

History of Translation

Introduction

Scholars say that translation involves transferring the meaning of a message from one language to another. While the historical roots of translation are debated, it is widely acknowledged to precede the Bible. Throughout human history, translation has developed, enabling cross-cultural connections, trade, economic globalization, and the sharing of knowledge. Translation has played a crucial role in fostering global understanding, unifying the world's diverse cultures, and, as a result, has become an indispensable service. The analogy frequently used to describe translation as a bridge holds true, with translation evolving significantly throughout history while maintaining its fundamental purpose. Whether facilitating communication between tribal communities or enabling dialogue at international gatherings like United Nations summits, translation and interpretation (in spoken form) have consistently acted as conduits for connecting human societies since time immemorial. A closer examination of the historical development of translation allows for a greater appreciation of the progress it has achieved. Within these lines, we will provide a concise overview of the history of both translation and interpretation.

The Early Origins of Translation

The study of historical theories sheds valuable light on the practice of translation, revealing its origins, purpose, and significance. In this context, several key facts are worth noting. Firstly, the term "translation" traces its roots to the Latin word "translatio," which encapsulates the idea of "conveying across or bringing over." Secondly, the Ancient Greek term "metaphrasis," meaning "speaking across," was coined to describe the concept of "word-for-word translation."

Historical evidence takes us back to the Mesopotamian era, where we find examples of early translation practices, such as the translation of the "Sumerian poem" of Gilgamesh into an Asian language. Another noteworthy instance of ancient translation is the work of Buddhist monks who undertook the task of translating Indian scriptures into Chinese.

Cicero, a notable Roman writer and philosopher, offered insights into translation in his work "De Oratore" or "On the Orator." He argued against strictly adhering to a "verbum pro verbo" (word-for-word) approach and, much like an artist, considered translation a creative endeavor.

Translators, particularly those engaged in translating sacred and holy texts in antiquity, made substantial contributions to the evolution of the languages into which they translated these significant works.

John Dryden, a renowned English poet and translator who lived from 1631 to 1700, provided his perspective on translation. He described it as the "skillful merging of two modes of expression when selecting 'counterparts' or equivalents for the expressions used in the source language" within the target language, using his unique terminology.

Before delving deeper into the lectures, it is imperative to establish a clear distinction between translation and interpretation (interpreting). These two distinct linguistic disciplines serve unique roles in bridging language barriers and demand separate considerations as we explore their nuances and applications.

Translation refers to the process of conveying the meaning of a message from one language into another. It can be carried out by humans or machines. A human translator may be a professional or someone with a basic knowledge of another language. In professional translation, the source language is the one the text originates in, while the target language is the language it is translated into.

Interpretation, on the other hand, involves oral translation from one language to another. Within the translation industry, interpretation is typically categorized into two primary forms: consecutive and simultaneous interpretation. In consecutive interpretation, the interpreter listens to the speaker and then, when the speaker pauses, repeats the spoken content in another language. Simultaneous interpretation, a more challenging task, involves the interpreter providing a real-time translation as the speaker is speaking. This is often facilitated by soundproof booths, headsets, and microphones.

The distinction between translation and interpretation lies in the nature of the communication they serve. Translation pertains to written communication, whereas interpretation is concerned with spoken communication.

However, it's essential to recognize the interconnection between these two linguistic skills throughout history. Discussing the history of one without acknowledging the other would result in an incomplete narrative.

Now that we've clarified the contrast between these disciplines, let's delve into their captivating and distinctive histories.