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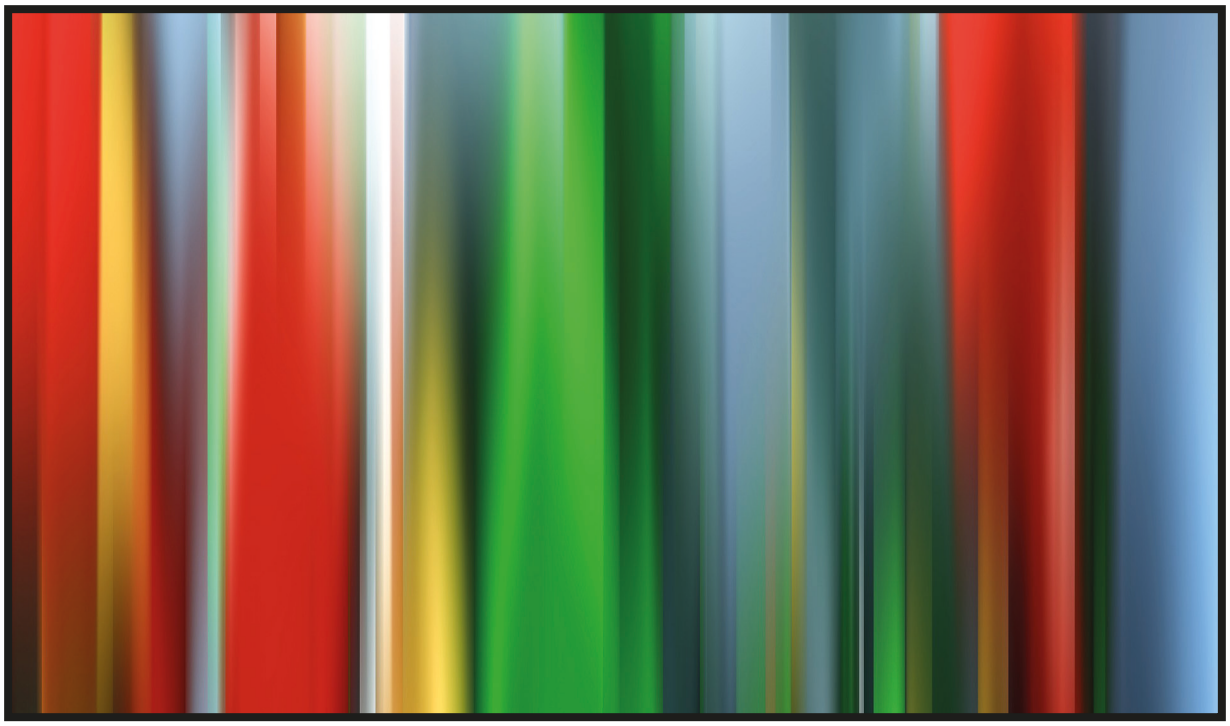

The Slave-Interpreter System in the Fifteenth-Century Atlantic World

JOSEPH A.B. JACKSON-EADE

Joseph has recently completed his Master's Degree in 'Global Cultures' at the University of Bologna, Italy, after having studied History and Anthropology at University of Lyon II, France. His dissertation is focused on cross-cultural communication in the early phases of the Iberian expansion into the Atlantic and Indian Oceans during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. He has been seeking to understand how the Iberians gained access to interpreters, and which mechanisms determined the relationship between the colonizing Iberians and their interpreters.

This article analyzes the structures the Iberians developed to acquire linguistic mediators during their early imperial expansion into the Atlantic Ocean. It focuses on the specific case of slave-interpreters, indigenous captives that were taught European languages and used as guides and go-betweens during later expeditions to their homelands. Following the diffusion of the slave-interpreter system from the Canary Islands to West Africa and later to the American world, this article underlines the paramount importance of linguistic mediation within the broader Iberian imperial project. Slave-interpreters rapidly became key figures and indispensable for the Iberians' success. However, the Iberians's dependance on these interpreters was also the source of suspicion and wariness. This pushed the Iberian expeditions leaders to constantly re-think their access to linguistic mediators, and their interactions with them. Through an analysis of contemporary sources, this article chronologically follows the evolution of the slave-interpreter system in the Atlantic throughout the fifteenth century. It focuses on the underlying tensions that shaped, and changed the relationship between the Iberians and their slave-interpreters.

Introduction

Although the topic of cross-cultural interaction during the late medieval and early modern Iberian imperial expansion has been widely addressed by generations of historians, the role of oral translation, verbal communication, and the particular figure of the interpreter remains surprisingly peripheral within this historiography.[1]

[1] Only a handful of monographs directly address the question of interpreters or go-betweens in the fifteenth and sixteenth century Atlantic world. See: Frances Karttunen, *Between Worlds: Interpreters, Guides and Survivors* (New Brunswick: Rudgers University Press, 1994); Icíar Alonso Araguas, *Intérpretes de Indias. La Mediación Lingüística y Cultural en los Viajes de Exploración y Conquista: Antillas, Caribe y Golfo de México (1492–1540)* (Ph.D. diss., Universidad de Salamanca, 2005); Alida C. Metcalf, *Go-Betweens and the Colonization of Brazil, 1500–1600* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); Marcos Sarmiento Pérez, *Les Captifs qui Furent Interprètes. La Communication entre Européens, Aborigènes Canariens et Berbères durant la Conquête des Canaries et de l'Afrique du Nord (1341–1569)*, trans. Marie Claire Durand Guizou and Jean-Marie Flores (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012). No equivalent research has yet been found for the West African context.

Indeed, when studying the contemporary sources, it appears that interpreters were almost always present during the Iberian[2] expeditions, despite remaining for the most part, anonymous figures whose presence was only implicitly mentioned. Interpreters were used throughout the Iberian imperial expansion and can be found in texts relative to all regions in which Europeans sought to establish a long-term presence; whether in Europe, America, Asia or Africa, linguistic mediators were called upon to facilitate cross-cultural communication, and thus were crucial actors in the establishment of the new, global-scale networks that emerged at the dusk of the medieval era.

When examining the typical interpreter of the early modern era, as a whole, one of the striking characteristics is the diversity of backgrounds and the variety of different profiles of these linguistic mediators. However, among this heterogeneous group of early interpreters, the repeated presence of slaves—whether men, women or children—makes this particular segment of the interpreter population stand out for a number of reasons. First, the slave-interpreters, and the rapidly expanding and complex system they were involved in, seems to have been one of the most widespread and prevalent ways of obtaining linguistic mediators present in almost all sources mentioning interpreters. Second, obtaining such figures was the result of a conscious endeavour by Iberian actors of the expansion, to whom the most efficient way of obtaining intelligence about territories yet to be seize dwas a central concern. By studying the slave-interpreter system and its evolution within a specific geographical and temporal framework, one can understand the reasoning that regulated the Iberians' access to the indispensable figure of the interpreter.

