Teaching Translation from Spanish to English

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CHAPTER 1

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSLATION

Professional translators have been around for nearly five thousand years, and yet, like members of another of the "oldest professions," they are often forgotten, underrated, and misunderstood by the general public. However, the importance of translation should not be underestimated, particularly in a world that has to learn to husband its resources as one world or perish in the attempt. Without translators, commerce, trade, international relations, politics, law, science, and art would be severely limited, and in some cases would wither away. "Shoot first and talk later" would be the order of the day.

The tremendous expansion of international relations in the twentieth century has led to an exponential growth in the number of texts translated every year and in the number of professional translators. However, recognition of the importance of this profession has been slow. In Spain, for example, translation and interpreting were not recognized as an independent area of research until 1991.

Today, translators are joining together in professional organizations to assure better working conditions and professional standards. Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go. Even public entities like Televisión Española do not pay sufficient attention to the quality of translation and interpreting. During the 1992 American election campaign, the face-to-face debates between George Bush, Bill Clinton, and Ross Perot were transmitted live on TV2 with simultaneous interpreting. The interpreters were obviously not professionals, and at several points in the debate they failed entirely to get the message across in Spanish. For example, Clinton said that Europe would have to take more responsibility for its own security, but the interpreter said, "Tendremos que ocuparnos de la seguridad de Europa" (We shall have to assure the security of Europe).

Mistakes of this kind can have serious consequences. Basil Hatim (1992) suggested that many of the events leading up to the Gulf War could have been avoided if both George Bush and Saddam Hussein had had better translators.
The Barcelona Olympic Committee prepared its team of translators and interpreters with care. All the same, those responsible for linguistic control often had their work sabotaged by other Olympic officials who did not understand anything about translation quality. The 1992 Olympic Games would not have been possible without the team of translators and interpreters, whose work began many years before the event and is not yet completed. Nevertheless, this letter appeared in *El País Semanal* (16 Aug. 1992, emphasis added):

**Traductores olímpicos.** Me apenas comprobar que en el artículo sobre “Personajes olímpicos” (*El País Semanal*, 19 de julio), que agrupa a 197 personas representantes de los colectivos que han hecho posibles los Juegos Olímpicos, hayan omitido a los traductores e intérpretes; sin nosotros, Barcelona hubiera sido una inconexa babel en la que la gran idea no se hubiera hecho realidad.

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The Tower of Babel was so called “because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth; and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth” (Genesis 11:8). Fortunately, after Babel there were a few translators around to assure communication among the different language groups.