egizi ed Erodoto*, 162-163.

²⁴ The term “slow writers” identifies low- or medium-level non-Hellenes made literate of Greek: see Reggiani, *Papirologia*, 354, with earlier bibliography.

he had a medium level of knowledge of the Greek language, knowing how to trace the characters but not confidently enough to write in a fluently continuous and cursive script. Despite the Greek onomastics, it was surely a Hellenised Egyptian family, the women of which did not have knowledge of Greek, and did need any occasional translator to understand what had been written to them. Why he chose to write in Greek, however, is still obscure to me.

Except for the possible employment of ἑρμηνεῖς in somewhat public enterprises such as commercial or military expeditions, it does not seem that they reached a particular official position during the Ptolemaic period. On the contrary, a public role of the “interpreters” is widely and explicitly credited in some typologies of official documents during the Roman age. First of all, we find them acting a central part in the official trial proceedings, when some parties’ interventions needed an “interpreter” to support a non-Greek speaker.²⁵ Among scattered occurrences,²⁶ the most complete example is P.Col. VII 175 = SB XVI 12692, a report of a trial about the ownership of some property held at Karanis (Arsinoites) on 17 May 339 AD.²⁷ A certain Nilos testifies for two sisters, Herois and Taesis (represented by Theodoros), who took to flight because unable to pay taxes on some land. The land was then cultivated by some peasants (represented by Alexandros) who, when the sisters returned, turned it over to them with in addition a parcel that, according to the sisters, did not belong to them. At the end, the official known as *defensor civitatis* confirms that the sisters are liable for taxes on all the land. When Germanos, head of the farmers, and Nilos take the

²⁵ Keenan, Manning, and Yiftach, *Law*, 97.

²⁶ SB XVIII 13156, 7 εἰπόντος δι’ ἑρμην[έως (unknown provenance, early 2nd cent. AD); PSI XIII 1326, 4 δι’ ἑρμηνέως ἀπεκρίν[ατο (unkn., AD 181-183); SB XIV 11391, 6 Ψενήσιος δι’ ἑρμ[η]νέως ἀπεκρίνα[το (Arsinoites, 2nd-3rd cent. AD); P.Stras. I 41, 36 ἰον δ[ι’] ἑρμηνέως Ἀμ[μ]ώνιον κ[α]ι[ι] Ἄντωνῖνον κ[α]ι[ι] C]α[ρα]πίωνα καὶ Ὀριγένην (Hermopolis, ca. AD 250); P.Sakaon 32, ii 23-24 δι’ ἑρμηνέ[ως] | ἀπεκρίναν[το] and 33 δι’ ἑρμηνέως [ἀπε]κρίναντο (Arsinoites, AD 254-268); BGU VII 1567, 15]ατ[ε]λ[ι]ς δι’ ἑρμηνέως εἰ[πε]ν (Philadelphia, 3rd cent. AD); P.Ant. II 87, 12 δι’ ἑρμηνέως ἀπ[ε]κρίνατο (Antinoupolis?, late 3rd cent. AD); P.Vind.Tandem 8, passim δι’ ἑρ(μηνέως) ἀπεκρ(ίνατο) (unkn., 3rd-4th cent. AD).

²⁷ Kraemer and Lewis, “A Referee’s Hearing”; Kramer and Hagedorn, “Zum Verhandlungsprotokoll”.

floor, they speak through an “interpreter”, who seems to have been not a professional but an officer, a “chief assistant” named Anoubion, acting as a linguistic mediator:

ὁ σύνδικος Γερμανῶ εἶπ(εν)· τί λέγει ὁ παρὼν Γερμανός; κατὰ ποίαν πρόφασιν ταύτην τὴν γῆν ὑμεῖς κατεσπ(ε)ίρατε; δι’ Ἀνουβίωνος | ἐρμηνεύοντος εἶπ(εν)· εὐλαβῶς ἔχοντες μὴ εἰς ἡμᾶς τὰ τελέσματα ἔλθῃ κατεσπ(ε)ίραμεν ταύτας. / ὁ σύνδικος εἶπ(εν)· καὶ πόσος ἐστὶν χρόνος ἀφ’ οὗ αὐτὰς κατεσπ(ε)ίραται; διὰ τοῦ αὐ[τ]οῦ ἐρμ(η)νέως ἀπεκρ(ί)νατο· μίαν μόνην ἰνδικτίονα κατεσπ(ε)ίραμεν αὐτά. / ὁ σύνδικος αὐτῷ εἶπ(εν)· καὶ πῶς σήμερον τοῖς περι Νεῖλον αὐτὰς παρεσ[χ]ήκατε; διὰ τοῦ | αὐτοῦ ἐρμ(η)νέως ἀπεκρ(ί)νατο· ὁμοῦ λέγοντες ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστίν. / ὁ σύνδικος αὐτῷ εἶπ(εν)· ὑπὸ σπορὰν αὐτοῖς παρεδόκατε (= -δόκατε) τὴν γῆν; διὰ τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἐρμ(η)ναῖος (= ἐρμ(η)νέως) | ἀπεκρ(ί)νατο· αὐτὰ ἀλλὰ παρεσχήκαμεν ὑπὲρ ἐκάστης ἀρούρης κύτου ἀρτάβας τρ(ε)ῖς. Θεόδωρος ῥ(ή)τωρ εἶπ(εν)· ψευδεται· οὐδὲν εἴληφαν ἀλλὰ ἠναγκά[σ]θη || .]μ[. . .] . . . παραδέξασθαι . . . ε. . . | τῶν αὐτῶν γηδίων. / ὁ σύνδικος εἶπ(εν)· καὶ ἐχρῆν σε πάραυτα ἀναγκασθέντα μέμψασθαι δι’ ἐγγράφων καὶ μηδὲ φόρον παραδέξασθαι. Νεῖλος δι’ ἐρμ(η)νέως εἶπ(εν)· πάραυτα ἦλθον τῷ | πραιποσίτῳ καὶ εἶπέν μοι· ἀνένεγκον λιβέλλον ἐπὶ τὸν ἔπαρχον. Ἀλέξανδρος εἶπ(εν)· ἵνα τοίν[υ]ν ἐντελέστερον ἀναδιδάξω τὴν σὴν ἐμμέλ(ε)ϊαν, ἔστιν καὶ οἰκόπεδον τοῦ | αὐτοῦ ὀνόματος ἐπὶ τῆδε τῆς πόλεως διακατεχόμενον ὑπὸ τῶν ἀντιδίκων ἀπὸ πατρώας αὐτῶν διαδοχῆς. / ὁ σύνδικος Νεῖλω ἐντολικαρῶ εἶπ(εν)· ἀκήκοας αὐτοῦ (τοῦ) διαδικούντο[σ] | μέρος φήσαντος διακατέχειν σε καὶ οἰκόπεδον τοῦ αὐτοῦ ὀνόματος τῶν γηδίων καὶ ὀφ(ε)ίλει καταθέσθαι εἰ ἐν νομῇ τυγχάν(ε)λις τοῦ οἰκοπέδ[ο]υ ἢ μέρος[σ] εἶ (= ἦ) μή. Νεῖλος δι(ὰ) Ἀνουβίωνος ἀρχυπηρ(έ)του ἐρμ(η)νεύοντος εἶπ(εν)· οὐκ οἶδα εἰ ἐνὶ οἰκίᾳ. / ὁ σύνδικος αὐτῷ εἶπ(εν)· τίς τοίνυν τὰ στεγανόμα κομίζεται; διὰ τοῦ αὐτ[οῦ] ἐρμ(η)νέως ἀπεκρ(ί)νατο· οὐδεὶς. κατέπεσεν γάρ. / ὁ κύ[ν]δικος αὐτῷ εἶπ(εν)· | πῶς τοίνυν κατὰ τὴν ἀρχὴν ἔξαρνος ἐγίνου μὴ εἶναι οἰκόπεδον τούτου ὀνόματος, νυνὶ δὲ ὁμολογεῖς εἶναι μέν, καταπεπρωκέναι δέ; Νεῖλος διὰ τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἐρμ(η)νέως ἀπεκρ(ί)νατο ὅτι | οὐδὲν οἶδα οὐδὲ ἐνοικία εἴληφον (= εἴληφαν). (Il. iii 56 – iv 67)