Although the slave-interpreter system can be found throughout the extensive Iberian imperial expansion, this paper will focus primarily on the Atlantic world during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The aim of the paper is therefore to understand how the infrastructures of the slave-interpreter system were first set up, and how they were modified and adapted according to the different contexts that resulted from the progressive integration of the Atlantic space. Following a presentation of the slave-interpreter system, this paper will focus on the evolution of this system throughout the fifteenth century along the coasts of the African and American continents. A comparative analysis of various fifteenth and early sixteenth century sources will reveal how the slave-interpreter system underwent a series of adaptations and critiques with the intention to further guarantee the

[2] Throughout this paper, although the expeditions mentioned were mostly sponsored by Castilian or Portuguese authorities, I have chosen to use the term Iberian because I believe it translates better the multi-ethnicity of these expeditions. Indeed, as shown a little later (footnote no. 5), these early modern expeditions contained very diverse crews. In addition, because this paper focuses primarily on the linguistic background of the different individuals that came into contact during these expeditions, the political affiliation that tied these expeditions to the central powers of Castile and Portugal is secondary. Therefore, the choice of the term Iberian is here intended to underline the cultural and linguistic porosity within the Portuguese and Castilian expeditions.

efficiency of the Iberians' access to linguistic mediators. Progressing through the sources, it becomes clear that issues regarding the obtaining of interpreters remained a central concern for all these fifteenth century expeditions.

Presentation of the Slave-Interpreter System

In Russell's words, "[t]he slave-interpreter was […] a crucial figure of the fifteenth-century Portuguese maritime expansion."[3] The capturing of slaves was one of the main motives that motivated the first Portuguese and Spanish expeditions into the unknown waters of the Atlantic.[4] Subsequently, the training of these very slaves as interpreters, in order to enable communication between the Iberians and their West African counterparts, also became a common practice and is mentioned in many contemporary travel accounts and chronicles.[5] In this sense, the development of the slave-interpreter system was tightly related to the broader slave trade that burgeoned with Iberian penetration into the Atlantic in the early fifteenth century. Despite the pervasiveness of the practice, sources unfortunately do not provide a conclusive approximation of the number of slave-interpreters employed during this era.

The system was in theory quite simple: after capturing indigenous people of a territory that was yet to be further explored, the expeditions would bring these captives back to Iberia (or to the Iberian settlement they were staying in), baptize them, and get them to learn their language. Once these slaves could speak Castilian, Portuguese, or any other Romance language[6] sufficiently to make themselves

[3] Russell, "Veni, Vidi, Vici: Some Fifteenth-century Eyewitness Accounts of Travel in the African Atlantic before 1492," in *Medieval Ethnographies: European Perceptions of the World Beyond*, ed. Joan-Pau Rubiés (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 127.

[4] Baily Diffie and George Winius, *Foundations of the Portuguese Empire, 1415–1580* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 74–79.

[5] See, for example: Eanes Gomes de Zurara, *Chronique de Guinée*, trans. Léon Bourdon, ed. Jacques Paviot (Paris: Chandeigne, 1994 [1453]); Alvise Ca'da Mosto, *Voyages en Afrique noire d'Alvise Ca'da Mosto (1455–1456)*, trans. and ed. Frédérique Verrier (Paris: Chandeigne, 2003).

[6] In many of the sources examined, the multi-ethnicity of the Iberian expeditions is evident. Indeed, although these expeditions were supervised by the Iberian crowns, usually Castile and Portugal, the crews comprised of men from all over the Mediterranean basin, and in some cases even outside of it. For example, the Castilian expedition that reached the Caribbean in 1492 was led by a Genoese admiral, counted members from all over the Iberian Peninsula, as well as at least one Irishman and one Englishman. See: Christopher Columbus, *The Voyages of Christopher Columbus: The Story of the Discovery of America, as Told by the Discoverer*, trans. Marc Navarrete (New York: United States Catholic Historical Society, 1892), 14. The multi-ethnic characteristic of these expeditions necessitated their members to agree upon a common language in order to communicate; however, it is difficult to tell in what language these crewmembers communicated. It is plausible that the *lingua franca* on these ships was the language of the majority of the men, such as Portuguese, Castilian, and other Iberian languages. Nevertheless, multilingualism was a characteristic of the Mediterranean world, and a range of Romance languages, loosely used, provided a common tongue to many of these men. See: Eric Dursteler, "Speaking in Tongues: Language and Communication in the Early Modern Mediterranean," *Past and Present* 217 (2012): 47–77. In addition, since the

understood, they were sent on a new expedition back to their respective homelands. There, they would be used as guides and interpreters, and act as go-betweens with the indigenous populations that they supposedly belonged to. Indeed, the Iberians were not always assured that their guide-interpreters would be welcomed by the societies to which they were being sent as scouts. For instance, Venetian merchant Alvise Ca'da Mosto explains how during his first voyage to Senegambia in 1455, the expedition's guide-interpreter was brutally torn to pieces by the people he had been sent to meet up with as he reached the shore. Shocked, Mosto questioned himself as to how they could "do such a thing to a person of their own race."[7] While this episode was probably meant to underline the violence and dangers inherent to such adventures, it also shows how many Iberian explorers either did not know much about, or care for, the precise origin of their interpreters. Interpreters were therefore sometimes confronted by a hostile population against which they had little means of defending themselves.

The first example of the establishment of the slave-interpreter system within the Iberian Atlantic expansion can be found in the Canary Islands. Although the interactions between Iberian expeditions and the inhabitants of the archipelago seem to have been relatively peaceful throughout most of the fourteenth century, a series of violent raids were initiated in 1393 by the Iberian merchants. This led to the first acquisition of Canarian slaves, and the subsequent establishment of a structured slave-interpreter system. Among this first generation of slaves were Afonso and Isabel from the island of Lanzarote, and Pedro from Gran Canaria. After having been baptized and spending nine years in Spain, they were recruited in 1402 by Jean de Béthencourt, a Norman captain in the service of the Castilian crown. They served as the interpreters of the first successful expedition in the conquest of Canary Islands.[8] According to Marcos Sarmientos Perez, a pioneering researcher on the role of indigenous interpreters in the Spanish conquest of the Canaries, "the kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula used the Canary Archipelago as a testing ground for their later conquests and colonization in the Americas."[9] However, before reaching the Western shores of the Atlantic, the Iberians built upon their experience in Occidental Africa to perfect the practice of using linguistic mediators.

thirteenth century, a language known as 'Sapir' or 'Lingua Franca,' which survived until the nineteenth century (a dictionary was published in 1840), enabled people from all shores of the Mediterranean to linguistically interact. This pidgin language, based on a Romance structure, was profoundly influenced by its borrowings from Arabic, Greek, Turkish, and Slavonic. See: Jocelyn Dakhlia, "La Langue Franque Mediterranéenne," *Les Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques* 42 (2008): 133–147. It is therefore not excluded that in some cases, such as the Arabic slave that served on Antão Gonçalves' expedition to the Atlantic coasts of the Sahara in 1441, actors could rely on this language to communicate.

