

# The Interpreter's General Knowledge

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## Abstract

*The present work contains a select biography of recommended short readings for interpreters training to work from English. The material selected includes institutional, literary and historic texts, many of whose contents have become an integral part of national and international language heritage.*

The insistence of professional interpreters, including those working with the European Union, upon interpreting students' "general knowledge" has always left the present writer uncomfortable, reminding him of the early days of his own interpreting career when his request for information about the subject of a forthcoming conference met with the answer "something to do with culture". Whereupon, he promised to read a book. He has, in fact and for different reasons, spent most of the rest of his life reading books, but is still not sure which of them have been most influential in preparing for the task of interpreting.

Clearly, the term "general knowledge" is inadequate; even the writer's traditional proposal "the history of Europe since 1945" is incomplete. The question has to be raised which texts and for what reasons the young interpreter would be well advised to study. The recommendations to follow are designed for the young interpreter whose mother tongue is not English and who will not, therefore, have absorbed at school, at University

or elsewhere during his formative years the information therein contained but who, yet, wishes to arm himself to tackle the challenges of interpretation from English. Many of the speakers he will be called upon to translate will take for granted a knowledge of such information. Vague indications are superfluous, only specific texts and the reasons why a given text has been included are of use.

The guideline has been the choice of texts containing concepts and formulae which have passed into national life and, thence, into everyday language usage. An interpreter with a degree in Economics may be a better interpreter than one without, but Mr. Micawber's economic theory: "Income one pound. Expenditure nineteen and sixpence. Result happiness. Income one pound. Expenditure one pound and sixpence. Result misery." is more familiar to an educated Anglophone public than the works of Adam Smith, Schumpeter and Galbraith together. Hopefully, the currency transactions will lend themselves to translation into euros in the not-too-distant future. Time and place play, as ever, a vital role.

The 1946 British vintage was brought up on radio broadcasts before passing to television, hence its insistence upon "proper" pronunciation, Queen's English and the like, now, fortunately, less significant. Its representatives also grew up reading books and newspapers rather than glued to a computer screen; it is perhaps the last exclusively text-based generation. Knowledge of the Bible, the central text of Western civilisation for the devout, the indifferent and the hostile, alike, was transmitted through the study of the Authorised Version of 1611, rather than through the New English Bible or any subsequent translation. That generation will always prefer "riotous living" to the horrors of "loose livers" (conjuring up the image of floating kidneys), though there is more justification for explaining Jacob's short-changing of his elder brother with "a dish of lentils", as the other European languages known to the author do, than with "a mess of pottage".

The present paper will deal with written texts in the traditional sense and not with computer jargon, a knowledge of which has also become advisable in the meantime, and will divide them into three categories – institutional, literary and historical. The Bible will be dealt with in a category of its own.

## 1. Institutional texts

Following the very sound principle that a gentleman's name only appears in the newspapers on three occasions (on two of which he is unable to read it), the institutional texts could well begin with the christening, marriage and funeral ceremonies of the Anglican Church. There is no covert establishmentarianism here; it is simply that the formulae of the Church have permanently influenced the language. The promise to "love, honour

and obey” may be modified according to individual female taste, but its origin and style must be recognised. Men will still, I imagine, be fairly enthusiastic about “with my body I thee worship”, though possibly less so about “with all my worldly goods I thee endow”. The ritual, but none the less beautiful for that, phrases pronounced on Remembrance Day could also be included: “They shall not grow old as we that are left grow old”, as could the text of at least one of Her Majesty’s Christmas Day Broadcasts to the Commonwealth. The Christmas Day speech of 2002 after the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth , the Queen Mother, is particularly moving. The present writer is neither monarchist nor Anglican, but simply acknowledges the forces which have contributed to influencing his language patterns. The oath that witnesses are called upon to take in a Court of Law before the “good men and true” (i.e. the members of the jury) and the Hippocratic oath are also essential.

## 2. The Bible

The influence on the language of the translation of the Bible commissioned by King James I is as great, if not greater, than that of the works of Shakespeare. Catholic friends are frequently surprised by the familiarity of those born and brought up in the Protestant world with the sacred texts. A Non-Conformist education was/is unthinkable without regular Sunday School study of the scriptures. The writer’s generation can only regret that their successors have not been exposed so thoroughly to the prose splendours of the Authorised Version, but rather to the New English Bible and subsequent translations. Hence, the recommendation that the interpreting student wishing to familiarise himself with the formulae that have, over five centuries, become an integral part of the Anglophone’s language heritage opt for the 1611 translation.

