

# Missionary Translations: The Activities of the American Board in the Ottoman Empire (1820–1923)

**Misyoner Çeviriler: Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nda Amerikan Board’un Faaliyetleri (1820–1923)**

Research/Araştırma

**Ceyda ÖZMEN**

Dr. Öğr. Gör., Ege Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngilizce Mütercim Tercümanlık Bölümü, [ceyozmen@gmail.com](mailto:ceyozmen@gmail.com), ORCID ID: [orcid.org/0000-0003-0431-0025](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0431-0025)

## ABSTRACT

Beginning in the first half of the nineteenth century, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) established a significant presence in the Ottoman Empire through its activities in translation, printing, and education. From the 1820s to the early twentieth century, the Board produced a broad corpus of translated texts, including biblical works as well as textbooks in science, medicine, and the humanities. Approaching these activities from a translation studies perspective, this article argues that translation constituted a central institutional practice that structured the Board’s publishing and educational enterprises. Drawing on archival sources and missionary accounts, the study shows how translation shaped pedagogical practices, mediated the circulation of knowledge, and contributed to the codification of minority vernaculars in Anatolia. Missionary presses and educational institutions constituted key sites where translation was systematically carried out in conjunction with religious instruction and publishing activities. In particular, translations into Armenian and Bulgarian played a formative role in the development of modern written forms of these languages. By foregrounding translation as an analytical lens, the article reconsiders missionary activity in the Ottoman Empire and demonstrates the relevance of missionary translation to discussions of language planning, print culture, and sociocultural change in the nineteenth century.

**Keywords:** Translation studies, missionary translators, the American Board (ABCFM), Ottoman Empire

## ÖZET

On dokuzuncu yüzyılın ilk yarısından itibaren Amerikan Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) çeviri, basım ve eğitim alanlarındaki çalışmalarıyla Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda etkin bir biçimde faaliyet göstermiştir. 1820'lerden yirminci yüzyılın başlarına kadar Board, Kutsal Kitap metinlerinin yanı sıra fen bilimleri, tıp ve beşerî bilimler alanlarına ait ders kitaplarını da kapsayan geniş bir çeviri yayın faaliyeti yürütmüştür. Bu faaliyetlere çeviribilim perspektifinden yaklaşan makale, çevirinin Board'un yayıncılık ve eğitim çalışmalarında belirleyici bir rol oynadığını savunmaktadır. Arşiv kaynakları ve misyoner anlatılarına dayanan çalışma, çevirinin pedagojik uygulamaları nasıl şekillendirdiğini, bilginin dolaşımına nasıl aracılık ettiğini ve Anadolu'daki azınlık dillerinin gelişimine ve yaygınlaşmasına nasıl katkıda bulunduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Misyoner matbaalar ve eğitim kurumları, çevirinin dinî öğretim ve yayıncılık faaliyetleriyle birlikte sistemli biçimde yürütüldüğü merkezler olmuştur. Özellikle Ermenice ve Bulgarca'ya yapılan çeviriler, bu dillerin modern yazılı biçimlerinin gelişiminde kurucu bir rol oynamıştır. Makale, çeviriyi merkeze alarak Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'ndaki misyoner faaliyetlerini yeniden değerlendirmekte ve misyoner çeviri pratiğinin on dokuzuncu yüzyılda dil planlaması, basın-yayın kültürü ve sosyo-kültürel değişim tartışmaları açısından taşıdığı önemi ortaya koymaktadır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Çeviribilim, misyoner çevirmenler, Amerikan Board Teşkilatı (ABCFM), Osmanlı İmparatorluğu

## 1. Introduction

Beginning in the first half of the nineteenth century, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) established a notable sphere of influence in the Ottoman Empire not only through its missionary organization but also through its activities in translation, publishing, and education.<sup>1</sup> These activities, which continued from the 1820s to the 1920s, coincided with a critical period of Ottoman modernization and played a significant role in introducing new educational models, new literacy practices, and new forms of knowledge to certain segments of society. The broad corpus of texts published by the Board ranged from biblical translations and moral instruction books to science textbooks, medical manuals, children's narratives and simplified stories. Such a wide-ranging body of publications reveals that translation functioned at the very core of the Board's institutional practice, serving as the principal means through which it disseminated knowledge and advanced its missionary objectives. The schools established by the American Board functioned not only as structures serving missionary objectives but also as translation bureaus and translator-training centers at the time. Translations made into the languages of minority communities significantly contributed to the emergence and consolidation of modern national identities among these groups (Selimler, 2023; Merguerian, 1998; Bablunyan, 2024).

