



# The Role of Dragomans in the Ottoman Empire

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**Historically**, a state wishing to establish relations with another state required the assistance of individuals fluent in languages who could help diplomats accomplish their mission. These interpreters and translators were called “dragomans” in the Ottoman Empire. Dragomans are a fairly unknown institution and their history is linked to the beginning of regular relations between Western countries and the Ottoman Empire [\[1\]](#).

In Muslim countries, dragomans first appeared in the 8<sup>th</sup> century at the time of the Abbasids. They also existed under the Mamluks in Egypt and the Seljuqs in Anatolia. Under the Seljuqs, the dragoman was named by a firman. The Ottoman Empire carried on in the same tradition [\[2\]](#).

The history of diplomatic translation and interpretation in the Ottoman Empire is tightly linked to dragomans. The latter could be considered to be the founding fathers of diplomatic translation and interpretation in the Ottoman Empire and later in Turkey. This history began with the first contacts and the first treaties signed with Western powers.

In 1454, Venice sent an ambassador to Istanbul, called a *Balyos* [\[3\]](#). After the Republic of Venice, Poland (1475), Russia (1497), Austria (1528), France [\[4\]](#) (1535), England (1583) and Holland (1612) also sent ambassadors to establish relations with the Ottoman Empire.

But before delving into these extraordinary individuals, let us look at the origin of the word “dragoman”.

## The Origin of the Word “Dragoman”

Several theories exist as to the origin of the word “dragoman”. This word of Syriac origin was borrowed by Arabic (*tardjumān*) and then by Turkish (*tercüman*). The oldest versions of the word are *tagmāna* and *targem*. It made its way to Latin (*turchimannus*, *dragumanus*, *dracmandus*, *turchimannus*), Italian (*drogmano*, *dragomanno*, *turcimanno*), French (*drugement*, *drugement*, *drogman*, *truchement*), Spanish (*truchiman*, *trujaman*), German (*dragoman*), Bulgarian (*драгоманин*), Portuguese (*turgeman*), Serbian (*terduman*, *dragomani*), Polish (*turdzyman*), Byzantine Greek (*dragomanus*) and Flemish (*droogman*).

In the past, the word was used in Turkish languages in the variants *dilmaç* or *tilmaç*.

Nowadays, the same word has been borrowed by some European languages such as German (*Tolmetsch* and then *Dolmetscher* [5]), Russian (*толмач*, though little used today), Czech (*tlumoč*), Hungarian (*tolmács*), Macedonian (*толкувач*), Polish ( *tłumacz*), etc. It is still used in Turkish today. In Azerbaijani, the words *tərcüməçi* (translator / interpreter) and *dilmanç* (interpreter) are used as well.

Although the word “*tercüman*” was used in Ottoman documents to refer to interpreter-translators from embassies and consulates, it was the word “*dragoman*” which was used in nearly all European languages [6]. However, its spelling and pronunciation varied from one language to the next, as shown in the preceding examples.

## Dragomans

The Sublime Porte and Western diplomatic missions in the Ottoman Empire needed individuals fluent in both Western and Oriental languages who also mastered the cultural differences and codes of behavior of both Ottomans and Westerners. In Europe, such individuals were known as “*dragomans*”. The dragoman’s tasks were manifold: political and commercial translation and interpretation between the Sublime Porte and the ambassadors and consuls of Western powers. They constituted veritable dragoman dynasties in the Levant, stemming from “national” or Levantine [7] descent and representing “Ottoman Latins”. They were then present in the Ottoman Empire and continued to carry out their tasks until the end of the Empire. Within the Ottoman Empire two main categories of dragomans existed:

### 1. Dragomans of the Sultan’s Imperial Divan (*Dîvân-ı Hümâyûn tercümanları*)

Dragomans of the Sultan’s Imperial Divan (*Dîvân-ı Hümâyûn tercümanları*) were civil servants of the Ottoman Empire and they were also known as Grand Dragomans in the West. They held very high posts, albeit also with very high risks. Before the Tanzimat period, they held the second most important position after that of the *Reis-ül küttâb* [8].