The whole of the first Chapter of Genesis is essential. For syntax reasons, it provides an object lesson in the difference between an adverbial phrase “in the beginning” and any kind of prepositional phrase “at the beginning (of the lesson)” and a perfect expression of third person imperatives “Let there be light”. The phrase “in the beginning” is much loved by some of those who wish to give lectures on interpreting, though the beginning involved is the “In the beginning was the Word” which opens the Gospel according to St. John. The association is only acceptable to the Pentecostal school of interpreting studies. The rest of us know only too well that the “Word” like every other form of human activity is the product of centuries of evolution. “In the beginning was the deed” from Goethe’s “Faust” makes much more sense, though the devastating opening of the “Edda” has an even more powerful impact: “In the beginning, there was nothing there at all”.

The second Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke (verses 1 to 22) contains the story of the Nativity, while the most complete account of the

Passion and Resurrection, including references to doubting Thomas, is to be found in Chapters 19 and 20 of the Gospel according to St. John. Chapter 5 of the Gospel according to St. Matthew contains the Sermon on the Mount and the necessary reminder that “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God”, while the ten Commandments with the terrible solemnity of the “Thou shalt not” imperative are listed in Chapter 5 of Deuteronomy.

Other passages could be recommended according to taste (environmentalists would not wish to be deprived of the rescue of the animal world from the waters of the flood contained in Genesis, Chapter 8 and pessimists would echo Job’s curse in verse 3 of Chapter 3: “Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, there is a man child conceived”), but let the following references suffice: Psalm 23 (“The Lord is my Shepherd”), Isaiah Chapter 40 (“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people”) extending the reading until verse 15 to be reminded that the “Nations are as a drop of a bucket” and, finally, the hymn to charity in Chapter 13 of St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians. The temptation has been resisted to quote passages from the Scriptures containing the term “Interpretation”, not only for the reason that it most frequently refers to text exegesis rather than the transposition of a text from one language into another. Scholars, who have written doctoral theses on the use of the term “nature” in “King Lear” and “honest” in “Othello”, would certainly find a wealth of material here!

### 3. Literary texts

What criteria are to be applied for a selection of reading matter from the boundless material available from literature for an Anglophone public? As might be expected from a citizen of Napoleon’s “nation of shopkeepers”, philosophical reflections upon the nature of “life” have been eschewed in favour of specific comments on specific societies at specific times. Hobbes’ description of human life (“nasty, brutish and short”) will undoubtedly meet with general approval, though the writer has a decided preference for the Anglo-Saxon metaphor comparing our passage through this Vale of Tears to “the flight of a sparrow straying into a hall at a time of feasting – a brief passage from darkness through light, warmth and company, out into darkness again”. The only other references to “life” and, even there, in the context of widely-used metaphors, will be found in the paragraphs on Shakespeare.

So where to start? Well, compendia of English Literature rarely contain much material before the end of the fourteenth century, also because Anglo-Saxon and the various transitional phases of Norman French cannot be considered instantly accessible. It is with “The Canterbury Tales” that an autonomous English literature bursts onto the world stage. The

delights of the prologue are readily comprehensible today. Anti-clericals will revel in the sheer abundance of material – well-fed monks going riding in expensive fur cloaks and pardonners ruthlessly fleecing the gullible with “pigges’ bones” passed off as relics. The presence of the humble clerk attentive to the needs of his parishioners and deaf to the blandishments of court and society is a comforting counterweight. One single character chosen for interpreters must be the Nun, firstly, because, like many of her successors, she spoke French with the accent of Stratford-atte-Bowe and, secondly, because of the conviction expressed engraved on the pendant worn round her neck: “Amor vincit omnia”.