The historical and sociological literature on this period has predominantly examined the Board's activities in the Ottoman Empire through the lenses of education, missionary work, the history of non-Muslim communities, or politics (e.g. Alan, 2007;

<sup>1</sup> A large part of the research findings is based on the ABCFM annual reports accessed through the fellowship awarded by the British Library Eccles Centre for American Studies. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Centre for its valuable support and the research opportunities it provided.

Şafak, 2003; Uçar, 1988). Although translation was one of the principal instruments through which the Board disseminated its cultural, ideological, and pedagogical aims, the Board's translation activities have long been overlooked from a translation studies perspective. The present study aims to explore how the Board developed and operationalized a translation policy through its practices of textual production and dissemination, and how this policy intersected with the social, cultural, and pedagogical transformations unfolding in the Ottoman Empire. In doing so, the analysis focuses primarily on Anatolia, rather than on other regions of the Empire, as it constituted the principal locus of the Board's activities and the most significant site of its educational and translational initiatives. The period selected for this research extends up to the proclamation of the Republic and corresponds to the era in which the minority communities were most influential in Anatolia.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

Throughout the study, the activities of the Board will be analyzed from a systemic viewpoint, in which translational outputs are not treated as isolated texts but as elements embedded within the broader dynamics of the Ottoman cultural polysystem (Even-Zohar, 2010). Within this framework, translation is approached as a practice that participates in the organization, distribution, and transformation of cultural resources across different strata of the system. In particular, this study draws on Itamar Even-Zohar's concept of "culture repertoire," defined as "the aggregate of options utilized by a group of people and by the individual members of the group, for the organization of life" (2010, p. 70). Rather than being a static inventory, the repertoire is understood as a dynamic and continuously negotiated set of possibilities, which can be expanded, reorganized, or constrained through various forms of cultural activity, including translation.

Even-Zohar emphasizes that culture repertoires may be constructed both "deliberately" and "inadvertently" (2010, p. 72). This distinction is particularly significant for the present study, as it provides a basis for distinguishing between spontaneous cultural change and externally driven or institutionally coordinated intervention. When repertoire construction is deliberate, agents actively select, promote, and legitimize certain cultural options while suppressing or excluding others. This process, conceptualized as culture planning, involves not only the circulation of new materials but also their institutional reinforcement through mechanisms such as education, publishing, and distribution. In this sense, translation is not merely a channel of transfer but a key instrument through which planning is enacted, particularly when it operates in conjunction with organized structures of production and dissemination.

Furthermore, the processes of "import" and "transfer" highlighted by Even-Zohar (2010) provide an analytical framework for examining how foreign textual and epistemological models enter and are integrated into a target system. In the present study, these processes are examined through the selection of source texts, the choice of target languages, and the adaptation strategies employed in translation. These dimensions allow us to trace how particular forms of knowledge—such as Protestant

theology or Western scientific discourse—were not only introduced but also reshaped in accordance with local conditions and institutional objectives.

In addition to Even-Zohar's framework, Gideon Toury's emphasis on the role of agents offers a crucial analytical extension. Toury (2002, p. 151) foregrounds the importance of individuals and institutions in shaping translational activity within a given culture. Building on this perspective, the present study conceptualizes missionaries not simply as translators, but as "agents of change" who operated across multiple domains, including education, publishing, and linguistic standardization. This expanded notion of agency makes it possible to analyze translation as a coordinated and multi-layered practice, rather than a series of isolated textual operations.

Building on these theoretical considerations, the analysis is organized around a set of interrelated dimensions. At one level, it examines how translation participates in the expansion and reorganization of the cultural repertoire through the introduction of new textual forms, genres, and discourses. At another level, it considers how processes of selection, adaptation, and dissemination may indicate forms of culture planning, through which certain elements are promoted while others are marginalized. In parallel, the analysis foregrounds the role of translational agency, focusing on how missionaries operated as multi-layered actors within institutional structures. Finally, it addresses the linguistic and pedagogical implications of translation, particularly in relation to processes of language formation, standardization, and the embedding of translation within educational practices. Taken together, these dimensions provide an analytical framework for examining the American Board's activities.

### 3. Establishment of the ABCFM

American missionary work emerged within the wider religious environment of the early nineteenth century, a period shaped by a wave of Protestant evangelical revivals known collectively as the Second Great Awakening. This movement, viewed as a continuation of the earlier First Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s, significantly reshaped American Christianity and expanded its social and cultural reach. While the First Great Awakening had transformed the religious and intellectual life of the colonies before the American Revolution, the Second Great Awakening generated widespread popular enthusiasm—drawing vast crowds, stimulating renewed spiritual fervor, and producing unprecedented increases in church membership. This "awakening" also stimulated a wave of social activism that led to the foundation of several societies and missionary organizations, including the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (Doğan, 2013, pp. 19-20; McGrew, 2015, p. 3).

