1611 REVISTA DE HISTORIA DE LA TRADUCCIÓN
A JOURNAL OF TRANSLATION HISTORY
REVISTA D'HISTÒRIA DE LA TRADUCCIÓ

NÚMEROS | ISSUES | NÚMEROS | ARTÍCULOS | ARTICLES | ARTICLES | ESCENARIOS | SCENES | ESCENARIS

NÚMERO 14
ISSUE 14

THE STORY OF A SHIPWRECKED SLAVE: THE ROLE OF ESTEBAN DE DORANTES AS AN INTERPRETER IN THE EARLY EXPLORATION AND CONQUEST OF THE AMERICAS

Gabriel González Núñez

Department of Writing and Language Studies
College of Liberal Arts
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

2020

Recibido: 17 enero 2020
Aceptado: 20 julio 2020

1. Introduction

Nebrija's oft quoted 1492 statement that "la lengua fue siempre compañera del imperio" (2015: 3) links language to power. The statement serves to introduce the argument that as empires flourish, so do their languages; and as empires decay, so do their languages (Nebrija, 2015: 3-7). The linking of language to empire by Nebrija was a strategic choice in order to gain the Crown's favor for his *Grammatica* of the Castilian language. That a brief introductory statement in an archaic grammar book continues to be quoted by scholars half a millennium later (e.g., De Varennes, 2012: 14) is evidence that Nebrija picked up on the strong connection between language and imperial ventures. For the Spanish in particular, 1492 was a hallmark year, as they were about to launch the first wave of modern globalization by putting the Americas on European maps and eventually finding a westward route to Asia.

In so doing, they were aware of language issues and enlisted a host of interpreters for the task of Empire. Interpreters in the Spanish empire played an arguably broader role than modern interpreters. The way interpreters were recruited changed over time, and it ranged from forceful kidnapping to formal schooling processes. These interpreters came from varying backgrounds, but the two most common profiles seem to be that of Indigenous or Mestizo individuals, on the one side, and Europeans who learned the languages of the conquered on the other. A less well-known, less researched group included people of African ancestry.

This paper seeks to inquire into the latter type of interpreter by presenting a historical case study, a microhistory, of Esteban, also known as Esteban de Dorantes, Estebanico, or Estevanico. To that end, Part 2 of this paper grounds this study in the historical knowledge and theoretical understanding we have of interpreters during the Spanish colonial era in the Americas, including broad interpreter profiles and the roles said interpreters played. Part 3, in turn, will consider the documentary sources where information regarding Esteban can be found. Specifically, it will consider documents produced by the Narváez, Fray Marcos, and Vásquez de Coronado expeditions. Part 4 will approach Esteban by focusing on his role as a slave, interpreter, and guide during the exploration of what is now North America. Part 5 will bring together the previous three sections by drawing some conclusions based on the information presented.

2. Communication in the early stages of the Spanish Empire in the Americas

2.1 Who were the interpreters?

In traveling west by sea, the Spanish took the language of Castile with them, but they also understood they would come across other languages. This makes sense, as they could have no expectation that the

populations they hoped to find in Asia would speak Castilian. In other words, if the Crown's dominions were to expand overseas, early contact at the very least would have to be mediated through interpreters. The use of something akin to modern professional interpreters was a logical solution to the expected linguistic differences, at least in the planning stages. By the end of the 15th century in Europe there had arisen a cadre of what Italiano calls "erudite polyglots," who were "highly respected intellectual figure[s] in Europe, whose services were invaluable to every European court" (2016: 66). It should come as no surprise then that Christopher Columbus would include as part of his crew an experienced interpreter, namely, Luis de Torres, who had "knowledge of Hebrew, Chaldean, and Arabic, besides, of course, Spanish, Portuguese, and Latin" (Italiano, 2016: 66-67).

Of course, local populations in the Caribbean islands spoke none of those languages, which meant Torres was ultimately of no help as an interpreter. Faced with the dilemma of trying to communicate in truly unknown languages, Columbus and his crew, like others who would follow in similar situations, fell back on the use of hand gestures (Martinell Gifre, 1992: 128). This solution is limited and unreliable—interpreters were understood to be a more desirable option—so Spanish explorers and conquerors set about obtaining such interpreters. In researching communication strategies between the Spanish and the autochthonous American populations, Martinell Gifre (1992: 162-169) describes three broad categories of early bilinguals who may have been recruited as interpreters: Natives, Europeans, and Africans.

The very first interpreters were Indigenous, and they were recruited through captivity (Martinell Gifre, 1992: 152). This was the strategy adopted by Columbus after reaching the island of Guanahani on October 12, 1492. Upon seeing that Torres lacked the skills to be helpful and having attempted to communicate via hand gestures, Columbus decided to kidnap a young Indigenous man, hoping to turn him into an interpreter. As Alonso Araguás explains:

> Young Diego Colón, kidnapped on Guanahani Island with other natives and taken to the Indies as an interpreter one year later, was only the first in a long series of indigenous people captured for the purpose of resolving communication problems. Kidnapped on October 14, 1492, during Columbus' first voyage, he received the same name as the Admiral's legitimate son. After a one-year stay in Spain, he was considered fluent enough in Castilian to serve as an interpreter and thus was taken by Columbus on his second voyage in 1493. (2016: 31; see also 2012: 51–53.)