[7] Jeanne Hein, "Africans on the Searoute to India," *Terra Incognitae* 25, no. 1 (1993): 44.

[8] Marcos Sarmiento-Perez, "The Role of Interpreters in the Conquest and Acculturation of the Canary Archipelago," *Interpreting* 13, no. 2 (2011): 159–160.

[9] Sarmiento-Perez, "The Role of Interpreters," 172.

Developed in the Canary Islands during the early fifteenth century, the slave-interpreter system was once again called upon by Iberian expeditions, which were progressively reaching new territories south of Cape Bojador. Indeed, texts produced by European authors such as Portuguese chronicler Gomes Eanes de Zurara's *Chronicle of the Discovery of Guinea* reveal how the slave-interpreter system manifested itself in West Africa as the first contact between Europeans and Sub-Saharan Africans took place. In this work published in 1453, the author retraces the first two decades of the Portuguese expeditions to the coasts of West Africa. During Captains Nuño Tristão and Antão Gonçalves' first expedition to the region of the Rio do Oro in 1441, in present-day Western Sahara, the Portuguese fleet successfully captured a total of ten men, women, and children. These people were members of the Azenegue tribal society, and one of them, Adahu, was presented by Zurara as "holding the pre-eminence of nobility over the other [captives]."[10] In addition to this superior status, Adahu was the only captive able to speak Arabic, a language that was at the time well known and in some cases spoken by foreign communities in Portugal and in some cases Portuguese themselves.[11] This can be seen during that very expedition: among his men, Captain Tristão had an 'alarve'[12] under his orders. This Arabic speaker could therefore speak with Adahu and serve as interpreter for the Portuguese expedition's leaders.[13] With the presence of Arabic speakers such as Adahu along the hitherto unknown territories south of Cape Bojador, the Portuguese were guaranteed the presence of Arabic as a *medium* language between them and the societies of these coveted lands. Adahu and his fellow countrymen were brought back to Portugal, where he was presented to the court. There, he defended his case and argued for his liberation along with two other young men he presented as members of the Azenegue aristocracy. In exchange, he delivered to the Portuguese important information regarding inland trade routes. In addition, he assured to the Portuguese authorities that their liberation would guarantee them the acquisition of "five or six black Moors" each.[14]

The implications of such a deal were twofold. Firstly, ten slaves were worth more than three, both on the economic as well as the spiritual level: as put by Zurara himself, "it was better to save ten souls than three—for though they were black, yet had they souls like other [sic]."[15] Secondly, and more central for our present discussion, these "blacks could give news of land much further distant," especially since Adahu willingly proposed himself as interpreter for the

[10] Zurara, *Chronique de Guinée*, 68.
[11] Ibid., 69–70.
[12] 'Alarve' is most probably an archaic form of the word 'Árabe.' It can therefore be assumed that this man was probably a slave captured on the Moroccan front, in which the Portuguese were engaged. See: Ibid., 293.
[13] Ibid., 67.
[14] Ibid., 76.
[15] Eanes Gomes de Zurara, *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea*, trans. Charles Raymond and Edgard Prestage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 55.

Portuguese, promising that "when he spoke about the traffic with the natives, he would find means to learn as much news as possible."[16] Eventually, in 1443, Captain Gonçalves returned to the Rio do Oro region, where Adahu had first been captured.[17] This time they were accompanied by an alfaqueque, an Iberian official that traditionally was used to negotiate ransom and the exchange of hostages on the Iberian frontier during the last centuries of the Reconquista.[18] In this context, calling upon an alfaqueque underlines how the progressive expansion along the unknown African continent was perceived more as a continuity in the long process of the Reconquista than an abrupt rupture with the past and the entry into a new era.[19] As they reached the coast, Adahu seized his chance to escape from the Portuguese, which would prove successful.[20] Although they were assured good quality communication thanks to the presence of two linguistic mediators—Adahu and the anonymous alfaqueque—the Portuguese did remain highly dependent upon external agents. There was therefore a paradoxical tension: on the one hand, the Iberians constrained to rely on mediators closely tied to foreign societies, manifest by their linguistic and cultural knowledge of them in order to establish complex communication with the societies of West Africa. On the other hand, this situation also contained the risk of these slave-interpreters taking advantage of their position and favouring their personal interests over that of their masters or employers.[21]

Adahu might not represent the *stricto sensu* definition of the slave-interpreter. Indeed, no information is given by Zurara regarding his proficiency in Portuguese by the end of his three-year stay, so it is impossible to tell if he could directly address the Portuguese in their own language. As a result, nothing is known of his capacity to serve as interpreter between the Portuguese captains and the Azenegue populations. However, this example does perfectly illustrate the fundamental

[16] Zurara, *The Chronicle of the Discovery*, 55.
[17] Zurara, *Chronique de Guinée*, 76.
[18] James Brodman, "Municipal Ransoming Law on the Medieval Spanish Frontier," *Speculum* 60, no. 2 (1985): 324–330. The alfaqueques were professional interpreters and negotiators who acquired an increasingly influential role across the Iberian Reconquista frontier in the late medieval era. Coming from the Arabic word *al-fakkâk* meaning "redeemer", the function was given a legal framework during the thirteenth century in Castile, as part of the *Siete Partidas* legal corpus. The crown of Castile indeed created the *Alfaqueque Mayor* office, in charge of overseeing the Castilo-Nasrid cross-frontier relations, particularly regarding the ransoming and exchange of captives. These negotiators could easily pass from one side of the frontier to the other, and were legally protected to do so. Their function as negotiator implied that they were multi-lingual, in both Arabic and Romance languages, and had a good knowledge of the situation on each side of the frontier. In exchange for their services, and in case of a successful exchange, the alfaqueques were rewarded by rerceiving a commission from the total ransom.
[19] Kenneth Baxter Wolf, "The 'Moors' of West Africa and the Beginning of the Portuguese Slave Trade," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 24, no. 3 (1994): 449–469.
[20] Zurara, *Chronique de Guinée*, 76.
[21] Joseph Jackson-Eade, "The Role of Interpreters during the Early Portuguese Presence in East Africa," *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* (2018): 1–25.

logics of the slave-interpreter system: the freshly captured individuals, once they could make themselves understood (in this case this was almost immediate because Adahu was fluent in Arabic), were questioned by the Portuguese authorities in order for them to obtain as much information as possible on the lands they had reached. Once this first step was accomplished, the captives were sent back to the lands in which they had been captured with the objective of using them as linguistic and cultural mediators in order to establish communication with the local populations. The final objective of this was to successfully reach more distant lands in which the process would start again.