The ABCFM (1810) was the first foreign mission board founded in the United States, as well as being the largest in the nineteenth century. "The object of the Board" the ABCFM announced "is *one*—the promulgation of Christianity among the heathen. The means, by which this object is designed to be effected, are two kinds; -the publication and distribution of the Scriptures in the different languages of the nations; and the

support of faithful missionaries to explain, exemplify, and impress on the mind, the great truths which the Scriptures contain” (Doğan, 2013, p. 30).

In the American Board’s organizational structure, the mission—rather than the country—functioned as the principal administrative unit. Each mission drafted its own constitution and by-laws and, through annual meetings, defined its objectives, strategies, and programs of activity (Kocabaşoğlu, 1989, pp. 53–54). Missionaries regularly assessed local conditions, reported to Boston, and maintained close contact with government officials (Yıldız, 2015, p. 29).

For administrative purposes, missions were divided into stations and out-stations. Stations, typically located in urban centers and supervised by a missionary, managed their own warehouses, accounts, printed materials, translators, and staff (Kocabaşoğlu 1989: 54). They carried out administrative, educational, and pastoral duties, supervised schools and other funded institutions, managed printing activities, and reported political, social, and environmental conditions to Boston (Kocabaşoğlu, 1989, pp. 53–54). Out-stations, situated in towns or villages and overseen by local Christians, lacked executive authority and operated under the directives of their mission and the American Board (Yıldız, 2015, pp. 25–26).

This highly centralized and hierarchical organizational structure enabled the American Board to coordinate its activities across a wide geographical area. Within this global missionary network, missionaries were sent to numerous countries and American possessions; among these fields, the Middle East acquired particular prominence, as the Ottoman Empire’s vast and interconnected territories constituted a strategically crucial arena for the Board’s evangelical, cultural, and educational ambitions.

#### **4. The ABCFM in the Ottoman Empire: A Translational and Institutional Framework**

Early relations between the Ottoman Empire and the United States emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, mainly through commercial and maritime interests. Seeking safe Mediterranean trade routes, the United States viewed the Ottoman Empire as an important diplomatic partner. Official diplomatic ties were established in 1830 (Erhan, 2000, p.191). Beyond commerce, two institutions—the U.S. Navy and American missionaries—played key roles in expanding the American presence in the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century (Kocabaşoğlu, 1989, p.12). Missionary activity began well before the establishment of formal diplomatic relations and laid much of the groundwork for the subsequent expansion of American presence.

The first American Protestant missionaries assigned to the Ottoman Empire, Levi Parsons and Pliny Fisk, arrived in İzmir in 1820. Proficient in several languages, including Turkish, Arabic, Greek, and French, their initial task was to assess local conditions and introduce the Christian mission (McGrew, 2015, p.5). Anatolia soon emerged as a central focus of missionary activity. This strategic importance was explicitly articulated in the opening sentence of the 1880 Bartlett Report: “In terms of missionary work, Turkey is

the key to Asia.”<sup>2</sup> The weakening of central authority, political and economic instability, declining territorial control, and continuous territorial losses in the Ottoman Empire created favorable conditions for missionary activity in Anatolia.

The activities of missions were organized around four main areas: (1) language-related activities, focused on acquiring proficiency in local languages such as Turkish, Armenian, Bulgarian and Greek, regarded as the missionary’s primary instrument; (2) book preparation activities, including the compilation, translation, editing, and production of printed materials for missionary, educational, and religious purposes; (3) educational activities, encompassing both formal and informal instruction—secular and religious—through lessons, seminars, lectures, and classroom teaching; and (4) community engagement, which required missionaries to interact closely with the local population by participating in everyday social life (Kocabaşoğlu, 1989, pp. 50–51).

American missionaries initially targeted Muslim and Jewish communities, but practical, legal, and social constraints soon forced a shift (Şafak, 2003, p.67; Akgün, 1986, 2122; Nossner, 1929, p.16). Muslims who converted faced severe penalties, and Jewish communities were largely unreceptive. Consequently, missionaries focused on Christian minorities—Armenians, Syriac Christians, Chaldeans, Nestorians in Anatolia, and Greeks, Bulgarians, and Serbs in Western Anatolia and the Balkans. Given that nearly half of the Ottoman Empire’s population consisted of Greeks, Armenians, and Bulgarians, the Board naturally prioritized its activities toward these communities (Kocabaşoğlu, 1989, p.120). Among them, the American Board was particularly active with the Armenians, whose dispersed settlement patterns, relatively weak communal organization, and the restrictive practices of the Gregorian Church facilitated a shift toward Protestantism. (Doğan, 2013, p.34). One of the Board’s founders, C. Young, described the Armenians as an “open door” for extending influence within the Ottoman Empire (Şafak, 2003, p.63). Greeks and Bulgars subsequently also became targets of missionary activity. This shift occurred within a broader historical context in which minority communities across the Empire were increasingly shaped by the rise of nationalist movements. In particular, the Armenian, Greek, and Bulgarian uprisings further strengthened ethnic consciousness, shaping both missionary strategies and educational initiatives (Akgün, 1986, p. 2122).