[The *defensor* said to Germanos: “What does Germanos, here present, say? For what reason did you villagers sow this land?” Through Anoubion, interpreting for him, he said: “We sowed these fields as a precaution lest the taxes devolve upon us.” The *defensor* said: “And how long is it since you began sowing

them?” Through the same interpreter he answered: “We sowed them for one indiction only.” The *defensor* said to him: “And how is it that you have now handed them over to Nilos and the women?” Through the same interpreter he answered: “Because we agree that the fields are their property.” The *defensor* said to him: “Did you give them back the land under seed?” Through the same interpreter he answered: “No, but we gave them three artabas of wheat for each aroura.” Theodoros, advocate, said: “He lies. My clients received nothing, but were compelled ... to accept (?) ... the said plots.” The *defensor* said: “Then, if you were being compelled, you ought immediately to have complained through petitions and above all not have accepted rent.” Nilos said through the interpreter: “I did go immediately to the *praepositus*, and he said to me: ‘Bring a petition before the Prefect.’” Alexandros said: “Well, then, in order the more completely to convince your Grace, there is also a house in this city registered in the same name (i.e., Atisios) and held by our opponents from their father’s succession.” The *defensor* said to Nilos, appearing on behalf (of Herois and Taesis): “You have heard him, your opponent, say that you possess also a house registered in the same name as the plots, and you must depose whether or not you are in possession of a house or part thereof.” Nilos said through Anoubion, the Chief Assistant acting as interpreter: “I do not know if there is a house.” The *defensor* said to him: “Well, then, who pockets the rent?” Through the same interpreter, he answered: “Nobody. It has burned down.” The *defensor* said to him: “How is it, then, that at first you denied there was a house in this name, and now you admit that there was but that it has burned down?” Nilos replied through the same interpreter: “Because I do not know anything. And they have not received any rent.”^{28]}

Twice does Nilos seem to speak without the interpreter: he answers “The villagers” to the *defensor*’s question about who had gathered in the harvest the preceding year (iii 50 Νεῖλος ἐντολικάριος εἶπ(εν)· οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς κώμης) and he appeals in vain against the *defensor*’s final judgement (iv 74 Νεῖλος εἶπ(εν)· ἐκκαλοῦμαι). Either the copyist forgot to mention the interpreter or Nilos was able to utter simple Greek words, but not longer, though simpler, phrases.

²⁸ Translation from *ed.pr.*

Another famous legal context where an interpreter is explicitly cited is P.Oxy. II 237, a lengthy petition issued after 27 June 186 AD by a woman, Dionysia, to the prefect of Egypt over a property dispute in the city of Oxyrhynchus. Among other references, the petition cites verbatim the minutes of an earlier trial, held on 14 October 133, as evidence in support of her claims. At a certain point, the minutes state that an interpreter was employed to communicate to the Egyptian woman involved in that lawsuit (vii 37-38 καὶ ἐκέλευ[σε]ν δι' [ἐρ]μη|νέως αὐτὴν ἐνεχθῆν[α]ι τί βούλεται “and he ordered that she should be asked through an interpreter what was her choice”).²⁹