A Rapid Structuration of the Slave-Interpreter System

Following the first contact between West African populations and Portuguese expeditions in the late 1430s and throughout the 1440s, the study of the contemporary sources reveals a 'rationalisation' of the slave-interpreter system. As he participated in two Portuguese expeditions to the Senegambia region in 1455 and 1456, the Venetian merchant Alvise Ca'da Mosto directly witnessed the slave-interpreter system in action and left a rich account as he returned to Portugal. In his account, Mosto explicitly explains the central role of the interpreters in the unfolding of expeditions, underlining the dependence of the Portuguese on these guides and mediators. In fact, he even explains that it was the absence of interpreters that brought his second expedition up the River Gambia to an end.[22] But what is new in Ca'da Mosto's account is that he gives more information on the relationship between the slave-interpreters and their superiors, as well as the everyday functioning of the system. By the time Ca'da Mosto sailed to West Africa, the slaves who eventually became interpreters were no longer seized during raids, but were actually acquired "legally" in the African slave markets.[23] Indeed, following the first expeditions to West Africa, the Portuguese authorities became increasingly concerned that the aggressive slave raids they were leading would compromise future trade arrangements and political alliances with their African counterparts. Consequently, as soon as 1448, a first attempt to limit the raids on the coast of West Africa by Portuguese expeditions was initiated by the crown.[24] Although Ca'da Mosto's testimony in no way proves that raiding had been entirely given up as a source in the acquisition of slaves, it does reveal that alternative means of obtaining enslaved populations were rapidly forming in the direct aftermath of first contact.

[22] Russell, "Veni, Vidi, Vici," 126.
[23] Joan Fayer, "African Interpreters in the Atlantic Slave Trade," *Anthropological Linguistics* 45, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 281.
[24] Jeanne Hein, "Portuguese Communication with Africans on the Searoute to India," *Terra Icognitae* 25, no. 1 (1993): 45.

As presented by Ca'da Mosto, slave-interpreters appear to be central actors in the slave trade itself. The consequence of this is that they were given a specific position in the social ecosystem of these early expeditions: although they remained slaves, they could benefit from their linguistic skills and position as necessary go-betweens to experience a closer proximity to decision-making circles, and access to better living conditions than their peers. Indeed, their participation in the trade guaranteed them a rather privileged treatment. Their linguistic skills were highly sought-after, directly influencing their value in the slave market, which could be up to five times higher than 'regular' captives.[25] In addition, a market for the renting of the services of these slave-interpreters rapidly developed in West Africa.[26] In some cases, after sustained collaboration as brokers in the slave trade, slave-interpreters could actually obtain manumission, voluntary disenfranchisement by their masters, as a reward for their services.[27] Eventually, after their liberation, these interpreters could in turn become slave masters themselves.[28] In this way slave-interpreters could put the social and cultural capital that their bi-lingualism represented to good use and pursue upward social mobility.

From an early stage, the Portuguese crown sought to supervise and regulate the collection of interpreters and guides in order not to impede future interactions with West African authorities. As a consequence, obtaining slave-interpreters after the 1450s increasingly took part within the expanding legal slave trade. In addition to this evolution, regulations regarding the treatment of these interpreters were being implemented, inspired by the common practices that had been established during the first years of contact between Iberian and African traders and described by Ca'da Mosto.

The progressive re-structuring of the slave-interpreter system is the first indication of the general movement towards a rationalization of the position of interpreters inside the Iberian colonial expansion. By the beginning of the sixteenth

[25] In the specific case of mid-fifteenth century Afro-Portuguese interactions, sources do not give any precise example of the particular actions of these slave-interpreters. However, other posterior texts do give rich accounts of such actions. In most cases, these are indirect testimonies, such as in chronicles. See: Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *The Conquest of New Spain*, trans. John Cohen (London: Penguin Books, 1963), specifically the cases of the Mayan-Nahuatl-Castilian tandem Doña Marina—or Malintzin—and Jeronimo de Aguilar. In these chronicles, interpreters are shown in a close proximity to the leading figures of these expeditions; they were often consulted, and sometimes even took the initiative of making decisions in the name of their masters. In one exceptional case, an anonymous account in the first person of an interpreter gives a rich insight into the intimate thoughts and impressions of an interpreter during a diplomatic mission. See: Anonymous, *Voyage dans les deltas du Gange et de l'Irraouaddy, 1521*, trans. and ed. Geneviève Bouchon and Luis F. F. R. Thomaz (Paris: Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian, 1988).

[26] Hein, "Portuguese Communication," 45.

[27] Trevor Hall, *Before Middle Passage: Translated Portuguese Manuscripts of Atlantic Slave Trading from West Africa to Iberian Territories, 1513–1526* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 247.

[28] A. C. de C. M. Saunders, *A Social History of Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal, 1441–1555* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 62.

century, Iberian authorities went a step further in the control of their interpreters by creating government offices dedicated to the practice. For example, in the Canaries a new legal framework sanctioned the institutionalization of the process of obtaining slave-interpreters from the African mainland. With the establishment of the *concierto de lengua* (which Sarmiento Pérez translates as "language agreement") the guide-interpreter's activities were taken under state consideration. The intention here was primarily to give a more precise framework to the legal issues within the procurement, selling, and the manumission of slaves.[29] A similar evolution can be noted in the Portuguese context, where the *Lingoa do Estado* office was opened in Goa in 1510, only a decade after the Portuguese had reached the coasts of continental India.[30] Similar measures were later taken by Spanish authorities in America by 1529[31]