Beginning in the 1840s, missionary activity increasingly centered on the Armenians, whom missionaries characterized as the “Anglo-Saxons of the East” (Kocabaşoğlu, 1989, p. 76). With the promulgation of the Tanzimat Edict in 1839 and the Imperial Reform Edict of 1856, both of which expanded the religious rights of non-Muslim communities, American missionaries were able to extend their activities over a wider geographical area and conduct their work with significantly fewer restrictions (Kocabaşoğlu, 1989, p. 72). In 1850, with the support of the missionaries, the Protestant community was granted *millet* status (Yıldız, 2015). This growing institutional

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<sup>2</sup> Between the early years of the mission and 1895, 540 Board missionaries served in the Ottoman Empire, of whom 427—approximately 79%—worked exclusively in Anatolia. By the end of the nineteenth century, this number had increased to around 450 (Kocabaşoğlu, 1989, p.39).

recognition was accompanied by an increasingly systematic territorial organization of missionary activities.

In 1860, all missionary activities in Anatolia were reorganized into three missions, a structure that remained unchanged until the end of the century. These missions were the Western Turkey Mission, the Central Turkey Mission, and the Eastern Turkey Mission. By 1870, the number of mission stations had increased from five to seventeen, with the network of out-stations expanding to over 180. The missions spread eastward, with Istanbul serving as the central base (Yıldız, 2015, pp. 26–28; Kocabaşoğlu, 1989, p. 95). This territorial organization largely corresponded to regions where the Armenian population was most concentrated.

Taken together, these activities suggest that missionary work in the Ottoman Empire cannot be reduced to religious or educational initiatives alone. Rather, they point to a structured form of translational practice, in which language acquisition, textual production, and social interaction functioned as interconnected mechanisms of cultural mediation. This perspective becomes particularly significant when examined in relation to broader processes of cultural planning and repertoire formation, which will be discussed in the following sections.

## **5. Missionary Translation Practices and Multilingual Mediation**

Missionary translators within the ABCFM were typically highly multilingual figures whose activities extended well beyond the act of textual translation. They operated across multiple linguistic domains, employing different languages for preaching, education, interpersonal communication, and translation. This functional multilingualism enabled them to move flexibly between source languages, intermediary lingua francas, and local vernaculars, facilitating direct engagement with diverse speech communities. Translation functioned not as an isolated task but as a central and organizing element within a broader linguistic practice that also encompassed teaching, editorial revision, and linguistic mediation. Such versatility was not incidental but structurally necessary, as missionary translation presupposed sustained engagement with multiple written and spoken languages and required translators to navigate complex linguistic hierarchies within the Ottoman multilingual landscape (Prime, 1877, p. 84). The practical implications of this multilingual regime are particularly evident in the daily working practices of missionary translators, as illustrated by the following passage from the journal of William Goodell, who served for many years in Anatolia and was a leading figure in nineteenth-century missionary translation activities:

We almost daily read the Scriptures in Ancient Greek, Modern Greek, Ancient Armenian, Modern Armenian, Turkish Armenian (or Armeno-Turkish), Arabic, Italian, and English, and frequently hear them read in Syriac, Hebrew, and French. Seldom do we sit down to our meals without hearing conversation at the table in Armenian, Greek, Arabic, Turkish, Italian, and English, and prayer daily ascends from this house — I hope to heaven — in all these languages, excepting the Italian. In translating the Scriptures, we have open before us the Bible in Ancient and Modern Greek, Ancient and Modern

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Armenian, Turkish, Armeno-Turkish, English, two translations in Arabic and three in Italian, and occasionally Hebrew and Syriac. (as cited in Prime, 1877, p. 84)

In practice, translation within the framework of the ABCFM was not confined to missionary personnel alone. Local actors—particularly speakers of minority languages—were actively incorporated into the translation process and contributed their linguistic expertise to the production of biblical and educational texts (Prime, 1877, p. 269). In his journal, Goodell notes (as cited in Prime 1877, p. 16):

To aid me in the work, I have a Greek, an Armenian, and a Mussulman ; and as those who might escape the sword of Hazael were to be slain by Jehu, and those who might escape the sword of Jehu were to be slain by Elisha, so I hope that whatever errors may escape the notice of any one of my helpers will be detected by another.