The Grand Dragoman (*Baştercüman*) or Grand Dragoman of the Sublime Porte (*Bâb-ı âli baştercümanı*) was a sort of head interpreter-translator overseeing a team of translators and interpreters. They can be compared to translators and interpreters working for presidents and ministries in the modern world.

The Grand Dragoman’s work included:

- Interpreting the Grand Vizier’s meetings with foreign envoys.
- Translating letters sent by foreign missions to the Sultan and the Grand Vizier during receptions.
- Participating in the Grand Vizier’s meetings with foreign envoys and drafting summaries of such meetings.
- Taking part in Ottoman delegations sent abroad.
- Interpreting during bilateral negotiations.
- Drafting any correspondence sent to Western powers.

At first, Grand Dragomans were not allowed to participate in negotiations, but this practice changed starting in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, all diplomatic activity in the Ottoman Empire was concentrated in the hands of the Grand Dragomans. In this way, they became the most important civil servants in Ottoman diplomacy.

In 1502, Ali Bey became the first Grand Dragoman in the Ottoman Empire. Between 1502 and 1661, Grand Dragomans were chosen from among the German, Hungarian, Italian and other communities. In 1661, with the appointment of Panayotis Nicousios as Grand Dragoman, it was the

Greeks who began to hold this prestigious post and would continue to do so until the Greek Revolution of 1821. During that period, members of the Christian community known as the *Magnifica Comunità di Pera et Galata* [9] shared until the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century the roles of Grand Dragoman of the Sublime Porte and Grand Dragoman of the Fleet with Orthodox Greeks from Fener. Some of the great dynasties belonging to this community included the Pisani, Navoni, Timoni, Testa, Fonton, and other families.

## 2. Dragomans of foreign mission (embassies, consulates)

Western powers which established missions in the Ottoman Empire needed people who spoke their own language as well as the language used by Ottoman authorities. At first, foreign missions recruited them from among the minority Christian communities in the Fener and Pera in Constantinople. Fener was inhabited by Orthodox Greeks and Pera (*Beyoğlu*) by Latins [10], often of Italian origin. Subsequently, Western countries began to train their own dragomans since they did not trust local ones.

These dragomans acted as secretary-interpreters who translated documents as well as meetings with representatives of the Ottoman administration. They accompanied diplomats and lived in embassies or consulates. Many renowned Orientalists such as the historian Baron von Hammer, Bianchi, Jaubert, Huart, Schlechta-Wssehrd, M. Hartmann and others, at some point held the position of dragoman. They can be compared to press officers at embassies who often act as interpreters or translators.

One of the reasons why Westerners chose their dragomans from among these families was due to the fact that according to Ottoman traditions based on Islam, it was forbidden to learn European languages. Westerners were considered to be infidels. Muslims states and Christian states were not held in the same regard. European countries were called "*Dar ül-cihad*" (The Gate of the Holy War) "*Diyar-ı küfr*" (The World of Heathenism), etc. It was not well seen if a Muslim lived for too long in such countries. Ottomans also had a superiority complex. Sultans (*padişah*) and grand viziers (*sadr-ı a'zam*) carried out humiliating behavior towards emissaries of Western countries. It is for all these reasons that, until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman Empire had never opened an embassy in any Western country.

With the increase in relations between the Ottoman Empire and Western powers, there were no longer enough dragomans to fulfill demand, and so each country looked for another solution. Beginning in 1551, Venice sent young children (*Giovani di lingua*) to Constantinople to train them as dragomans. The Republic of Ragusa, Poland and France followed suit. In 1626, French Capuchins set up a school [11] in Constantinople to teach French, Turkish, Latin, Italian and Vulgar Greek. The school trained the first group of dragomans to serve France. In 1669, Colbert created a school for dragomans in Constantinople, the school for "*Jeunes de langue*" [12]. The school was free, tuition being paid by the Marseille Chamber of Commerce. Its goal was to avoid having to recruit dragomans only from local families. "Local" dragomans were subjects of the Sultan and as such their loyalty was sometimes questioned. Their imperfect knowledge of French also constituted a risk during negotiations. That is how the idea came about to recruit young children in order to teach them Oriental languages from an early age.