The Place of Linguistic Communication in Iberian Imperial Projects

Many of the authors involved in the early Iberian presence in West Africa were eager to underline the royal implication in the creation of the slave-interpreter system, and the crown's dedication to the matters of knowledge-gathering in relation to the process of their imperial expansion. Indeed, the more or less evident role of the royal authorities in the establishment and the promotion of the slave-interpreter system is a point these sources have in common. Describing the preparation of Captain Afonso Gonçalves Baldaia's first expedition to the unknown lands south of the much-dreaded Cape Bojador in 1536, Zurara attributes the following words to Dom Henrique himself, son of King João I and main architect of the early imperial Portuguese expansion, giving his last recommendations to his captain: "I order you to go as far as you can to try to take an interpreter from among these people. Surely you know that seizing someone through whom we can become familiar with this land would in no small way carry out my aspirations."[32] According to Zurara, this royal order was subsequently repeated many times, to Diogo Gomes de Sintra in 1438[33] and Lançarote de Freitas six year later.[34] A decade later, Alvise Ca'da Mosto speaks of almost identical recommendations given by Dom Henrique to the expedition in which he was participating and that was heading for the Gambia river region. The Infante had requested that the expedition collect information about West Africa's geography, political organization, and trade

[29] Sarmiento-Perez, "The Role of Interpreters," 168.
[30] Jorge Flores, "Le 'Lingua' Cosmopolite: Le Monde Social des Interprètes Hindou de Goa au XVIIe siècle," in *Cosmopolitanism en Asie du Sud: Sources, Itinéraires, Langues (XVIe-XVIIIe siècles)*, ed. Corinne Lefèvre, Ines Zupanov, and Jorge Flores (Paris: Editions EHESS, 2015), 234.
[31] Alonso-Araguas, *Intérpretes da India*, 178.
[32] Hein, "Portuguese Communication," 42.
[33] Zurara, *Chronique de Guinée*, 292.
[34] Ibid., 83–84.

routes, by sailing up the river Gambia[35]. These different testimonies reveal the almost systematic mandate delivered to these early expeditions by the Portuguese authorities, underlining the latters' concern for the collecting of information about the West African world.

Both Ca'da Mosto and Zurara are clearly presenting the establishment of the slave-interpreter system as a top-down initiative. Dom Henrique, while still in the very first stages of his Atlantic expansion, seems to be fully aware of the importance of obtaining interpreters to rapidly establish oral communication and therefore develop trade and diplomatic relations with the societies and states the Portuguese were expecting to encounter along the African coast and interior. But this policy survived the death of the Infante in 1460, and an anonymous account of 1463 reads that a man was captured along the river Senegal because "this was commanded by the king of Portugal [João II (r.1460–1495)] that from the last land discovered they should take some to Portugal to learn the language."[36] In some cases, the crown even got personally involved in matters regarding interpreters. In 1477, a Guinean slave-interpreter by the name of João Garrido was freed by João II as a reward for his active participation in the development of the Luso-African trade.[37] Garrido's case is interesting because it underlines two aspects of the relationship interpreters had with the Iberian ruling authorities. On the one hand, it illustrates the importance of such figures in the eyes of the Crown, perceived as crucial actors in the successful unfolding of these early exploratory expeditions. On the other hand, it also shows us that the establishment of a legal framework exposed by Ca'da Mosto was not fully and efficiently implemented. Indeed, the fact that the king had to personally intervene shows that Garrido's solicitation of the lower layers of the Portuguese colonial administration had been fruitless. The intervention of the king possibly hides the previous abuses Garrido had been a victim of, in which none of the privileges his position as an interpreter should have guaranteed him, was respected.

The previous examples show the implication of the Portuguese crown in efficiently obtaining interpreters and informers during the early expeditions to West Africa. In both Zurara and Ca'da Mosto's accounts, the authors present Dom Henrique as an active promoter of the slave-interpreter system. Dom Henrique, in both sources, appears to place the possession of linguistic mediators to be of paramount importance in the successful evolution of the exploration expeditions he was sponsoring. Consequently, Zurara, Dom Henrique's official chronicler, portrays him as a fine strategist by placing linguistic mediation at the centre of Henrique's concerns. Indeed, by insisting on the rapid establishment of means of

[35] Russell, "Veni, Vidi, Vici," 316–317.
[36] Hein, "Portuguese Communication," 45.
[37] Diogo Curto, "*Portuguese Colonial and Imperial Culture*," in *Portuguese Oceanic Expansion, 1400–1800*, ed. Francisco Bethencourt and Diogo Curto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 316–317.

communication, and by encouraging his expeditions to obtain informed guides and interpreters, Zurara constructs the image of a leader who, from an early stage, was already looking at facilitating diplomatic negotiations and alliances with newly encountered societies and territories. By stressing Dom Henrique's concern about obtaining interpreters, Zurara presented the Portuguese ruler in a positive light. By putting political and military strategy at the centre of Dom Henrique's orders, Zurara was able to avoid mentioning other motivations for the Portuguese to capture indigenous African populations; for example, the accumulation of wealth through the slave trade, or more symbolically the personal glory that was obtained by the participation into a successful expedition.

The Transfer of the Slave-Interpreter System to the American Continent.

As this study has examined, the slave-interpreter system rapidly became a prevalent practice employed by Iberian expeditions along the West African coast. By the mid-fifteenth century, the Spaniards and the Portuguese had developed an efficient system that enabled them to access the service of bilingual individuals that served as indispensable cultural mediators with their agents. This system flourished, despite practical concerns expressed by Russell, for "depending on conscripted slave-interpreters ought to have been a very ineffective way of securing trustworthy intelligence…for linguistic, conceptual and psychological reasons;"[38] nevertheless, the successive Iberian expeditions in the Atlantic continued to rely on such a system. Decades after the beginning of sustained contact between Iberians and the populations south of the Cape Bojador, Columbus' successful crossing of the Atlantic initiated a new phase in Iberia's early modern cross-cultural encounters. Focusing on Columbus' rich testimonies of his first expeditions to the Caribbean enables us to analyze the modalities in which the slave-interpreter system was transferred to the American world. Columbus is in fact a particularly interesting source of information regarding the slave-interpreter system because he actually visited West Africa during the 1480s.