Naturally, the most important materials to be translated and distributed among the ‘nominal Christians,’ according to American missionaries, were the Bible and the relevant religious tracts, sermons, and gospel materials in the vernacular. Consequently, one of the first institutional initiatives of the ABCFM was the establishment of translation committees in different regions, tasked with translating the Bible and other sacred texts into local languages and overseeing their dissemination (Doğan, 2013; Prime, 1877). However, biblical translation proved to be neither a rapid nor a finite undertaking. On the contrary, the translation of the Bible often extended over two to three decades, involving multiple stages of drafting, revision, and correction. These translations were repeatedly reworked in response to linguistic debates, doctrinal concerns, and changing perceptions of local readerships, rendering biblical translation a continuous and evolving process rather than a completed product (Prime, 1877, p. 473). The translations were “first issued in parts in small editions, intended partly to supply the existing demand and partly to secure criticisms and to leave room for corrections arising from comparison of the different parts of the Bible” (Doğan, 2013, p. 156).

The Bible was translated into a wide range of languages, including, but not limited to, Modern Armenian, Armeno-Turkish, Ottoman Turkish, Bulgarian, Classical Armenian, Kurdish, and Hebrew (Burnet, 1853, p. 205). Despite this wide range of target languages, the translation of the Bible into Turkish posed particular challenges. William Goodell emphasized the linguistic and stylistic difficulties involved in rendering biblical texts into Turkish, especially with regard to idiomatic expression, register, and the selection of appropriate lexical equivalents (as cited in Prime, 1877, pp.16-17). Goodell attributes these difficulties not only to linguistic factors but also to the broader religious-linguistic culture of the Ottoman context. He notes that rendering biblical concepts into Turkish was problematic at both the level of everyday vocabulary and that of abstract theological terminology, which frequently appeared unfamiliar or stylistically inappropriate. Since the Qur’an had never been translated into Turkish in a form recognized as authoritative, religious discourse remained tied to an ancient and sacralized language rather than the language of everyday communication. Goodell suggested that, had Turkish been long used in Islamic worship through an accepted Qur’anic translation, many religious terms and expressions would have already been naturalized, thereby facilitating the translation of the Bible into Turkish (as cited in

Prime, 1877, pp. 16-17). These constraints also help to explain the Board's increasing investment in lexicographical and linguistic infrastructure. In this context, Redhouse's Bible translations and dictionary projects (English-Turkish, Turkish-English), undertaken at the request of the American Board, can be understood as concrete efforts to address the lexical gaps and stylistic uncertainties that hindered Turkish biblical translation (Tuncer, 2012, p. 3).

Such initiatives, however, were not unique to Turkish. Translation activities frequently extended beyond the rendering of religious works to include the preparation of alphabets, grammars, and dictionaries, especially for languages that lacked standardized written conventions such as Armenian and Bulgarian. Over many years, missionary translators played a central role in these efforts, contributing not only to biblical translation but also to the grammatical and lexicographical codification of several vernaculars within the missionary enterprise. For example, Elias Riggs<sup>3</sup>, who served for many years in Anatolia and was a highly influential figure within the American missionary enterprise, authored a series of influential linguistic works, including *Notes on the Grammar of the Bulgarian Language* (1844), *A Brief Grammar of the Modern Armenian Language as Spoken in Constantinople and Asia Minor* (1847), *A Vocabulary of Words Used in Modern Armenian but not Found in the Ancient Armenian Lexicons* (1847), *Correct Method of Speaking the Modern Armenian Language* (1853), and *Outline of a Grammar of the Turkish Language as Written in the Armenian Character* (1856). These practices indicate that missionary translation functioned not merely as a means of textual transfer but as a form of language planning carried out under religious and institutional auspices. Through translation, printing, and pedagogical use, selected vernaculars were codified, standardized, and integrated into emerging educational and print networks. Translation thus operated as a mechanism of linguistic intervention, shaping which languages and varieties were rendered visible, teachable, and reproducible.

