

An early history of the discipline of translation

Writings on the subject of translating go far back in recorded history. The **practice of translation** was crucial for the early dissemination of key cultural and religious texts and concepts. In the west, the different ways of translating were discussed by, among others, Cicero and Horace (first century AD) and St Jerome (fourth century AD). Their writings were to exert an important influence up until the twentieth century. In St Jerome's case, his approach to translating the Greek Septuagint Bible into Latin would affect later translations of the Scriptures. Indeed, in western Europe the translation of the Bible was to be the battleground of conflicting ideologies for well over a thousand years and especially during the Reformation in the sixteenth century. In China, it was the translation of the Buddhist sutras that inaugurated a long discussion on translation practice from the first century.

While the practice of translation is long established, the study of the field developed into an academic discipline only in the latter part of the twentieth century. Before that, translation had often been relegated to an element of language learning. In fact, from the late eighteenth century to the 1960s and beyond, language learning in secondary schools in many countries had come to be dominated by what was known as **grammar-translation** (Cook 2010: 9–15). Applied to Classical Latin and Greek and then to modern foreign languages, this centred on the rote study of the grammatical rules and structures of the foreign language. These rules were both practised and tested by the translation of a series of usually unconnected and artificially constructed sentences exemplifying the structure(s) being studied. This is an approach that persists even today in certain contexts. Typical of this is the following rather bizarre and decontextualized collection of sentences to translate into Spanish, for the practice of Spanish tense use. They appear in K. Mason's *Advanced Spanish Course*, still to be found on some secondary school courses in the UK until the 1990s:

- (1) The castle stood out against the cloudless sky.
- (2) The peasants enjoyed their weekly visits to the market.
- (3) She usually dusted the bedrooms after breakfast.
- (4) Mrs Evans taught French at the local grammar school.

(Mason 1969/1974: 92)