Determined not to let the paragraph on Shakespeare upstage the other authors quoted, the writer proposes six well-known passages, justifying the wry assertion that the works of the Bard are “full of quotations”, one less familiar passage and two sonnets. “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun” (Sonnet 130) is an ironic descant upon “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” (Sonnet 18) and a warning against an excess of uncritical, romantic zeal. Hamlet’s reflections upon suicide (Act 111. Sc.1. verses 56-88) are too familiar to require further justification, as is Mark Antony’s funeral oration (“Julius Caesar” Act 111. Sc.11. verses 79-256). Macbeth’s monologue upon the futility of life (“a walking shadow, a poor player” Act V. Sc. 1V. verse 20-28) and Prospero’s comparison of human existence to a stage pageant (“Our revels now are ended” – “The Tempest” Act 1V. Sc. 1. verses 146-158) have both passed virtually in their entirety into the repertoire not only of the lettered, as has Jacques’ Seven Ages of Man (“As You Like It” Act 11. Sc. V11. verses 138-166). Shylock’s impassioned plea for the rights of ethnic minorities in “The Merchant of Venice” (“Hath not a Jew eyes?” Act 11. Sc.1 lines 62-78) will strike as vibrant a chord now as it did at the end of the sixteenth century. The extraordinary scene from the third part of “Henry VI” (Act 11. Sc. V. verses 1-120), with the King sitting on a molehill after the Battle of Towton, the bloodiest ever on English soil, observing a father who has killed his son and a son who has killed his father fighting on opposite sides in the civil war, is not proposed as tribute to the quality of the poetry – quite a lot of it is, in fact, routine if not doggerel – but, rather, as a blow to the solar plexus of those who would still presume to send their subjects to war, with the echo of the Commandment destined for their ears: “For I have murdered where I should not kill”.

Leaping o’er the vast stretch of time between the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre and the early novels of more than a hundred years later is, obviously, a dangerous operation justified only by the need to “turn the accomplishment of many years into an hour-glass”. A hint at Donne’s “No man is an island”, at Francis Bacon’s worldly wisdom in short, sharp barks (“The higher the ape climbs, the more he shows his arse”), a glance at the cast list and the toponymy of “Pilgrim’s Progress” (Giant Despair, Vanity Fayre and the Slough of Despond) with a sprinkle of Malapropisms from

Sheridan's "The Rivals" ("The allegory on the banks of the Nile") will, hopefully, whet the appetite. A look at nursery rhymes, some of which owe their origins to the Great Plague and the Great Fire ("Ring a Ring of Roses" – being the most famous) will also fill language gaps. Children remember the rhymes they learned from their grandmothers. Adults acquiring a second language do not share the same experience.

Any selection of passages from novels must begin with a tribute to the great women novelists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The first paragraph of "Pride and Prejudice" is a perfect introduction to Jane Austen's humane and perceptive irony, whereas the dialogues between hero and heroine in Elizabeth Gaskell's "North and South" see the increasing mutual respect and comprehension of the two interlocutors accompanied by each adopting the syntax patterns of the other. Thereafter, Dickens, already present with Mr. Micawber's economic theories, could be represented by *Oliver Twist* asking for more (the law of increasing expectations?), though preferably not by Mr. Bumble's prophecy of his future destiny ("that boy will be hanged") or by the latter's contempt for the law ("the law is an ass!"). The first paragraph of "Bleak House" ("Fog everywhere"), originally intended as a metaphor for the slow, relentless machinations of the legal system, is equally applicable to bureaucracy today. His description of Coketown (Manchester) in "Hard Times" expresses the quintessence of the pollution and alienation attendant upon industrial society – rivers running purple with evil-smelling dye and the pistons of the machinery moving up and down like "the heads of elephants in a state of melancholy madness".

A Thomas Hardy addict will be forgiven for adding the epic struggle between light and darkness at dawn and sunset over Egdon Heath in the first paragraph of "The Return of the Native" and the mirage of Christminster (Oxford) shimmering through the mists seen by young Jude the Obscure, only to elude his gaze immediately as education and social recognition will for the rest of his days. Leaving the novel for other literary genres, the whole of Wilde's "The Importance of Being Ernest" (in haste – Act 11, set in the country where "flowers are as common as people are in London") will introduce that particular cold, detached brand of British humour which bewilders and attracts at the same time. Two essays by other great humourists will serve the same purpose: William Hazlitt's "On Getting up on Cold Mornings" and Charles Lamb's "On the Origin of Roast Pork". A particular delight in the latter is the description of the great leap forward in Chinese civilisation made possible by the realisation, after hundreds of years, that the same result could be obtained, not by setting fire to the whole sty, including the sow, after the latter had farrowed, but by selecting individual piglets from the litter.

