

# On Knowledge of Languages

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The importance of translations and knowledge of languages of origin and destination have been crucial throughout history as they have channelled philosophical, scientific and technical know-how between different cultures. This importance grows the more distance there is between the two languages from a linguistic point of view, and the fewer people there are from one society or the other who can use them as an instrument. In this context, translations of Greek and Arabic works into Latin vernacular languages have been, as we know, one of the most important elements for the transmission of knowledge in our past, and for promoting technical, ideological and literary advances in the cultures receiving them. Notable in this transmission is the fact that the technical means at their disposal were rudimentary, as they were undertaken in an era when printing did not yet exist and the work of copying was done by hand. This is why many works have been totally or partially lost. The history of the destruction and loss of these volumes is part of the black history of humanity, because it was mostly committed by man, driven in many cases by fanaticism and intolerance.

Today, however, we live in a time when technological media are far more advanced than 10 or 15 years ago, and infinitely beyond what our ancestors possessed. But, paradoxically, these advances have not yet been put in a structured form at the service of the transmission of knowledge, which therefore has not suffered an exponential growth like that of technologies. In the first place, knowledge of languages by the population is still scarce, especially of those more removed from Latin, as is natural. For the

same reason, their development in schools, educational institutions and universities should be strengthened, along with that of their cultural elements. This step is fundamental for purely ideological reasons. In the framework of the Alliance of Civilizations the need to break the physical, cultural, linguistic and social barriers that divide societies is emphasised, so that the differences of each group, whatever they may be, constitute a positive element within global society. This is only achieved through the transmission of knowledge carried out fluidly, so that cultural diversity is accepted at the heart of our societies. In order to achieve this objective it is necessary to promote the teaching of languages and of cultural elements characteristic of other societies.

The reality, however, is different. The number of translations carried out of Arabic, Hebrew or any other language that is not one of the standard ones is almost nominal. Although translations have increased in recent years, this increase does not mean a significant change in the global spectrum of the publishing world. It has mainly been the result of two factors: first, that notable Arab or Hebrew intellectuals have managed to overcome this cultural barrier (in some cases by receiving laurels that help their dissemination, such as the Nobel Prize). There have been few chosen, but in one way or another they have attracted other writers, whose works have been translated into Spanish and other European languages, with worse or better results in terms of dissemination or social reach. The second reason, which to some extent is connected to the first, is the fact that at present international politics revolves around



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the Arab and Mediterranean world, and any issue related with this geographical and cultural area has an added value because of the interest it awakens in readers.

It is necessary, therefore, to enhance the potential from the institutions of a policy of translation of literary works and essays into European languages, which provides direct knowledge of other cultures. This policy must be strengthened from the institutions, because leaving it to the uncertainty of the market means the translation of these works is reduced considerably and is limited to the more current authors. With this in mind, protection and support of the world of translation is a fundamental element. It is heartbreaking, for example, that the current literary translation programme Culture 2007, of the European Union, does not provide for languages such as

Arabic and Hebrew (even as languages used in Europe in the past!) but does include Latin and Greek classics.

Moreover, it would be very interesting to use the new technologies, enhancing the translations of websites and the creation of others which have the objective of making known the literature and thought of the Arab and Hebrew world, as language continues to be a barrier that the general public cannot cross. Today, the authors who do not have a space in the virtual world barely exist, and through this kind of initiative – those existing until now are created independently and undertaken through personal initiative (blogs) by specialists of the Arab and Hebrew world, with few resources and much effort – virtual centres of knowledge would be created which would bring about the dissemination of works in other languages from neighbouring cultures.