Young children from Western countries and from the territories of the Ottoman Empire received an education and learned Turkish, Arabic and Persian (*elsine-i selâse* [13]). After their training, they were known as "*dil oğlanı*" (language children).

As time went by, these students made up an integral part of diplomatic links by becoming not only translators and interpreters between the Sublime Porte and emissaries of Western powers, but also specialists in Oriental civilizations. They also replaced dragomans known as "barataires" [14].

At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, pupils at the *Ecole de Jeunes de langues* had to translate Turkish, Arabic and Persian manuscripts as mandatory exercises. The goal was to enrich the Library of the King of France. This policy of translation was part of a wider movement, started under Colbert, of acquiring Oriental works in a well-planned and orderly fashion. The idea of translating manuscripts was thought up by the Count of Maurepas, State Secretary of the Navy. Most of these translations are currently kept at the National Library of France. They included stories, historical, military and diplomatic texts, as well as treaties, laws and canons.

The British also tried to train dragomans specifically for the British embassy in Constantinople. The school of Greek at Oxford was to receive young Greeks into the Anglican religion. The Patriarch of Jerusalem and the Grand Dragoman of the Sublime Porte Alexandre Mavrocordato expressed their reservations because of a possible reaction on the part of Ottoman authorities.

Through their deep knowledge of Muslim civilization and its languages, dragomans played a key role in the transfer of knowledge and ideas between the Ottoman Empire and the West, as well as in the history of the Ottoman Empire.

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English version by  
[Gregorio Villalobos](#).

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[1] Marghetitch, S.G. (1898). *Étude sur les fonctions des Drogmans des missions diplomatiques ou consulaires en Turquie*, p. 3. Constantinople.

[2] Orhonlu, Cengiz. (1993). *Tercüman. İslam Ansiklopedisi*. Istanbul, MEB, 176, quoted by Polatci, *Osmanlı diplomasisinde oryantalist memurlar (Osmanlı belgeleriyle diloğlanları ve tercümanlar)*, p. 42.

[3] **Balyos** is a word of Italian origin. *Bailo* was a title once given to consuls from European states, but it was especially used for emissaries from the Republic of Venice to the Sublime Porte. The first Venetian *bailo* was appointed to the Ottoman Empire with the signing of the treaty of 1454. Later on, the same term was used for emissaries and ambassadors from other countries.

[4] In 1535, Francis I of France forged an alliance with Suleiman the Magnificent. That same year, France established its first embassy in Constantinople.

[5] In modern German, the word “*Dolmetscher*” is used to refer to conference interpreters.

[6] Kinli. p. 83, quoted by Polatci. *Osmanlı diplomasisinde oryantalist memurlar (Osmanlı belgeleriyle diloğlanları ve tercümanlar)*. pp. 41-42.

[7] Levantine: The group of communities which for centuries made up the Oriental Latin or Ottoman Latin nation.

[8] In the Ottoman Empire, the *Reis-ül küttâb* carried out the functions of the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

[9] Non-Muslim subjects of the Ottoman Sultan in Galata had their own council known as the *Magnifica Comunità di Pera*.

[10] The Latin families of Galata: the Navonis, the Grillos, the Olivieris, the Fornettis, etc.

[11] *Ecole de Jeunes de langue des Capucins* (Capuchin Youth Language School).

[12] This school was transferred to Paris and is now called INALCO (National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations).

[13] The three languages.

[14] The word *barataire* comes from *berât*, meaning diploma. This *berât* granted them the trade and tax benefits guaranteed by capitulation to the citizens of the countries they served.

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