



Looking for interpreter zero: (1) Christopher Columbus and the ‘Indians’

Interpreters in history: changing roles and identities.

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Conference interpreting has a clear history but less is known about the interpreters who assisted early travellers, diplomats or traders. I have only just started looking into this and am intrigued to note that the literature shows both a recognised need for language intermediaries and a lack of any real interest. Those writing the history of exploration or conquest have other tales to tell. Early interpreters play a marginal role in their accounts.

We are there in the background, though. Felipe Fernández-Armesto’s biography of Christopher Columbus includes some intriguing anecdotes about his language adventures. When he set sail in 1492, he had an Arabic interpreter on board to enable him to communicate with any oriental people he might meet. That interpreter was clearly under-employed but his presence reflected that there was an established need for interpreters. That is why Columbus took several Caribbean people back to Spain at the end of that first voyage; the idea was to present them at court, have them baptised and teach them Spanish so they could both learn about their new religion and interpret on subsequent trips.

Only one of them, known as Diego Colón, actually worked as an interpreter. He was not able to help much, however, because the Indians of the Caribbean did not share a language. By 1502, on his fourth voyage, Columbus was training a captive Indian - renamed Juan Pérez - for the job. In the meantime he communicated with locals on the coast of Honduras by means of signs, which is apparently how he took their account of the strait (or isthmus) of Panama to be a description of a waterway to a large ocean and thought he was indeed going to sail to India.

It is hard to imagine how that information was imparted through gesture – Columbus clearly wanted to understand that he was on his way to India. These few examples from his journeys to America raise a number of questions I would like to explore in my search for early interpreters. Those who – willingly or not – assisted early explorers were often captives but not all of them: there is evidence of professional linguists at work from the ancient Fertile Crescent onwards.

In this series I intend to look backward and forwards from accounts of European explorers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to see if it is possible to track down early instances of interpreting and to trace its ups and downs through the ages.

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