As he reached the Caribbean Islands in October 1492, communication was apparently a central concern for the Genoese admiral. Throughout his journal of his first voyage, Columbus repeatedly refers to the Taino captives he had made, and his intentions regarding their future use in his mission to probe the newly found lands he had stumbled upon. On October 14th, 1492, two days after his arrival in the Caribbean, Columbus writes that he ordered that the seven Taino prisoners they had captured should return to Spain with Columbus so "that they might learn our language, and serve as interpreters."[39] When he eventually did

[38] Russell, "Veni, Vedi, Vici," 327.
[39] Christopher Columbus, *The Voyages of Christopher Columbus: The Story of the Discovery of America, as Told by the Discoverer*, trans. Marc Navarrete (New York: United States Catholic Historical Society, 1892), 38–39.

return to Iberia in the spring of 1493, Columbus wrote a letter to the Spanish crown informing them of his discovery, in which he stated: "on my arrival at that sea [of Cuba], I had taken some Indians by force from the first island that I came to, in order that they might learn our language, and communicate to us what they knew respecting the country; which succeeded excellently, and was a great advantage to us, for in a short time, either by gestures and signs, or by word, we were enabled to understand each other."[40] Almost exactly a month after they had first set foot on the islands of the Caribbean, Columbus mentioned once again the capturing of indigenous people for the sake of obtaining future guides and interpreters. He writes that "[on Sunday, November 11th, 1492,] a canoe came to the ship with six young men, five of them came on board, whom I ordered to be detained, and have them with me."[41] With these examples, it is obvious that Columbus immediately sought to recreate the slave-interpreter system in these newly reached territories.

Following the example of Columbus, contemporary Iberian expedition leaders reproduced such a pattern. During the first expedition to Yucatán, led by Captain Francisco Hernandez de Córdoba in 1517, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, a young soldier who participated in the mission and who eventually wrote the famous *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España*, gives us an explicit example how the slave-interpreter system functioned in America. The chronicler explains how in the coastal town of Champotón, two men were captured from among the indigenous population.[42] Brought back to Cuba and baptized as Julian and Melchor, they learned Spanish during their captivity and participated as interpreters in the following expedition to Yucatán led by Captain Grijalva (1518). The following year, Melchor once again returned to Yucatán as an interpreter, this time in the service of Cortés. However, by that time, "his companion [Julian] was dead."[43] Both Columbus and Cortés relied on the slave-interpreter system as they reached lands that they wished to further investigate, with the ultimate goal of establishing the hegemony of the Spanish crown. These examples therefore further confirm the success of this way of obtaining linguistic mediators during the process of imperial expansion. Tested in the Canaries and then in West Africa over the past century, the slave-interpreter system had proved sufficiently effective to be transferred to the opposite side of the Atlantic Ocean.

The Evolution of the Slave-Interpreter System

Columbus, Cortés, and many others relied on a system that had been tried and tested throughout the Iberian imperial expansion in the Atlantic since the closing

[40] Columbus, *The Voyages*, 10.
[41] Ibid., 66.
[42] Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *The Conquest of New Spain*, trans. John Cohen (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 20.
[43] Ibid., 58.

years of the fourteenth century. However, the system was by no means rigid or strictly defined. On the contrary, comparing texts of different moments, such as Zurara [1453] and Columbus [1492] actually reveals that the slave-interpreter system was rearranged, adapted, and moulded according to specific contexts and past experiences. As he reached the region of the Rio del Sol in the Island of Cuba in November 1492, Columbus explicitly refers to his experience in West Africa. Having captured five young men, the admiral ordered his own men to go ashore and search the houses for more captives.[44] Eventually, seven women and three children were seized and brought to the ship.[45] Although the motivations of such an attitude could have been solely pecuniary, Columbus gives another explanation as to why he insisted on capturing entire families. According to the admiral, it was common that "when the Portuguese carried the natives from Guinea to Portugal for the purpose of learning their language [and then] returned with them to Guinea, [the natives] have gone among their own people and never appeared again."[46] This was apparently the case even though these captives had benefited from "the good treatment that [the Portuguese] had showed [sic] them, and the presents they had given them."[47] Here, Columbus presented the early slave-interpreter system as only partially achieved. The privileged treatment that these captives benefited from, underlined by Ca'da Mosto, seems to have not fully guaranteed the collaboration of these very captives.

The trustworthiness of the slave-interpreters was indeed a central concern for the Iberians. For instance, authors as far back as Zurara, had already addressed this problem. This can be seen in the following episode: in 1444, Captain Sintra was leading an expedition to the island of Naar, accompanied by a young indigenous boy who had been captured and trained as an interpreter during his stay in Portugal, to the point that "he spoke our language [Portuguese] very well."[48] According to the chronicler, as the expedition reached the island, the young boy escaped and rushed to warn the local inhabitants.[49] Trapped in an ambush, the expedition met a disastrous end from Zurara's perspective as Sintra and eight of his men were killed.[50] Knowing about such complications, Columbus in another passage of his journal actually expressed his doubts regarding the fidelity of his interpreters: commenting on his relationship with the captives that were on board, Columbus writes that "while the Indians I have on-board with me I very often understand to say one thing when they mean the opposite nor do I trust them too far as they have made various attempts to escape."[51]

[44] Columbus, *The Voyages*, 66.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Zurara, *Chronique de Guinée*, 99.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid., 99–102.
[51] Columbus, *The Voyages*, 80.

To counter such issues, it appears through Columbus' comments that solutions had been developed on the African coasts, and that he intended to apply them to the new American context he was confronting. By capturing not only men, but also women and children, Columbus was indeed seeking to create a less stressful and more reassuring context for his indigenous captives destined to be sent to Europe. In his own words, the capturing of the seven women and three children was done "so that the Indians might bear their captivity better with their company."[52] Capturing entire families was seen as a way of watering down the shock of captivity, and even inciting the slave-interpreters to collaborate. Eventually, the early modern Europeans that set out to obtain new interpreters came to favour younger slave-interpreters, and in some cases, even children. This can be understood when focusing on the conditions of language learning itself, and the development of affective ties on the side of the interpreter; if done at a young age, extracting children from their cultural and linguistic background while still in their language-learning process rapidly produced bi-lingual individuals.[53] What is more, relying on children or teenagers presented other advantages influencing the relationship of the Iberians with their interpreters. Indeed, if uprooted from a young age from their home, these future interpreters would only have a limited insertion into the socio-political patterns of their society. This presented an immediate advantage for the Iberians: if captured as children, interpreters were less likely to have personal interests in serving one side or the other as they returned to their homeland, because they would not have had any particular position in the social and political hierarchy, and in any case, would not have been able to maintain it (or have it maintained for them) once they had been captured and sent to Europe. In fact, in some cases, it was believed that capturing their future interpreters at a young age would actually create a strong and long-lasting bond, and a certain loyalty towards their "masters," a central aspect the Iberians wished for in their relationship with their interpreters.[54]

Towards the Theoretical End of the Slave-Interpreter System

Following the first remark made by Columbus regarding the fidelity of the interpreters, the admiral went along in his analysis of the slave-interpreter system and proposed yet another solution. Columbus writes that "[O]thers have done differently, and by keeping their wives, have assured themselves of their possession. Besides, these women will be a great help to us in acquiring their