This was not a novel solution. Kidnapping locals to train as interpreters was a strategy practiced in Iberian explorations of the West African Coast and the Canary Islands (Alonso Araguás, 2012: 30). Another way Indigenous individuals were forced into the service of the Spanish Empire as interpreters occurred when they were gifted to the Spanish as captives by other Indigenous groups. For example, after Hernán Cortés and his party defeated the Tabascans in modern-day Mexico, the defeated people gave the conquerors gifts, including twenty women. One of these women would become one of the most high-profile interpreters in the Americas: Malintzin or Doña Marina, more commonly known as Malinche (see Valdeón, 2013: 164-165). The reliance on prisoners as interpreters was not a novel solution either. In the Old World, Arab prisoners had been used as interpreters since at least the 11th century, apparently because their time in captivity forced them to acquire the bilingual skills needed to interpret interlingually (Martinell Gifre, 1992: 153). In short, at least during the early stages of exploration and conquest, most interpreters were Indigenous and apparently did not enter the service of the Spanish empire willingly.

As mentioned above, however, there were also interpreters of European origin. Some of these were Europeans who took it upon themselves to become knowledgeable of Indigenous languages for purposes such as evangelization and initial contact (Martinell Gifre, 1992: 167-168). Other Europeans learned Indigenous languages because they had become part of local Indigenous communities, either willingly or by captivity (Alonso Araguás, 2016: 33). A high-profile example of the latter is Gerónimo de Aguilar, who had been a captive in Yucatán for so long that he almost seemed to have forgotten Spanish when Cortés and his party found him (Martinell Gifre, 1992: 168). He would then join Cortés and act as an interpreter in the conquest of Mexico alongside the above-mentioned Malintzin.

It is well documented that the Spanish used Indigenous, captive interpreters and, to a lesser extent, European interpreters in the early stages of the Conquest. The third group of bilinguals mentioned above, namely, those of African descent, is relatively unknown in terms of the role they might have played as interpreters. This is the case, in part, because few records exist of specific individuals of African descent who might have been interpreters (Martinell Gifre, 1992: 169). The lack of specific documentation does not mean that African slaves were not part of the exploration and conquest of the Americas. It simply means that some individuals were considered to be too low in status to be accounted for in many of the records left behind by the Spanish. Take, for example, the well-

documented Coronado expedition into what is now Northwest Mexico and Southwest United States. The muster roll of the expedition lists 289 men, but this accounts for only a fraction of the actual members of the expedition (Flint and Flint, 2005: 135-8). Among those unrepresented in the document were "at least 1,300 natives of central and western Mexico, the so—called indios amigos," several "Old World natives" who joined the expedition once it started, and, quite strikingly by modern sensibilities, all the women (Flint and Flint, 2005: 135-136). More telling to the point of this paper is that many slaves and servants participated in the expedition but were not accounted for: "[i]n all likelihood, the total number of slaves and servants equaled or exceeded the number of European men-at-arms in the expedition" (Flint and Flint, 2005: 136).

Even if largely unaccounted for in historical records, African slaves where brought across the Atlantic, and it seems highly unlikely that their tasks would not bring them into language contact. While not everyone that lives in a situation of language contact become functionally bilingual, some inevitably do. Due to the subservient position of African slaves in colonial society, if they did acquire language skills, they would have been required to employ them as requested by their masters. Following this line of reasoning, one can hypothesize that some people of African descent were used as interpreters. The challenge, however, remains the lack of documentation tending to prove (or disprove) such a hypothesis.

Nonetheless, there is evidence that by the sixteenth century, Mulattos (i.e., individuals of African and European descent) were performing interpreting tasks. In his study of inquisition documents from New Spain, Schwaller concludes that "by virtue of their family connections, residence patterns, and occupations many mestizos [sic] and mulatos [sic] served as mediators between both dominant groups, albeit in an unofficial capacity" (2012: 721). As will be explained below, during the time of the Spanish colony, official interpreters existed as such and performed specific duties, but outside of the official realm it was people of mixed ancestry, including Mulattos, that were acting as linguistic and cultural intermediaries. In some ways, that these intercultural individuals in the lower rungs of society would act as interpreters should not come as a surprise. It is not especially unique to the colonial American context. For example, people of African descent, either in captivity or as free individuals, acted as interpreters in European and West African ports during this broad time period too (see Berlin, 1996).

As mentioned above, this paper hopes to add to our understanding of the role people of African descent played as interpreters in the early stages of the conquest by providing a case study of an African slave who was thrust into the role of interpreter. However, before doing so, it is helpful to be reminded of the roles played by interpreters in the very late 15th and early 16th century in Spanish America.

2.2. What role did the interpreters play?

What we generally understand to be an interpreter's role today does not necessarily apply to the role that interpreters played in the 15th and 16th centuries, especially during the early stages of exploration and conquest in the Americas. In describing the role of interpreters at that point in time, one must also bear in mind that our understanding of said role is in all likelihood fragmentary. This is so because "[i]nformation about interpreters is generally scarce in traditional historical sources," including sources that help "rebuild the history of the conquest of the Americas by the Europeans" (Alonso Araguás and Baigorri Jalón, 2004: 129).

Even so, there are some general traits to which we can point. For example, we know that at early stages individuals tasked with interpreting and facilitating communication across languages "received little, if any, training" (Alonso Araguás and Baigorri Jalón, 2004: 129). This implies that interpreting was not understood as a profession in the same way it is understood in our present times. This lack of training implied that their role, even though absolutely necessary, would not have been perceived to have the same kind of status as one might expect to find among many modern professional interpreters, e.g., court interpreters in the United States or conference interpreters in Switzerland.