In the Anatolian context, the most clearly observable effects of this process emerged among Armenian and Bulgarian communities. The contribution of ABCFM missionaries to the development of minority languages in Anatolia can also be observed in contemporary assessments of missionary translation activities. For instance, a member of the Gregorian Church wrote in an Armenian journal published in London that Riggs's Armenian translation of the Bible had "laid the foundations of our modern Armenian" (Doğan, 2013, pp. 161–162). Another missionary-translator, Cyrus Hamlin, who served for many years in Istanbul and played a pivotal role in the establishment of Bebek Seminary and Robert College, described the influence of the mission on the Armenian language as follows (1893, pp. 249–250):

An able and accomplished professor of the Armenian language and literature was always employed. One's native language, his native tongue, must be his chief instrument of

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to serving as editor of two religious journals—*Avedaper* in Armenian and *Zornitza* in Bulgarian—Elias Riggs produced a wide range of publications for missionary use within the Ottoman Empire. He also participated in the Turkish Bible translation committee and devoted many years to the translation of the Bible into Armenian and Bulgarian (Doğan, 2013, p. 2).

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thought and expression. Our course gave a great impulse to the cultivation of the Armenian language. We found it clay and iron, and we left it gold. I only claim that the seminary at Bebek had a part and an honorable part in the renaissance of the language. The entire influence of the mission went in that direction.

The implications of this form of language planning extended beyond the immediate objective of evangelical dissemination. By stabilizing particular vernaculars as written and printable languages, missionary translation contributed to the consolidation of language-based communities. In line with Benedict Anderson's (1991) emphasis on the relationship between print culture and imagined communities, missionary presses did not merely disseminate religious content; they also helped create shared linguistic spaces through the repetitive circulation of texts in standardized vernaculars. Through translations, textbooks, newspapers, and religious publications, languages such as Armenian increasingly acquired a more regularized written form and a broader reading public. In this respect, missionary publishing contributed not only to literacy and religious instruction but also to the formation of a collective linguistic consciousness among dispersed populations. This broader cultural and linguistic impact has also been emphasized in studies focusing specifically on Armenian print culture. Barbara Merguerian (1998, p. 49) argues that missionary translation and publishing activities among Armenians stimulated a broader expansion of Armenian-language print culture, leading to a substantial increase in the production of books and periodicals. She further maintains that "the development of the Western Armenian became a significant component of the growth of Armenian nationalism in this period" (Merguerian 1998, p. 49) .

A similar impact can be observed in Elias Riggs's work on the Bulgarian Bible, where his translation efforts were likewise considered formative for the development of modern Bulgarian as a written language. It was emphasized that this translation played an important role in "the regeneration of a nation." Constantine Stephanove claimed that the Bulgarian Bible "meant the resuscitation of the Bulgarian nation from the fetters of Hellenism, the triumph of the Bulgarian language, [the] Bulgarian National Church and schools, over the deadliest and secular enemy of the Bulgarian race" (1919, p. 300)

Beyond biblical publications, the Board's printing activities increasingly included educational materials that supported its expanding school network. Missionaries prepared textbooks and handbooks for use in Board schools and colleges in subjects such as arithmetic, geography, grammar, algebra, geometry, astronomy, physiology, intellectual philosophy, and the natural sciences (Richter, 1910, p. 109; Kocabaşoğlu, 1989, p. 154; Gümüş, 2017, p.35). This expanding curricular repertoire closely paralleled the educational reforms pursued by the Ottoman state during the nineteenth century, particularly its efforts to introduce modern sciences and standardized textbooks into state schools. These materials were produced within a missionary framework and were often accompanied by religious instruction. At the same time, however, they addressed many of the same pedagogical needs that the Ottoman educational administration was attempting to meet through its own reform initiatives.

At the same time, the effectiveness of translation as the intellectual and linguistic foundation of the Board's activities depended on its transformation into widely accessible printed materials. Translation alone was insufficient without the institutional mechanisms that enabled reproduction, circulation, and sustained readership. For this reason, missionary translation was inseparable from the Board's printing and publishing practices, which functioned as the primary means through which translated texts entered everyday religious, educational, and social life.

## **6. Translation, Print Culture, and the Circulation of Knowledge**

Printing and publishing constituted a crucial dimension of missionary activity, serving as one of the most effective means of shaping public opinion and disseminating religious teachings, ideas, and ideological perspectives. Pamphlets and books—including schoolbooks—enabled missionaries to reach diverse audiences and cultivate relationships with local communities. Fully aware of this, the ABCFM invested substantial resources in the expansion of its printing operations.

Given that most missionary publications consisted of translated rather than original texts, translation emerged as a central component of missionary printing and publishing practices. This translational orientation was evident from the very outset of American Board activity in the Ottoman Empire. When the missionaries entered Ottoman territories in 1822, they brought a printing press with them and established their first printing center on Malta. During its four-and-a-half years of operation, the Malta press produced approximately eight million pages in multiple languages, including Italian, modern Greek, Bulgarian and Armeno-Turkish (Greene, 1916, p. 136; Selimler, 2023, p. 62). In 1833, the press was relocated to İzmir, where nearly twenty million pages—predominantly in Armenian—were printed (Greene, 1916, p. 136; Gümüş, 2017, p. 35). Based on average page counts, volumes, and print runs, this output corresponds to roughly 200 books. When compared with the fact that fewer than 500 books were published in the Ottoman Empire between the establishment of İbrahim Müteferrika's press in 1729 and the Tanzimat period in 1839, the scale and significance of missionary publishing—and its reliance on translation—become particularly evident (Kocabaşoğlu, 1989, p. 89).