[52] Columbus, *The Voyages*, 66.
[53] Mary Louise Pratt, "Language and Afterlives of Empire," *PMLA* 130, no. 2 (2015): 352.
[54] Marie Christine Gomez-Géraud, "La Figure de l'Interprète dans quelques Récits de Voyage Français à la Renaissance," in *Voyager à la renaissance*, ed. Jean Céard and Jean-Christophe Margolin (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1987), 322.

language."[55] Paradoxically, while this appears to bring yet another component to the slave-interpreter system, it also suggests the very end of this system by proposing an alternative. Indeed, what Columbus is saying here is that the female captives from these lands were taken as wives and concubines by the Europeans not only to resolve the issues regarding the lack of women in the Iberian camps, but also because they would enable a rapid learning of the local languages. By taking these women as concubines, the men who participated in these expeditions were greatly increasing their cultural confrontation to the indigenous practices and languages, an exposure that automatically produced a favourable context for the process of language learning. This is once again repeated by the admiral, as he writes that "I shall have this language learned by the people of my household [personas de mi Casa]."[56] In a very similar fashion, Amerigo Vespucci, who travelled to America around the same time as Columbus, also defended the idea of learning the languages of the people he encountered. In the letter he wrote in 1504 retracing all four of his voyages, the Florentine navigator mentioned that during his third expedition to America (1501–2) on behalf of Manuel I of Portugal, as his expedition sailed south of the Cape Saint Augustine in present-day Brazil, they "decided to take a couple of men from this place to teach us their language, and three volunteered to come with us to Portugal."[57]

In both these cases, the two Italian navigators did not encourage the continuation of the slave-interpreter system, but rather called for its end, while paradoxically resting on similar underlying logics of displacement and coercion of indigenous populations. The slave-interpreter system was based on the idea that the captives that were taken in Africa and the Caribbean would eventually learn to speak an Iberian idiom and serve as linguistic mediators. But in this new configuration presented by Vespucci and Columbus, the captives would not serve as interpreters (although nothing suggests that they would not eventually be used as so), but rather as teachers. Both Columbus and Vespucci saw their captives not as direct go-betweens, but instead as the owners of a valuable linguistic and cultural capital, which in the hands of European colonists could drastically improve the quality of communication and have a positive influence on European expansion in the region.

It is interesting to note here that Vespucci and Columbus' proposition regarding the learning of American languages directly by European expeditions differs quite drastically from the approach the Europeans in West Africa developed. This had much to do with the linguistic context on both sides of the Atlantic, and on respective regional particularities. By the time Columbus and Vespucci reached the Caribbean and the American mainland, Iberian expeditions had been reaching

[55] Columbus, *The Voyages*, 66.
[56] Ibid., 80.
[57] Amerigo Vespucci, *Letters of the New World: Amerigo Vespucci's Discovery of America*, trans. David Jacobson and ed. Luciano Formisano (New York: Marsilio, 1992), 90.

coastal Sub-Saharan Africa for over half a century, and the slave trade was flourishing. Between 1441 and 1505, an estimated 140,000 to 170,000 African slaves had disembarked in Lisbon.[58] From there, they were transferred to the major Iberian port cities (Seville, Barcelona, Valencia) where they made up 5 to 10% of the population.[59] On arrival, the new cultural context in which these African slaves were immersed forced them to develop new linguistic skills, which they would have to use in order to communicate. Although proficiency in Romance languages depended on individual capacities in local contexts, the capacity to communicate in the language of the master was perceived as a fundamental stage in the process of integration. From this process, the African stereotypical figure progressively emerged, within which the African way of speaking Romance languages (*Fala de preto*) was one of the main identifying features.[60] Little by little, the literary figure of the Black African, easily identified by his or her stereotypical accent, spread across the entire Iberian Peninsula.[61] The development of such a stereotype, and the importance given to the black slave's capacity to communicate, suggest that a substantial part of the African population in the Iberian Peninsula was bilingual. Consequently, many Africans in Iberia could therefore serve as interpreters, whether in Africa, as part of the slave-interpreter system, or within the Iberian Peninsula itself, for example during trials.[62]

On the other hand, and although more research is needed on this specific topic, it appears as though Iberians within the Peninsula in contact with African slaves only very seldom learned their slaves' language. This was undoubtedly due to many different factors. For instance, because language learning was for the slave a sign of integration, the social pressure to improve linguistic skills in the other's language was much stronger for the slaves than for the free Iberians. By opposition, addressing Black Slaves in their own language might have been seen as a hindrance in the slaves' process of integration through language. However, other explanations can be found as to why Iberians did not learn the African languages in order to communicate with the Black Africans they encountered. A hint is given by Columbus himself, indeed, he regularly repeats throughout his journal that in the Caribbean he had just reached, "their language is the same

[58] Joseph Clancy-Clements, *The Linguistic Legacy of Spanish and Portuguese: Colonial Expansion and Language Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 44; Russell-Wood, *Iberian Expansion*, 20.

[59] Jeremy Lawrence, "*Black Africans in Renaissance Spanish Literature*," in *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe,* ed. Kate Lowe and T. Earle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 70.

[60] Ibid., 72, 83. A. C. de C. M Saunders, *A Social History of Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal, 1441–1555* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 99–100.

[61] André Belo, "Language as a Second Skin: The Representation of Black Africans in Portuguese Theatre (Fifteenth to Early Seventeenth Century)," *Renaissance and Reformation* 36, no. 1 (Winter 2013).

[62] Debra Blumenthal, "*'La Casa de Negres': Black African Solidarity in Late Medieval Valencia*," in *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, ed. Kate Lowe and T. Earle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 253–255.

throughout all these countries,"[63] and a little later that "I noticed that there is but one language throughout these lands."[64] Referring to his past expeditions under Portuguese banners, he contrasts the Caribbean context with his past experiences in West Africa. Confronting the apparent linguistic homogeneity of the Caribbean around the Arawak languages, the admiral underlines that "this is not the case in Guinea, where there are a thousand different dialects, one tribe not understanding the other."[65] In other words, even if they had had the intention to master West African languages, the Iberians were in any case confronted with the issue of the linguistic fragmentation in the region. It was impossible, and even useless, to attempt learning West African languages because of their sheer diversity.[66] However, reaching the Caribbean offered a seemingly different linguistic context to that of West Africa: the apparent linguistic uniformity in the Caribbean made the effort of learning the language more attractive because it guaranteed the capacity to communicate over wide-ranging territories. As they reached the Americas, the relationship the Iberians had regarding linguistic communication with the newly encountered populations evolved. It now became realistic—and even profitable—for men such as Columbus and Vespucci to imagine themselves learning the language of the "other."