Further, with few exceptions as indicated above, Europeans were generally unable to understand what the interpreter was actually saying in the Indigenous language during mediated interactions. This led to a generalized sense among the colonizers of mistrust toward the interpreters (Baigorri Jalón and Alonso Araguás, 2007: 4). This mistrust could only be exacerbated if interpreters were not European, as in the case of interpreters of Indigenous or African descent.

Despite the lack of formal training and general mistrust, interpreters played a broader role than many of their modern counterparts. During the exploration phase of the conquest, the Spanish expected their interpreters to be guides as well. For example, Columbus captured a native whose name was Yumbé, who then served the Spanish as a guide for as long as they were in a territory whose language he could understand, providing them with valuable knowledge of the place and acting as an interpreter (Martinell

Gifre Martinell Gifre, 1992: 155). When Yumbé became unable to communicate with the local populations, the Spanish let him return home (Martinell Gifre, 1992: 155). In essence, early interpreters were valued not only for what they offered linguistically but also for their geographic guidance and cultural expertise.

This meant that in the early stages of the Spanish empire, interpreters were broad linguistic and cultural mediators, more so than what we would more narrowly consider a modern, professional interpreter (Alonso Araguás, 2016: 29). Despite the mistrust alluded to earlier, the challenges of exploring and conquering such broad lands as the Americas meant that early on Europeans had no option but to rely on interpreters as their cultural mediators. This is no insignificant detail. It is hard to imagine the conquest of the New World to have developed the way it did without the linguistic and cultural mediation of a vast network of interpreter-guides.

The expectation that interpreters would provide an array of functions beyond translating conversations was to some extent the result of specific circumstances. Alonso Araguás and Payàs Puigarnau (2008*a*: 39) have observed that the exact set of functions varied depending on the specific circumstances in which the individual was tasked to act. This functional flexibility was also rooted in experiences with interpreters in the Old World. Interpreters there were also expected to carry out a number of related functions in addition to interpreting (Alonso Araguás and Payàs Puigarnau, 2008*a*: 40). In Spain, for example, *alfaqueques* were individuals tasked with securing the exchange or freedom of prisoners held by the Moors (Alonso Araguás and Payàs Puigarnau, 2008*a*: 39). Their duties included interpreting, but also a host of administrative tasks related to their jobs as "redeemers of captives" (Alonso Araguás and Payàs Puigarnau, 2008*a*: 43). Thus, it should come as no surprise that for interpreters in the early stages of the conquest of the New World, linguistic mediation was only one of a broad range of functions.

To be sure, these functions would change over time. The fluctuating nature of the interpreter's role is evidenced in that "the first decades of the sixteenth century were characterized by a terminological conundrum" regarding what interpreters were called,**(1)** which reflected "the instability of a task that would gradually become professionalized" (Valdeón 2014: 40). Whatever their denomination, as society transitioned from a conquest zone to a colonial zone, interpreters evolved from being allies in Spaniards' military ventures to being colonizers alongside them and, eventually, to being officials serving the viceroy, his governors, and judges (Puente Luna, 2014: 145-146). This process was the result of a pragmatic approach to the challenges of Empire, because "[i]nterpreters were indeed necessary in all the spheres of the colonial system" (Valdeón, 2019: 61). In addition, starting in the 1520s, the practices of interpreters in Mexico, and presumably other parts of Spain in the Americas, "showed a rather fast evolution from the 1520s onwards toward the establishment of a series of official positions under specific regulations" (Alonso Araguás, 2016: 28). Another signal of interpreters' changing roles was the founding of language schools that would train interpreters (Alonso Araguás and Payàs Puigarnau, 2008*b*). But even under these latter, more regulated frameworks that colonial interpreters worked under, they continued to perform many duties beyond interpreting oral communications. For example, in the Andes, it was not uncommon for official interpreters to perform legal duties that went beyond interpreting as we currently understand it (De la Puente Luna, 2014: 154). And to be sure, the emergence of official interpreters in official settings did not mean that ad-hoc interpreters ceased to exist locally (De la Puente Luna, 2014: 154).

Thus, when considering the roles of interpreters at any stage of the Spanish conquest and colony, it must be born in mind that interpreting was generally only one of many functions they were expected to perform. In the early stages, which is what this paper is most interested in, interpreters were often individuals thrust into this role by specific circumstances, lacked specific training, and performed a host of duties beyond interpreting. As will be seen below, all of these traits were present in the case of Esteban. In addition, his status and prestige was not significantly increased by the service he provided as an interpreter and guide to those he served. Before reviewing Esteban's story, however, some methodological clarifications are in order.

3. Method and sources

Because consideration of Esteban's role as an interpreter is a matter for translation history, a brief discussion of method and sources should not be avoided. Specifically, this paper relies on the study of historical documents. There are several such documents to which researchers interested in Esteban have turned. These are documents produced as a result of three different expeditions. The expeditions are important to this study because they generated first-hand accounts which specifically mention Esteban. In order to assess Esteban's role in said expeditions, the first-hand accounts were read

individually, and note was taken of all references to Esteban. This was done in order to gain an understanding as to how his role might have been conceptualized by his contemporaries.

The three expeditions in question were led by Pánfilo de Narváez, Fray Marcos de Niza, and Francisco Vásquez de Coronado, respectively. These expeditions are briefly described in the following paragraphs, along with the sources we rely on and the issues that are raised by each source. In the interest of histographical rigor (see Bastin, 2006: 121-123), preference is given to primary sources.**(2)** However, due to limitations that made it impossible to travel and handle the actual, original documents, this study relies on transcriptions of these accounts found in reputable scholarly publications, as detailed below:

First, the Narváez expedition. This was an ill-fated attempt to explore and establish Spanish control over Florida. His expedition launched in June 1527 from Spain with hundreds of men. In March 1536, the four remaining survivors of the expedition, including Esteban, wandered into central Mexico.