We do not know whether the preceding ἐρμηνεῖς were officially established as such or they were just officers able to speak both languages. Nevertheless, the case of a census declaration of 27 May 161 AD “written through the interpreter of the village” of Theadelphia in the Arsinoites (P.Berl.Leihg. I 16a, 15-16 ἐγρ(άφη?) δι' ἐρ(μηνέως) τῆς | [κ]ώ(μης)) introduces us to two further issues. The first is the existence of proper public interpreters, likely special officers in the employ of the Roman Greek-speaking administration to communicate with the Egyptians. We know of an “interpreter of the (or and) secretary of the tax collectors” (P.Cair.Mich. II 12a = P.Cair.Reggiani 5, 7 Εὐ]δαίμονος ἐρμηνέως γρ(αμματέως) πρακ(τόρων), Karanis, ca. AD 148/9) and of an “interpreter of the strategus” (SB VI 9406, cii 308 ἐρμην(ε)ῖ στρατηγοῦ (δραχμαῖ) η, Euhemeria, AD 247), as well as of a series of geographically determined ἐρμηνεῖς (τῆς) κώμης “of the village” (sometimes made explicit: of Karanis, of Bakchias, in Talei) as the qualification of measure standards which seems typical of the Arsinoites in the first two centuries AD. Their actual capacity of regulators emerges from P.Monts.Roca IV 71, a receipt from Boubastos (Arsinoites) dated to AD 141 or 143, which certainly refers to an extralinguistic meaning of ἐρμηνεία:³⁰

Διονύσιος Διονύσιος (= Διονυσίου) Στοτο[ρήτ]|(ε)ι ἐλαιουργῶ χαίρειν. ἔχω
[π]|αρά σου ὑπὲρ ἐρμην(ε)ίας μέτ|ρου κώμης Βουβάστου τοῦ | ε (ἔτους)

²⁹ Keenan, Manning, and Yiftach, *Law*, 97-98.

³⁰ Reggiani, “Tradurre”.

Αντωνίνου Καίσαρος τοῦ | κυρίου τὰς συμφωνηθεί|ας δραχμὰς ὀκτώ. (ἔτους)
[.] | Ἀν[τ]ωνίνου Καίσαρος τ[οῦ] | κυρί[ο]υ Φάωφι .

[Dionysios son of Dionysios to Stotoetis, oil maker, greetings. I receive from you for the conversion of (or to) the measure of the village of Boubastos of the 5th year of Antoninus Caesar the lord the agreed eight drachmas. Year x of Antoninus Caesar the lord, Phaophi x.]

The second issue put forth by the cited declaration is that of the legal documents, such as contracts, declarations, or petitions, composed or signed by a third party on behalf of an illiterate subject (ἀγράμματος). This circumstance was widespread and is frequently attested in the papyri. It is usually considered from the viewpoint of ancient illiteracy, especially to stress the social incidence of non-Greek speaking Egyptians (note that ἀγράμματος usually did not define a total illiterate but referred to the knowledge of τὰ Ἑλληνικὰ γράμματα).³¹ However, it can be considered also as an aspect of the more or less silent work of the ἑρμηνεῖς as historical actors.

Further on, beside these real, historical characters, the papyri provide us with remarkable examples of literary, perhaps fictional translators as well. Indeed, there are comparatively few, but significant cases of self-presentations claiming to have translated important religious texts from Egyptian to Greek.

Religious translation in Graeco-Roman Egypt bears as many social and cultural loads as the lay cases discussed above. Hellenic religion was performed in Greek and Egyptian religion was performed in Egyptian language, and any mixture of the two components could be potentially dangerous. Ptolemaios son of Glaukias, Greek resident priest (κάτοχος) and prophet of Serapis at the Serapeum of Memphis around the second quarter of the 2nd century BC, learnt that at his own expense, when he was forced to move his brother Apollonios away of the temple because of the heavy enmity of the local clergy against their Hellenic presence.³² Ptolemaios himself was attacked by the Egyptian dwellers of the sacred

³¹ Reggiani, *Papirologia*, 352-355, with earlier bibliography.