However, a second interpretation of this attitude of Columbus towards the process of language learning can be made. By learning the language himself, Columbus assures his interlocutors—the crown of Castilia—that he will use this new skill to gather knowledge about the local peoples and lands and rapidly obtain the conversion of the indigenous populations. However, this also represented a more personal interest for Columbus. By getting his household, therefore himself and his potential successors, to learn the language, he was also implicitly preparing his family to become the privileged interlocutor between the Crown and the 'Indians' by mastering of Castilian as well as Arawak languages. Although this role as legitimate intermediary was already mentioned in the Capitulation of Sante Fe,[67] the fact of actually knowing the languages of both sides of the Atlantic was a means for Columbus of strengthening his household's position as political mediators between both continents. Columbus, in his letters to the Spanish crown, repeatedly underlines the terms of the contract that had been negotiated between him and his interlocutors. Therefore, after the first step which consisted in actually 'discovering' lands, the second logical phase in the stabilization of his authority

[63] Columbus, *The Voyages*, 66.
[64] Ibid., 81.
[65] Ibid., 66.
[66] John Thornton, *African and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800,* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), x–xiv.
[67] The Capitulations of Santa Fe were the result of an intense process of lobbying by Columbus in the Spanish court, during the preparation phase of his first voyage. In them, and although they were never officially ratified, Columbus was guaranteed the title of 'admiral of the Ocean Sea' as well as Governor General and Viceroy of the lands that he would potentially discover.

was to rapidly and permanently take control of the communication with the Crown. By learning the language, Columbus was aiming at making himself and his household the indispensable intermediary through which the Iberian authorities would have to transit for the administration of their newly conquered territories. Columbus's aspirations however did not materialize. His long-lasting trial and equally long-lasting removal from the American affairs without a doubt put a curb on his ambitious plan, and the journals of his fourth and final expedition to the Caribbean suggest that he was not able to directly speak with any of his American interlocutors.

The inevitable consequence of Columbus's aim to become fluent in Arawak languages was of course the erasure of the need of slave-interpreters. Iberians would master both languages, and in this way, further extend their control over the conquered lands. Ultimately, diminishing the role of the slave-interpreter became the logical solution to the problem that this position posed regarding the loyalty and trustworthiness of the linguistic mediators the Iberians relied on. However, the later expeditions to the Caribbean and later the American mainland show that in practice, the abolition of the dependence on slave-interpreters was unrealistic. Throughout the first half of the sixteenth century, Iberian expeditions were constrained to systematically rely on indigenous mediators. This was the case for Cortés, who first relied on a captive named Melchior, before later bringing Malintzin—more famously known as *la Malinche*—into his service.[68] Similarly, Pedro Cieza de León, in his chronicle of the conquest of Peru by Pizarro, shows how the conquistador still strongly relied on indigenous collaborators, such as Felipillo and Martinillo.[69] Columbus's example does not therefore announce an inevitable and linear evolution of the interpreter-master relationship in which indigenous slave-interpreters were to rapidly disappear. Rather, it illustrates how the admiral had identified the problematic issues regarding trust and loyalty inherent to the slave-interpreter system: the Iberians had to fully rely on captives, potentially impeding their imperial aspirations. With his project to firmly take control of the linguistic mediation with the Caribbean societies he encountered, Columbus was attempting to propose alternative solutions to these issues.

Conclusion

This brief analysis of the presence of the slave-interpreter system during the first recorded Atlantic Iberian expeditions reveals how important the role of these individuals was in the process of Iberian imperial expansion. In the space of a few decades, and the development of the ties linking the Iberian Peninsula to

[68] Diaz del Castillo, *The Conquest*, 85–87.

[69] Both la Malinche and Felipillo remain highly symbolic and controversial figures in their respective national cultures, and are in some cases used as insults synonymous with traitor or liar, underlining their role as duplicitous and untrustworthy figures.

the insular and continental areas of the Atlantic world, the Iberians mechanically increased their access to interpreters and mediators. Indeed, migrations (whether forced or not) improved the Iberian knowledge of the new worlds they were progressively reaching, as they accumulated exponentially increasing amounts of information regarding these territories and the people that inhabited them. In this process, access to linguistic mediators played an important role, as it enabled the establishment of relatively long-term relations. This seemingly ineffective system, as Russell has underlined it, in which conquerors were relying on indigenous intermediaries, became a widespread practice and enabled the Portuguese and Spaniards to collect precious intelligence.[70]

However, the slave-interpreter system was not a fixed and rigid structure. Comparing a variety of fifteenth century sources, it rapidly appears that the slave-interpreter system experienced important changes and adaptations throughout its application in the Atlantic context. A rapid 'rationalization' of the system in Guinea and an impulse from the Portuguese authorities who sought to further extend their control over the process of obtaining of the interpreters set the premises of a further institutionalization at the turn of the sixteenth century. The slave-interpreter system was encouraged by the ruling authorities as it progressively became an unavoidable feature of early Iberian expansion in the Atlantic. However, the Crown's intervention in these processes did not put an end to the evolution of the system. One of the fundamental issues was the loyalty of the captives that were to become interpreters. One central difficulty was the obtaining of an equilibrium between the effective captivity of these individuals, the coercion this condition implied and their will to actively collaborate with their very gaoler. One result of these tensions was a new approach to the issues of language and empire hinted at by Columbus and Vespucci: while throughout the fifteenth century Iberian expeditions had the slave-interpreter system as their main source in the obtaining of linguistic mediators in the West African context, new solutions were proposed at the end of the century. Although the place of slaves remained central in the process of obtaining linguistic mediators, both Vespucci and Columbus called for a new approach in which American and African indigenous captives would serve not directly as interpreters, but rather would pass down their linguistic knowledge to their European interlocutors.

The study of interpreters necessarily implies a broader questioning about the presence and the role of cultural brokers during the early colonial encounters. Although the realities of the interactions have been increasingly addressed in recent historiography, much remains to be studied in order to better understand the ways in which men and women from around the world, sharing radically

[70] Russell, "Veni, Vidi, Vici," 127; Anthony Disney, "Portuguese Expansion, 1400–1800: Encounters, Negotiations and Interactions," in *Portuguese Oceanic Expansion, 1400–1800*, ed. Francisco Bethencourt and Diogo Curto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 291.

different backgrounds, interacted during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In the particular case of interpreters and multi-lingual intermediaries, practically nothing is known about the processes of language learning that these individuals experienced. Such knowledge, in turn, would shed light on the broader cultural adaptation and transformation that these interpreters underwent at a personal level. From this perspective, the key role that a biographical and micro-historical approach could play in understanding the role played by linguistic go-betweens in the early colonial encounters becomes obvious and should be encouraged.