In 1853, the printing press was relocated to Istanbul, which soon became the central hub of missionary publishing and translation activities. From this center, translated texts were distributed to mission stations across Anatolia, facilitating the geographical expansion of missionary work. By the final quarter of the nineteenth century, the ABCFM was producing publications in twenty-three languages worldwide. Nearly half of this multilingual output was translated and printed within the Ottoman Empire, with Anatolia accounting for a particularly large share. (Kocabaşoğlu, 1989, p. 146).

Beyond biblical texts, missionaries produced a wide range of translated auxiliary materials, including manuals, concordances, and commentaries, to support both evangelical and educational activities. The output of the Malta, İzmir, and Istanbul presses underscores the central role of translation-based printing in missionary work:

from their establishment until 1881, these presses produced a total of 725 books, brochures, tracts, and related publications, distributed across languages as follows (Kocabaşoğlu, 1989, p. 147):

**Table 1**

*Number of materials translated by missionaries*

| Language                           | Number |
|------------------------------------|--------|
| Armenian                           | 193    |
| Turkish written in Armenian script | 155    |
| Romaic                             | 141    |
| Turkish written in Greek script    | 32     |
| Bulgarian                          | 100    |
| Italian                            | 40     |
| Turkish written in Arabic script   | 35     |
| Ladino                             | 29     |

Of these publications, about one hundred were direct Bible translations or other religious works, while approximately seventy were textbooks or supplementary instructional materials (Kocabaşoğlu, 1989, p. 147). Taken together, the output of the Malta, İzmir, and Istanbul presses provides a clear picture of the linguistic and translational priorities of the Board. While most of the books were translated into Armenian—the language spoken by the minority community on which the missionaries concentrated most intensely—substantial numbers were also produced in other languages, which highlights the Board’s engagement with additional local communities in Anatolia.

This diversification of genres and languages at the central level was accompanied by efforts to localize missionary publishing through presses established in strategically important provincial stations. One of the most significant examples was the printing press founded in Antep in 1880, the principal station of the Central Turkey Mission. In its first year, the press produced over 500,000 pages, and its output exceeded one million pages in the following year. Initially set up in a corner of the director’s house at Central Turkey College, the press published materials in Armenian, Kurdish, and English. Among its earliest publications were an English–Armenian Reader (1,200 copies), an English Grammar (3,000 copies), a Kurdish Hymn Book (660 copies), an Armenian Reader (5,000 copies), and an Armenian Arithmetic Book (3,000 copies) (Kocabaşoğlu, 1989).

When total print runs and subsequent reprints are taken into account, the number of copies reaches into the millions. In 1898 alone, the combined output of the Istanbul, Antep, and Beirut presses amounted to roughly twenty-eight million pages (Kocabaşoğlu, 1989, p. 147). From 1822 to the end of the nineteenth century, American missionary presses produced more than six hundred million pages. Of this total, slightly over forty million pages came from the Malta and İzmir presses, while the remainder was printed primarily in Istanbul and Beirut. Between 1880 and 1889, an annual average

of 23,000 books, brochures, or pamphlets were printed; this number rose to 39,000 annually in the 1890s. This intensive publishing activity continued uninterrupted until the outbreak of the First World War (Kocabaşoğlu, 1989, p. 148).

Publishing efforts also extended to periodicals, which themselves constituted an important site of translation activity and multilingual mediation. The mission press in Istanbul printed two journals: *Avedaper*, in Armenian and Armeno-Turkish, and *Zornitza*, in Bulgarian. *Avedaper*, launched in January 1855 as a 24-page weekly religious newspaper published in Armenian. From 1860 onward, it appeared in Armeno-Turkish for Turkish-speaking Armenians, and from 1872 in Turkish written in Greek characters for Turkish-speaking Greeks. A monthly periodical entitled *Children's Avedaper* was also produced (Gümüş, 2017, p. 36). By 1880, *Avedaper* had become one of the most influential periodicals in the Ottoman Empire, particularly among Armenian communities. Its publication in multiple linguistic forms contributed to its wide circulation, with an estimated readership of 20,000–30,000 (Yıldız, 2015, pp. 76–77). Alongside *Avedaper*, the ABCFM issued *Zornitza* (Day Star), a Bulgarian-language mission newspaper that circulated widely across the region. While primarily devoted to religious instruction, *Zornitza* also included translated material on travel, science, folklore, and history, thereby broadening its appeal beyond strictly evangelical concerns. Initially published as a monthly and later as a weekly periodical, *Zornitza* reached a diverse readership and entered social spaces otherwise inaccessible to Protestant missionaries. As the Board itself noted, the paper carried out missionary work “where no other agency could do it,” reaching hundreds of homes and mediating religious ideas through familiar linguistic and cultural forms (Doğan, 2013, pp. 131, 146).