We have a great deal of information regarding their nearly decade-long journey because the expedition's treasurer Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca produced a 1542 *relación* **(3)** or official account of their travels. This report has been critically assessed as being filled with "Cabeza de Vaca's efforts at personal advocacy" (Adorno and Pautz, 1999*c*: 58-64) and to some extent unreliable (see Maura, 2002: 129-143). Even though other accounts were produced,**(4)** most of what we know about this expedition comes from the 1542 *relación* or similar texts derived from it (Herrick, 2018: 43). In other words, despite its shortcomings, it is the best historical source we have for this expedition. For that reason, the 1542 *relación* by Núñez Cabeza de Vaca is a primary source in this paper. More specifically, the transcription and translation published by Adorno and Pautz (1999*a*: 14-279) were consulted for this study.**(5)**

Second, the Fray Marcos expedition. This was an exploratory overland journey seeking to find the fabled Cíbola, a country with seven cities of gold. Núñez Cabeza de Vaca claimed he had heard from the Indigenous populations that wealthy cities could be found north of New Spain, so Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza charged a second expedition, which was organized with Esteban as a guide. The expedition departed in March 1539 from the Culiacán outpost. The expedition seems to have come to an end when reports of Esteban's death at the hands of Indigenous populations made Fray Marcos decide to turn back.

By late August 1539, Fray Marcos had reached Mexico City, where he produced a *relación* of his expedition. As soon as the report was released, its reliability began to be questioned (Flint and Flint, 2005: 634, n. 17). Most obviously, Fray Marcos claimed to have seen a city—purportedly the first of the seven cities of Cíbola—from a distance, but scholars have long scoffed at this claim (e.g., Hallenbeck, 1987: 62).**(6)** Perhaps more intriguingly, modern scholars have also called into question Fray Marcos' account of the demise of Esteban (Maura, 2002: 143-151). Even so, his report remains the only first-hand account **(7)** we have of Esteban's second expedition. For that reason, the 1539 *relación* by Fray Marcos is also a primary source in this paper.**(8)** More specifically, the transcription and translation published by Flint and Flint (2005: 65-88) was consulted for this study.

Finally, the Vásquez de Coronado expedition. This was an inland expeditionary venture that promptly followed the release of Fray Marcos' account. This new expedition was launched in 1540 and came to an end in 1542. In its wake, "it left behind a hostile land in which were buried a score of European expeditionaries and dozens of their Mexican Indian allies" (Flint and Flint, 2005: 2).

It also created an extensive trail of documentation, including a *relación*, produced by Pedro de Castañeda de Nájera in the 1560s but which has survived only in a copy written by hand in 1596 (Flint and Flint, 2005: 382). Because it discusses Esteban, it too is included as a primary source in this paper. The transcription and translation published by Flint and Flint (2005: 384-493) was consulted for this study.

Now that the primary sources for this study have been identified and discussed, we may move on to see what they have to say about Esteban's role as an interpreter of African descent in the early exploration of the Americas.

4. Esteban de Dorantes: slave, interpreter, guide

Esteban de Dorantes' life has been of interest to scholars, as evidenced in a recent biography penned by Herrick (2018); to writers, as evidenced in the award-winning novel *The Moor's Account* by Lalami (2015); and even to politicians, as evidenced by an image of Esteban being included in a monument in front of the Texas State Capitol (see Figure 1). Because his life story has been told elsewhere, the

biographical details presented in this paper are only those necessary to contextualize his role as an interpreter in the Spanish empire.

Fig. 1: Statue of Esteban at the Texas State Capitol grounds

Born in Africa, probably in or relatively close to Azemmour, he was taken to Iberia as a slave by Spanish traders "[i]n 1522 or soon afterward" (Herrick, 2018: 17-19). By 1527 he was a slave in the household of Andrés Dorantes de Carranza, who joined the aforementioned Narváez expedition. Again, it was commonplace for Spanish who had servants to take them on their explorations, and that his how Esteban ended up traveling to the New World.

Esteban was not the only African slave in that expedition, as logic would dictate and historical sources confirm (Adorno and Pautz, 1999*b*: 57). These slaves are not mentioned by name in the *relaciones*, suggesting that their presence was taken for granted as well as their subordinate roles. It is unlikely that these African slaves were thought of as potential interpreters, since that would not have been their job back in the Old World. Not all slaves were African, however, and scholars have identified at least two individuals "who were most likely Indian slaves brought to Florida from the Caribbean" (Adorno and Pautz, 1999*b*: 57). In light of the way Indigenous people were kidnapped or made captive to serve as interpreters, it is probable that these "Indian slaves" were seen as potential interpreters. Even so, it is unclear from Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's *relación* whether the expedition had individuals specifically designated as interpreters. It likely did, because as was indicated above, the Spanish were quite aware of the linguistic challenges of exploration and Empire.

After stopping in Hispaniola and Cuba, the expedition arrived at Florida in 1528. The very first recorded contact with an Indigenous group seems to have been initially peaceful, with the giving of gifts by the

locals and communication through hand gestures. Núñez Cabeza de Vaca indicates that as foreigners they could not understand what the Indigenous people were saying: "aunque nos hablaron, como nosotros no teníamos lengua, no los entendíamos" **(9)** (Adorno and Pautz, 1999*a*: 34). Tellingly, Núñez Cabeza de Vaca points to the lack of a "lengua," or an interpreter, as the reason they were unable to communicate.