The literature of the twentieth-century is, perhaps, more familiar, as the weird Dystopian societies of "Brave New World", "Animal Farm" and

“1984” now appear regularly on school syllabuses everywhere and their contribution to the language with “double-speak” and some animals being “more equal than others” is as readily identifiable as were quotations from the Authorised Version in the seventeenth century. Perhaps here, too, the proposal to present what has passed, often unrecognised, from the literary world into everyday language usage has outlived its usefulness, since the texts have become a permanent feature of contemporary life and the author’s intention has been that of providing a guide to more distant sources of information and inspiration. For the same reason, he has not even broached the great themes of twentieth-century emancipation such as womens’ rights or celebrated the greatest day in the history of the European Parliament on which it decided that no citizen could be discriminated against on account of his racial origin, political or religious convictions or sexual persuasion – all of which themes are part and parcel of our everyday reading and conversation. The “deconstruction” of agrarian and industrial societies has, in any case, been taken over by the need to “deconstruct” the world of mass-media and computer society and contemporary literature has already begun to devote itself to the task.

#### 4. Historic speeches

The remaining category of texts recommended is that of “historic” speeches. The collection of historic speeches collected and published in “The Penguin Book of Historic Speeches”(1995) edited by Brian MacArthur is a mine of information. With the exception of Lincoln’s Gettysburg address, all the speeches recommended by the present writer can be listened to as well as read, the rhythms and the rhetorical devices resorted to being an essential component. The radio recordings of King George VI’s declaration of war (“His Majesty’s government has no alternative but to declare war on Germany”) and, even more so, his announcement of the end of World War II (“Our hearts are overflowing as are yours”), stammered and stuttered in defiance of all the laws of rhetoric, are no less effective than all Churchill’s carefully rehearsed spontaneity. Notwithstanding, the latter’s “blood, toil, tears and sweat” (13/5/1940) and “This was their finest hour” (18/6/1940) are essential. Add his tribute to British airmen after the Battle of Britain (“Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many by so few”) in conjunction with Henry V’s exhortation to his troupes before the Battle of Agincourt (“We few, we happy few, we band of brothers” – Act IV. Sc. 111 verses 20-67) to reach the melancholy conclusion that, as far as waging war is concerned, nothing has changed under the sun. Harold Wilson’s tribute to Churchill in the House of Commons (24/1/1965) reveals the modesty of a man of talent acknowledging a man of genius (“the meanest of us is touched by greatness”), while Blair’s finest hour was his tribute to the Princess of

Wales” broadcast after her untimely death (“the people’s princess” – 31/8/1997). Funeral oratory is a speciality of British rhetoric as are famous last words (immortal those of the nineteenth-century Staffordshire poisoner, William Palmer, about to step onto the trapdoor of the gallows, who turned to the hangman and asked “Hey – is this thing safe?”) and no list of recommended reading would be complete without them.

The Penguin volume recommended also includes great American speeches as a corrective to the Eurocentric perspective of the present work. Lincoln’s Gettysburg address (“Government of the people, by the people, for the people” – 19/11/1863) and Kennedy’s new generation of Americans (“Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country” – 20/1/61) are crucial. It also glosses over anything and everything pronounced by Margaret Thatcher, whose only lasting contributions to the language were, after all, “I want my money back”, “there is no alternative” and “there is no such thing as society; only people and their families” and who even managed to make St. Francis of Assisi sound mawkish and banal. Cross, rather, the Atlantic again for a breath of fresh air and compare and contrast Obama’s speeches for the inauguration of his presidency and for the acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize. The former, inspired by and with copious reference to his great predecessor, Abraham Lincoln, reveals the idealist, conscious of his historic mission as The United States of America’s first black president. The latter astonishes the world making it perfectly clear that the Nobel Peace Prize in no way commits the Commander-in-Chief of America’s Armed Forces not to deploy them, but only to do so in the service of ethically justifiable operations.

Which is, possibly, the most suitable conclusion for the present work. The interpreter must be aware of how speakers manipulate language, of the explicit and implicit repertoire upon which they draw to do so and with what purposes in mind. The vaster the interpreter’s reflections and the deeper his analysis of the examples provided by history, the more faithful his rendition of the text will be. The ordinary citizen, not committed by professional ethics, is allowed to draw more daring conclusions in his perpetual quest to escape from the mesh of rhetoric and information by which he is surrounded, rejecting, as Walt Whitman so beautifully puts it, whatever is “repellent to his soul”.