³² Lewis, *Greeks*, 74-87.

precinct several times, as it emerges from some petitions written by him to the strategus (UPZ I 7, 8 and 15), where he reports the violence suffered *παρὰ τὸ Ἕλληνα εἶναι* “despite I am Greek.” In opposition to the foreign rule, with the Egyptians often considered inferiors (a local worker complained to Zenon that he had been mistreated *ὅτι οὐκ ἐπίσταμαι ἑλληνίζειν* “because I can’t behave the Greek way”: P.Col. IV 66, 20; Philadelphia, ca. 256/5 BC), the local language was the shrine of Egyptian pride and religious tradition. Ptolemaios son of Glaukias, who stemmed from a glorious kleruchic family of Macedonian ancestry, did certainly have to know Egyptian language and writing, as is shown by the Demotic texts found in his archive.³³ Accordingly, the reading ability of Hieratic and Demotic was the proof to ascertain the priestly rank of a young man in P.Tebt. II 291, an official letter from Tebtunis dated to AD 162.

It is against this backdrop that we must consider the phenomenon of the translations of religious texts from Egyptian to Greek, ranging from the Ptolemaic to the Roman period: well-known and well-studied cases but still lacking a general explanation. It is generally impossible not to notice that they mostly pertain to the ever-growing revanchist feeling of Egyptian population sectors against the ruling foreigners. Both the *Dream of Nectanebo* and the *Novel of Sesonchosis* focus on the future return of a legendary Pharaoh of the past, who would free Egypt from the foreign domination. The *Oracle of the Potter* stages a prophecy to Pharaoh Amenophis about natural, political and military catastrophes caused by the domination of the foreign worshippers of Seth, the god of chaos, until the arrival of a King coming from the Sun and appointed by the Egyptian goddess Isis. The Greek translation of the *Myth of the Sun’s Eye*, recounting Thot’s research for the sun-god Atum-Ra’s daughter Tefnut fled to Nubia, poses more complex issues, in being a simplified version of a relevant theological text.³⁴ Who were the translators, and why did they translate such texts, seemingly intended for a purely Egyptian audience?

³³ Del Corso, “I figli di Glaukia”.

³⁴ Signoretti, “A Tale of Two Tongues?”; Jay, *Orality*, 293-344; Bazzana, “The *Oracle of the Potter*”.

First of all, I believe that the exceptional occasions of such translations (they are few and limited) explain why at least some of their alleged authors felt obliged to reveal themselves and to justify their uneasy enterprise. The case of the hymn to god Imouthes (Imhotep) preserved on P.Oxy. XI 1381 (Oxyrhynchus, 2nd century AD) can be illuminating.³⁵ The long text, devoted to the divine character identified by the Greeks with Asclepius, the god of medicine, was transcribed on the verso of an analogous hymn to Isis. At the beginning, the copyist describes the circumstances of the discovery of the original papyrus roll in the temple of Imhotep at Memphis, in the time of Nectanebo. As the introduction goes, the worship of Imhotep had decayed in the troubled times preceding Nectanebo, and the temple was largely deserted when the king, with a view to restoring the worship on its former basis, ordered an examination of an ancient roll found there. In l. 32 the translator starts a rather long personal explanation of the reasons why he first undertook and then postponed the rendering of this ancient text in the Greek language (ll. 33-64), resuming the work after three years at the direct instigation of the god, who had miraculously appeared to him and his mother and cured him of a fever (ll. 64-167). After further explanations addressed to Asclepius concerning the nature of this composition in his honour (ll. 168-202), and an invocation of pious worshippers (ll. 203-218), the writer proceeds to paraphrase the very content of the original roll, but at l. 247 the text breaks off. A statement is particularly worth being quoted:

ἐγὼ δὲ πολλάκις τῆς | [α]ὐτῆς βίβλου τὴν ἐρμηνείαν | [ἀρ]ξάμενος Ἑλληνίδι
γλ[ώ]σση | [όρμ]αθὸν ὄν (= ἐν) αἰῶνι κηρῶσαι, καὶ | ἐν μέσῃ ῥεύων τῆ γραφῆ
| ἐπεσχέθην τὴν προθυμίαν | τῷ τῆς ἱστορίας [τω] μεγέθει, | δ[ι]ότι ἔξω ἐλεῖν
ἔμελλο[ν] ἀν[τι]τῆν· θε[ο]ῖς γὰρ μόνοι[ς] ἀλλ' οὐ | [θν]ητοῖς ἐφ[φ]ικ[ε] . .]τ[ὸ]ν τὰς
θε[ῶ]ν διηγεῖσθα[ι] δυνάμεισ. (ll. ii 32-42)

[Having often begun the translation of the said book in the Greek tongue, I learnt at length how to proclaim it, but while I was in the full tide of composition, my ardour was restrained by the greatness of the story, because I was about to make

³⁵ Signoretti, “From Demotic to Greek”.

it public; for to gods alone, not to mortals, is it permitted to describe the mighty deeds of the gods.^{36]}

The translator comes on stage and nearly becomes himself a character of the legend, resuming old literary and religious schemes – the recovery of an ancient sacred manuscript, the god’s order after the man’s hesitation³⁷ – along with new reflections on the reasons for and the troubles of translating. The aim is to make the story public (ἔξω ἐλεῖν), which implies the passage from an elitist and divine language – namely, Egyptian (Demotic) as it was in the Roman period – to the more popular and international Greek. The trouble just arises from the divine character of the story as expressed in a divine tongue: its greatness, its godly nature in terms both of content and of form. It is not a matter of pure translation but of interpretation, of ἐρμηνεία indeed: the creation of a new narrative (διήγησις).

The divine intervention grants that the book was composed not according to the translator’s thought but according to the god’s grace (ix 182-84 κατὰ τὴν κτὴν εὐμ[ένει]αν | ἀλλ’ οὐ κατὰ τὴν ἐμ[ὴν φρ]όνησιν): one cannot but recall the traditional legend about the Greek translations of the Bible in Ptolemaic Alexandria, performed by seventy sages reportedly informed by the divine Spirit.³⁸ It is also important to stress that ἐρμηνεῖς were also called the priestly prophets charged of “interpreting” the gods’ will in human terms, and ἐρμηνεῖαι the symbolic interpretations of Christian texts.³⁹

The “poverty” (iii 48-49 τ[απει]λῶμα) of the new script (γραφὴ) is exactly what Greek was charged of and the basic origin of the κατὰ τὸ

³⁶ Translation from *ed.pr.*

³⁷ The recovery of an old holy text is a theme found both in Egyptian and in Greek traditions: e.g., in the Demotic novel of Setne, the protagonist searches for a magical book that belonged to deceased prince Naneferkaptah; Pausanias IV 27, 5 tells of Messenian priests transcribing recently recovered ancient and precious ritual texts. For the second topic, see P.Cair.Zen. I 59045 = PSI IV 435 (before 257 BC), where a certain Zoilus of Aspendus tells Zenon to have twice ignored the healing god Serapis’ will to have a temple built and to have been accordingly twice struck with an illness, until the god’s will was fulfilled.

³⁸ Reggiani, “Greco”.

³⁹ Reggiani, “Tradurre”.

δυνατόν legal formula in the documentary translations (see above). It will not surprise that a papyrus copy of the Greek version of the *Oracle of the Potter* bears the colophon ἀπολογία κεραμέως {μεθηρμενευμένη} | πρὸ[c] Ἀμενῶπιν τὸν βασιλέα {μεθηρμενευμένη} κατὰ τὸ | δυν[α]τό[v] περὶ τῶν τῆ Αἰγύπτῳ [με]λλόντων “Apology of a Potter to the King Amenophis, translated as best as possible, about the future of Egypt” (P.Vindob. G 19813 verso, ii 54-57; Oxyrhynchus, second half of the 3rd century AD).