Communication was an issue, and encounters turned hostile. Soon after the first encounter, the Spanish set up an ambush where they captured "tres o quatro indios" whom "llevamos por guías de allí adelante" **(10)** (Adorno and Pautz, 1999*a*: 52). As discussed above, when Indigenous Americans were captured as guides, they were expected to act as interpreters too, so while these captives are not explicitly designated as interpreters, it stands to reason that they were at least intended to perform that duty. What is clear, nonetheless, is that communication often did not take place, and when it did, Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's *relación* does not specify how it came about.

Ultimately, the local populations inflicted considerable casualties on the would-be conquerors (Herrick, 2018: 78-82). In an act of desperation, the survivors sailed in five makeshift boats into the Gulf of Mexico (Herrick, 2018: 86-87). At some point, "the boat with Esteban [and others] was cast ashore by large waves onto what is believed to be today's Velasco Peninsula, near Galveston, Texas" (Herrick, 2018: 88). Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's boat ends up further north, and since he is the account's narrator, little is known about Esteban's whereabouts and activities during this time.

However, we know that most if not all of the shipwrecked survivors became captives of one or several Indigenous groups for the next five years (Herrick, 2018: 95-9). As mentioned above, captivity is how some Arab interpreters had acquired their bilingualism, and it seems this is how Esteban learned to communicate in Indigenous American languages. It is noteworthy that in a stunning reversal of fortunes, the Spanish were now slaves alongside Esteban, which means they too would have acquired linguistic skills in this manner.

By 1534, through battle, shipwreck, captivity, illness, and sheer hunger, the large Narváez expedition had been reduced to four individuals (Esteban de Dorantes, Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Alonso del Castillo Maldonado, and Andrés Dorantes de Carranza), all of whom managed to flee together from their captors (Herrick, 2018: 104). It is at this point that Esteban clearly assumes his role as an interpreter and ambassador for the group. As the party of four began wandering though Texas, crossed the Rio Grande, and stumbled its way to Central Mexico, it was Esteban who was often tasked with communicating with the different groups along the way. For example, soon after they fled their captors, the party noticed some smoke (Adorno and Pautz, 1999*a*: 52).**(11)**

> Y yendo a ellos, después de bísperas llegamos allá do vimos un indio que, como vio que ívamos a él, huyó sin querernos aguardar. Nosotros embiamos al negro tras dél. Y como vio que iva sólo, aguardolo. El negro le dixo que ívamos a buscar aquella gente que hazía aquellos humos. Él respondió que cerca de allí estavan las casas, y que nos guiaría allá. Y assí lo fuimos siguiendo

Esteban's role here fits the broader functions described above, where he is acting not only as the party's interpreter but also an emissary of sorts.

On Esteban's role, the assertion has been made that "[w]ithout Esteban, it is doubtful the [three] Spaniards would have survived" (Herrick, 2018: 135). Such an assertion is an exercise in counterfactualism that can neither be proven nor disproven based on available historical sources; nonetheless, it is hard to argue against the proposition that his role was crucial to the party. He was the one that was sent forward to communicate with the Indigenous populations in order to secure safe passage and satisfy other needs, including food. The ability to communicate was essential for these travelers, as evidenced by Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's often discussing matters of language in his *relación*.

From this account, it seems that Esteban was able to communicate at least in "lengua de Mareames" **(12)** and that there were other groups who, despite having their own language, also understood this language (Adorno and Pautz, 1999*a*: 152). Thus, there seems to have been some sort of lingua franca operating in what is now Texas. In Northern Mexico the party encountered members of a linguistic community that spoke "una lengua que entrellos avía con quien nos entendíamos,"**(13)** i.e., another lingua franca in which communication was possible (Adorno and Pautz, 1999*a*: 250). In short, the existence of transregional languages seems to have helped Esteban fulfill his communicative and diplomatic tasks.

It is not hard to imagine that the lingua franca was complemented, as necessary, with gestures (Herrick, 2018: 127). In addition, as the party of four continued its wanderings, they began unintentionally building up a large escort of Indigenous persons (Herrick, 2018: 126-127). Some of these acted as

guides (e.g., when two women led Esteban and Castillo Maldonado to an Indigenous town [see Adorno and Pautz, 1999*a*: 152]). As was discussed before, the Spanish expected their guides to also act as interpreters, so it makes sense that some communication would take place through this Indigenous cohort that built around, and served to guide, the traveling foreigners.

Whatever the case may be, in 1563 the party finally came across other Spanish men. In Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's account, upon finding signs of Christians, "tomé comigo al negro y onze indios,"**(14)** and they went looking for Europeans (Adorno and Pautz, 1999*a*: 244). At this point the ill-fated expedition can be said to have come to an end, but there is one more recorded act in which Esteban takes place. He is sent back with some horsemen and a group of Indigenous people "para guiarlos" **(15)** as they fetched the two Spanish men who had stayed behind (Adorno and Pautz, 1999*a*: 246).

