

## The Invisible Interpreters of Greece

Thousands of invisible, unnamed people move about in the background of histories, vital and yet unseen. One group of these people are the *ἐρμηνέες* “interpreters” or “translators” who allowed for communication in the multilingual expanse of Hellenistic Greece. Henry Gehman's 1914 paper explored the literary presence of translators in Plutarch's *Alexander* and Xenophon's *Anabasis*. More recently, Rachael Mairs' 2020 exploration of the Greek term *ἐρμηνεύς* in Egyptian papyri delves into the necessary role of interpreters in the Greek court system. Furthermore, Jonathan Hall's book “Hellenicity: Between Ethnicity and Culture” examined how the Greek language served as a unifying marker of national and ethnic identity across *poles*. My paper builds upon this research to examine the attitudes of Greeks who identified themselves based on shared language toward the essential bilingual translators of the Hellenistic world.

This paper conducts a linguistic study to analyze how Greek-identifying people socially perceived multilingual people and translators. Using the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, I have compiled a corpus of when Greek authors used the keywords *δίγλωσσος* “bilingual” and *ἐρμηνεύς* “interpreter” to compare the context and tone of relevant passages. The contexts in which they appear indicate that both ancient literature and modern scholarship overlooked translators, in part due to mixed heritage and dubious social status. However, this paper indicates that despite xenophobic biases in elite literature, translators in Greek histories played vital roles in military, political, and commercial interactions.

Studying the societal placement of translators in Hellenistic Greece can provide insight into evolving ideas about foreigners and national identity as Greece expanded. The Greek language created an overarching Greek identity during Hellenistic unification. Since mixed heritage bilingual people occupied a nebulous area between Greeks and foreigners, the Greeks were disquieted by their existence in the strictly stratigraphic social system. However, translators were essential contributors to Greek society and colonization – integrated into every level of the imperial regime.

The colonizer Greek viewed the learning of separate languages as a barbaric practice reserved for those not fully Greek, even though the majority of their colonies retaining their indigenous languages at home meant Greek translators were required for the function of the empire.

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