Scholars have recently underlined the likely fictional character of such translation stories.⁴⁰ The invention of an older Egyptian source to provide authority is common to other famous examples of so-called “religious pseudepigraphy” in Egypt, like the Shabaka stone, Horapollo’s *Hieroglyphika*, the *Sortes Astrampsychi*, the Hermetic treatises.⁴¹ The same device was deployed with the very same purpose in the magical handbooks on papyrus: PGM II 12, xii 400-401 ἐρμηνεύματα ἐκ τῶν ἱερῶν μεθηρμενευμένα | οἷς ἐχῶντο οἱ ἱερογραμματεῖς “Interpretations translated from the holy writings, which the temple scribes employed”; Suppl.Mag. II 72, i 1-5 ἐξαγωγή ἐπωδῶν ἐκ τῆς εὐρεθείης | ἐν Ἡλίου {c} πόλει ἐν τῆ ἱερᾷ βύβλωι τῆι καλουμένη Ἑρμοῦ ἐν τῷ ἀδύτῳ Αἰγυπτίους | γράμμασιν καὶ διερμηνευθέντων Ἑλληνικοῖς “Excerpt of enchantments from the holy book called of Hermes, found in Heliopolis in the innermost shrine of the temple, written in Egyptian letters and translated into Greek (letters)”.⁴²

Additionally, we must not forget that real translations from Demotic to Greek did exist (we have remains of the original Egyptian text of the *Myth of the Sun’s Eye*), and the possible fictionality of some of these declarations should not prevent us from a critical reflection on the phenomenon. Be they real or imaginary, indeed, those stories were created with a cultural purpose. The story of the Imouthes papyrus is the most complete so far and I believe that it tells a lot about the cultural mechanics of translation. Its apparent outline is the recovery

⁴⁰ Koenen, “Die Apologie des Töpfers”, 180-183; Naether and Thissen, “Genesis einer Aretalogie”.

⁴¹ Naether and Thissen, “Genesis einer Aretalogie”, 561, with further bibliography.

⁴² On the relationship between Demotic and Greek in the medical papyri see Dieleman, *Priests*.

of a powerful sacred tradition: the rediscovery of the holy papyrus at Nectanebo's times is re-enacted by the anonymous translator, the restoration of the worship of Imhotep is mirrored by the divine stimulus to the translating work aimed at spreading the god's cult. The presence of Nectanebo, the last of the indigenous Pharaohs, which was the subject of a number of legends in the popular literature of the Graeco-Roman period, such as the widespread story of his being the father of Alexander the Great, beside of course the abovementioned *Dream* with the messianic myth of his return, is significant: it seems to me evident that the meaning is the restoration of the Egyptian power, now as then. Accordingly, the explanation for the alleged translation offered in the Oxyrhynchus papyrus can easily be exported to the other – either true or fictional – cases of propagandistic literature: the reason for which texts rooted in the Egyptian tradition were translated into, or even originally composed in, Greek was their circulation among non-Egyptians.⁴³ It is perfectly understandable that such propagation was intended (also) to sensitize or even warn the non-Egyptian sectors of the population. From this perspective, it is no surprise at all that a copy of the *Dream of Nectanebo* has been found among the papers of Apollonios son of Glaukias, the very Greek *κἀτοχος* of the Serapeum (see above) – theoretically, among the least interested people in such apocalyptic literature – copied by his own hand (UPZ I 81).

Even though fictional, such translations are however important to understand the power of language and the power of its masters in the ancient times, who acted as a proper bridge between different cultural worlds.

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⁴³ On the meaningfulness of linguistic choices in the papyrological sources see Bagnall, *Reading Papyri*, 16-17.

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