In the conversations with Indigenous persons that from this point on are reported by Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, an interpreter seems to always be present. On several occasions, the Spanish narrator mentions "la lengua", i.e. the interpreter, that facilitated communication from this point on (see Adorno and Pautz, 1999*a*: 248, 250, 256, 258). If one contrasts this choice of words to previous ones, Núñez Cabeza de Vaca seems to see Esteban as fulfilling a role that is not that of an interpreter. When individuals designated as interpreters are present, he calls them *lenguas*, but he never applies this term to Esteban. Rather, Núñez Cabeza de Vaca refers to Esteban either by name, e.g., "Estevanico", which is a diminutive form of Esteban (Adorno and Pautz, 1999*a*: 128) or by reference to his skin color, e.g., "el negro" (Adorno and Pautz, 1999*a*: 164). In referring to Esteban in these ways and never as a *lengua*, it seems that Núñez Cabeza de Vaca saw the African slave as playing a role that was somehow different than that of an interpreter.

After the party returns to Spanish dominions, Esteban fades away from Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's *relación*. He would probably fade away from the historical record too, except that the return of the four survivors caused some speculation about the possibility of finding "populous and wealthy native peoples from whom significant tribute could likely be extracted" (Flint and Flint, 2005: 3). Before mounting a full-on expedition of conquest, an exploratory one was commissioned by the Viceroy. This expedition departed from Culiacán in early 1539 led by Franciscan friar Marcos de Niza, with Esteban acting as a guide. The African slave had been purchased by the Viceroy from Dorantes de Carranza precisely to serve as a guide for the expeditionaries (Herrick, 2018: 152). In the Viceroy's letter of instructions for Fray Marcos, Esteban's subordinate position is made starkly clear (Flint and Flint, 2005: 78):**(16)**

> llevareis con / Vos a esteban de dorantes por guia al qual mando que os obedesCa en todo / y por todo lo que Vos le mandaredes como A mi misma persona y no haziendolo / asi que yncurra en mal caso y en las penas que Caen los que no obedesçen / a las personas que tienen poder de su magestad par poderles mandar.

Esteban is not described as playing the role of an interpreter but rather of a "guia," i.e., a guide. Again, this task tended to include ad hoc interpreting responsibilities, but it does not seem to have been Esteban's primary role. He was selected because of his knowledge of the terrain and experience gained during his wanderings through the region.

In Fray Marcos' *relación* there is one mention of linguistic mediation, and this takes place early on, when he comes across an Indigenous group which is reported to have greeted him welcomingly. At this point, he communicated through interpreters: "a los / quales lo mejor que yo pude hize entender por las lenguas lo contenydo / en la ynstruçion" (Flint and Flint, 2005, 80).**(17)** It is unclear who these "lenguas" or interpreters are, but because the expedition contained many Indigenous individuals, these may have been Indigenous interpreters. Soon after this encounter, Fray Marcos sent Esteban to move ahead of the expedition. Esteban was to regularly send Indigenous messengers to Fray Marcos letting the Franciscan know what to expect. The African slave eventually arrived at the Zuni village of Hawikku, in what is now New Mexico (Herrick, 2018: 175). At this point, according to Fray Marcos's *relación*, Esteban ran afoul of the villagers, who in turn proceeded to kill him.**(18)**

Fray Marcos decided to return to the safety of Culiacán. His account of his journey included the claim that he had seen Cíbola (this is what he called the Zuni village where Esteban reportedly was killed) from afar. Fray Marcos' report was enough to convince the Viceroy to launch the much bigger, largely unsuccessful but later lionized Coronado expedition (see Flint and Flint, 2005: 3-5). Esteban was not part of this expedition, but he nonetheless appears in its documentary track.

The Castañeda de Nájera *relación* from the 1560s recounts the Coronado expedition in detail, including some background on Esteban. While Castañeda de Nájera did not have first-hand knowledge of Esteban, the way in which he discusses the African slave's role yields insights on how his contemporaries saw

Esteban. When Castañeda de Nájera summarizes the survival of the four from the Narváez expedition, he writes (Fint and Flint, 2005: 438):**(19)**

> aconteçio a / la saçon que llegaron a mexi- / co tres españoles y un negro que / havian por nombre cabeça de / vaca y dorantes y castillo / maldonado [...] estos die- / ron notiçia a el buen don Anto- / nio de mendoça en como por las / tierras que atraVesaron toma- / ron lengua y noticia grande de / Unos poderosos pueblos de altos / de quatro y çinco doblados.

The key phrase here "tomaron lengua" can be translated as "they took an interpreter" or "they took on an interpreter." Alternatively, Flint and Flint translated this phrase as "through an interpreter" (2005: 387). Even with that translation, if one reads the whole of Castañeda de Nájera's description of this expedition, it does not seem that Esteban is the interpreter. In other references to Esteban, Castañeda de Nájera employs either his name, e.g., "Esteban" (Flint and Flint, 2005: 439), or his skin color, e.g., "el negro" (Flint and Flint, 2005: 440), but never once calls him an interpreter. This does not mean that Esteban did not interpret but rather that he was not seen as fulfilling that role by Castañeda de Nájera.

Having a clear picture of what documentary sources tell us about the slave Esteban during the exploration and conquest of what eventually became the United States and Mexico, we can now arrive at some conclusions on the implications of said documents in our understanding of the role played by Esteban as guide and interpreter for the Spanish.

5. Conclusion: On Esteban's status and Black interpreters

Two general conclusions can be drawn from Esteban's role as described in the documents of the Narváez, Fray Marcos, and Vásquez de Coronado expeditions. The first is that Esteban had an inferior status, and his linguistic tasks corresponded to such a status. His inferior status is a foregone conclusion given that he was a slave, and it is further confirmed by the use in the historical documents of the diminutive form of his name, i.e., Estebanico ("Little Steve"), and the fact that he is frequently referred to simply by the descriptor "el negro" ("the black", "the black man," or "the black one"). It was because of this inferior status that he was given the task of establishing communication on behalf of the survivors of the Narváez expedition as they trudged through the land. This point is made by Núñez Cabeza de Vaca in his *relación*, when describing a group of Indigenous people that they came across (Adorno and Pautz, 1999*a*: 232):**(20)**

> Teníamos con ellos mucha autoridad y gravedad. Y para conservar esto les hablávamos pocas vezes. El negro les hablava siempre y se informava de los caminos que queríamos ir y los pueblos que havía y de las cosas que queríamos saber.

This passage indicates that the usage of Esteban as the speaker of the group was a means of reinforcing unequal power relations. It was explicitly a way to demonstrate to the Indigenous populations that the Spanish had rank and authority. This would also have served to remind Esteban that despite all that had happened, he was still at a lower rung than the three Spanish men. His master Dorantes de Carranza is also one of the survivors, and by performing these broad communicative tasks, which included interpreting, he still served his master in this new reality. This statement does not mean to imply that relationships and dynamics were not affected by the nine-year journey, but Esteban continued to be in a subordinate position, and for that reason, he was tasked with communicating with the people encountered along the way. This fact is born out in the text, leading Italiano to similarly conclude that "[e]mploying Estebanico for the job [of interpreter] was thus the natural consequence of a hierarchical system that was still fully operational among the four survivors" (2016: 66).

However, some scholars have gone a step further and attributed a special skillset to Esteban in his supposedly unparalleled ability to communicate with Indigenous individuals. Italiano, for example, argues that the Spanish exhibited "cultural monolingualism" while Esteban exhibited "superior linguistic competence" (2016: 66). The argument seems to be that Esteban was perhaps trilingual (Arabic, Spanish, and Portuguese), and therefore his "multilingual dexterity, his experience in dealing with other languages and cultures, his acquaintance with translation processes" made him ideally suited to be an interpreter (Italiano, 2016: 66). The problem is that the historical texts produced by the three expeditions do not provide evidence for such claims, beyond Esteban's ability to speak Spanish and possibly Arabic. The texts are also silent regarding the linguistic abilities of the three Spanish men. Rather, what arises in historical sources is that the same conditions that made Esteban able to communicate using some Indigenous language were also imposed on the Spanish during the same time frame. Thus, there is no indication that their linguistic competence in New World languages was inferior (or superior) to Esteban's.

Again, the text only speaks to one reason why Esteban was chosen to do the speaking, and it was not because they thought he was a better interpreter but rather because they thought that this activity was beneath their own status. This observation leads to the conclusion that at this stage of the Spanish conquest, interpreting (and its related activities) was considered a low-prestige job. As mentioned above, at this time the figure of the interpreter was in a fluctuating state. It was not regulated, as it would later be, and it was mostly an ad hoc solution to immediate communicative difficulties. This is an important implication stemming from the study of Esteban's story—the need for interpreters was often solved pragmatically, and interpreters chosen pragmatically did not enjoy much social prestige. Prestige would come later, so that by the 18th century, Mestizos or Indigenous interpreters enjoyed a certain level of status (Martinell Gifre, 1992: 166). This prestige stemmed from institutionalization, which required not only language skills but, in many cases, also knowledge of legal concepts (De la Puente Luna, 2014: 244-245).

The second conclusion that can be drawn from this review of historical documents pertaining to Esteban is that in the mind of his contemporaries, he was not seen as interpreter. As indicated above, neither Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Fray Marcos, or Castañeda de Nájera refer to him as an interpreter. There is no question that he did interpret, but his contemporaries rather saw him as a slave charged with either speaking on behalf of the group or with serving as a guide. In the Fray Marcos expedition, for example, he is specifically designated as a guide by the Viceroy. The expedition, which was unusual in that it had no military component and was led by lay clergy, apparently had its own interpreters or, alternatively, found interpreters along the way, but Esteban's role was to guide the expedition and provide information to Fray Marcos. Esteban was not to be the interpreter, but in his charge to obey Fray Marcos as if the friar had purchased Esteban himself, he could have interpreted.

This has some implications for scholars interested in researching the role of Blacks and Mulattos during the Spanish colonial era. As was indicated above, most interpreters were either Indigenous or Mestizo who obtained their bilingual skills organically, while others were Europeans who took it upon themselves to learn Indigenous languages. It was these kinds of individuals who would eventually populate the ranks of the army of regulated interpreters found throughout the vast empire. But, inasmuch as language contact was a way of life in a large portion of the Spanish overseas empire, ad hoc interpreting continued to exist beyond the early stages of exploration and conquest. It is in this continuing, ad hoc role that Mulattos, and possibly even some African slaves like Esteban, operated as interpreters. The difficulty for researchers is that such instances of ad hoc interpreting would rarely be registered in historical documents. This is so in part because the people interpreting would not have been seen as interpreters but rather as lower-status individuals performing broader, lower-status jobs that may or may not have included interpreting, e.g., records are more likely to say that "We had a Black for a guide" than to say "We brought Juan Pérez to guide us and act as our interpreter."

Thus, identification of Black or Mulatto interpreters becomes difficult. This is evidenced in Schwaller's (2012) important contribution that Mulattos and Mestizos played an important role as interpreters and cultural intermediaries during the sixteenth century. To reach this conclusion, he combed through Inquisition documents, criminal records, and petitions to the Crown in order to identify ad hoc interpreters of Mestizo or Mulatto origin. These records provide detailed information regarding the participants in the proceedings, which allowed Schwaller to find the people doing the interpreting, who were everything from shoemakers to ranch hands to merchants. Unless the researcher knows how to find them and where to look for them, such ad hoc interpreters are likely to remain unnoticed.

Esteban's case, while extraordinary in its epic arc, provides insights into Black (including Mulatto) interpreters in the Spanish colonial era. His story provides further evidence pointing to the low prestige of interpreters, particularly if they were not European wise men, during the exploration and conquest, before regulation from the Crown. This was linked to the way interpreters were recruited ad hoc, as mandated by circumstance, and to the fact that interpreting in such cases was conceived as only a portion of a broader service, such as scouting the terrain. His story also casts light on how difficult it can be for researchers to identify and study the history, or histories, of interpreters from the lowest rungs of society. Difficulty, however, does not necessarily mean impossibility, and thus much work can potentially be done on this front.

NOTES

(1) Valdeón (2014: 40-41) identifies three terms: *traductor*, *faraute*, and *lengua*.

(2) Bastin (2006: 122) warns of secondary or tertiary sources as being problematic in terms of methodological rigor. An example of this might suffice. While looking for information on the expedition led by Vásquez de Coronado, we found a tertiary source which stated that this expedition had an African

interpreter. Upon attempting to verify this information in primary sources, only Indigenous and European interpreters were identified. Further, while Flint and Flint do identify two interpreters (2005: 607, 654 n. 52), neither were African—one was Spanish (Juan de Contreras) and the other was an Italian lay brother (Fray Daniel).

(3) The document's full name has been transcribed as "La relación que dio Álvar Núñez Cabeça de Vaca de lo acaescido en las Indias en la armada donde iva por governador Pánphilo de Narbáez, desde el año de veinte y siete hasta el año de treinta y seis que bolvió a Sevilla con tres de su compañía" (Adorno and Pautz, 1999*a*: 14).

(4) For a discussion of the different accounts, including several that are no longer known to be in existence, see Adorno and Pautz, 1999*c*: 3-8, 83-84.

(5) A second, revised edition of the *relación* was published in 1555, under the name "La relación y comentarios del governador Álvar Núñez Cabeça de Vaca, de lo acaescido en las dos jornadas que hizo a las Indias." (Adorno and Pautz, 1999*a*: 14). A copy of this 1555 *relación* has been scanned and uploaded on the internet by Texas State University (Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, 1555). However, due to the difficulties involved in reading medieval calligraphy one photo at a time on a computer screen, this source was not consulted for the present study.

(6) Hallenbeck's 1987 book is a reprint of a work originally published in 1949.

(7) Testimonies relevant to the Fray Marcos expedition were recorded in Havana in November 1539 (Flint and Flint, 2005: 95-97). None of these are first-hand accounts (Flint and Flint, 2005: 96). Further, they fail to mention Esteban, and are thus of little relevance to the present study.

(8) For a discussion of the three existing copies of Fray Marcos' *relación*, see Flint and Flint, 2005: 62-3

(9) In Adorno and Pautz's translation: "although they spoke to us, since we did not have an interpreter we did not understand them" (1999*a*: 35).

(10) In Adorno and Pautz's translation: "took three or four Indians" whom "we took [...] as guides from that point onward" (1999*a*: 53).

(11) In Adorno and Pautz's translation: "And going toward them, after vespers we arrived there, where we saw an Indian who, as he saw that we were coming toward him, fled without wanting to wait for us. We sent the black man after him. And since he saw that he was coming alone, he waited for him. The black man told him that we were going to look for those people who were making those spires of smoke. He responded that the houses were near there, and that he would guide us there. And thus we went following him" (1999*a*: 153).

(12) In Adorno and Pautz's translation: "the language of the Mareames" (1999*a*: 153).

(13) In Adorno and Pautz's translation: "a language that they had among them by which we understood one another" (1999*a*: 251). This language is identified as Primahaitu by Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. For an evaluation of the claim regarding this language, see Gil-Osle, 2018.

(14) In Adorno and Pautz's translation: "I took with me the black man and eleven Indians" (1999*a*: 245).

(15) In Adorno and Pautz's translation: "to guide them" (1999*a*: 247).

(16) In Flint and Flint's translation: "you will take with you as guide Esteban de Dorantes (whom I ordered to obey you completely, as [he would obey] me myself, in whatever you might order him). If he does not do that, he would bring disapproval upon himself and incur the penalties that befall those who do not obey the persons who are authorized by His Majesty as empowered to direct them" (2005: 65).

(17) In Flint and Flint's translation: "I made them understand the best I could, through interpreters, what is included in the directive" (2005: 68).

(18) Many readers of Fray Marcos' *relación* have taken him at his word. Some modern scholars, however, have speculated that perhaps Esteban and his Indigenous friends fabricated the accounts of his death in order to secure his freedom (e.g., Herrick, 2018: 179-190; Maura, 2002: 143-150).

(19) In Flint and Flint's translation: "At that time, it happened that three Spaniards, named Cabeza de Vaca, Dorantes, and Castillo Maldonado, and a Black arrived in [the Ciudad de] México. [...] They

informed the good don Antonio de Mendoza how, in traversing those lands, they used an interpreter and obtained marvelous news of some wealthy, four- and five-storied pueblos" (2005: 387).

(20) In Adorno and Pautz's translation: "We had a great deal of authority and influence over them. And in order to conserve this we spoke to them but few times. The black man always spoke to them and informed himself about the roads we wished to travel and the villages that there were and about other things that we wanted to now" (1999*a*: 233).

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