Beyond the scale and diversity of missionary publications, the human and financial resources devoted to translation constituted a central component of the Board's missionary strategy. Alongside the technical staff employed at the presses, Armenian and Greek assistants—serving as translators, booksellers, and intermediaries—were recruited at the İzmir press and within the mission station to support both printing operations and broader missionary activities. Archival records from 1844, for example, provide detailed information on the names, duties, and annual salaries (in U.S. dollars) of these local assistants at the İzmir station (Demir, 2014, p. 100):

**Table 2**

*Local Translation and Distribution Staff at the ABCFM İzmir Station (1844)*

| Name              | Position            | Annual salary     |
|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Sarkis Ohannesyan | Armenian Translator | 500 \$            |
| Migirdiç Tomayan  | Armenian Translator | 372 \$            |
| Migirdiç Papazyan | Armenian Translator | 276 \$            |
| N. P. Petrokokino | Greek Translator    | 300 \$ (6 months) |
| I. A. Dellacasa   | Greek Translator    | 23 \$             |
| Antonio Dallessio | Book Distributor    | 156 \$            |

|        |                  |          |
|--------|------------------|----------|
| İsayah | Book Distributor | 312 \$   |
| Total  |                  | 1.939 \$ |

This structured investment in translators, intermediaries, and distributors indicates that translation was not treated as an ad hoc or auxiliary activity but as an organized and salaried form of labor within the missionary enterprise. Yet the circulation and reception of these translated materials depended not only on presses and personnel, but also on institutional spaces in which they could be taught, explained, and reproduced. In this respect, missionary schools constituted the second major pillar of the Board's translational infrastructure, providing both the pedagogical context for the use of translated texts and the training ground for future translators, teachers, and linguistic mediators.

## 7. Translation and Education: Pedagogical Functions of Missionary Schools

In the regions where missionaries expanded their activities, they established various institutions such as churches, orphanages, schools, nurseries, and health centers. Among these, schools were accorded particular importance. Missionaries believed that the dissemination of the Bible required the establishment of “civilized Christian institutions” and that literacy was essential for individuals to gain direct access to the Scriptures and their teachings (Nosser, 1929, p. 17). Within this framework, schools functioned as key sites for the introduction and circulation of biblical and instructional texts, many of which were produced or translated for local use. Through these materials, missionary influence extended beyond students themselves to their families and broader social circles (Doğan, 2013, p. 44).

Education constituted one of the foremost needs shared by people of all religions, denominations, and ethnic groups in the Ottoman Empire. Particularly in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, there was a marked demand for knowledge and schooling.<sup>4</sup> The legal, administrative, economic, and social transformations introduced by the Tanzimat further underscored the need for more qualified forms of education. The ABCFM rapidly recognized these conditions and systematically established schools across various regions of Anatolia. In the course of their educational activities, American missionaries not only administered and expanded their own institutions but also contributed to the development of other non-Muslim schools, with particular attention to Armenian and Greek communities (Yıldız, 2015, p. 102). Between 1824 and 1886, nearly 400 schools—most operating without official authorization—were founded by American missionaries in the Ottoman Empire (Şişman, 2006, p. 33). Student numbers continued to rise, reaching 23,474 by 1910 across a total of 430 schools (Yıldız, 2015, p.106).

<sup>4</sup> This demand was acknowledged by the Ottoman administration, and the first Western-style educational institutions emerged during the reigns of Selim III and Mahmud II (1789–1839) (Özmen, 2016).

In the early period, American missionaries adopted a predominantly religion-centered educational approach. From the final quarter of the nineteenth century onward, however, shifting social and educational demands prompted a gradual move away from theology-based schools aimed at training clergy toward more secular institutions. This transformation facilitated the introduction of Western-style schools and pedagogical methods into the Ottoman educational landscape, indicating that missionary activity involved not only the circulation of individuals and texts but also the institutional transfer of educational models.

One of the earliest educational initiatives undertaken by American missionaries was the establishment of 'Lancasterian-type' schools for minority communities. This preference was deliberate, as Lancasterian schools were widely popular in the early nineteenth century due to their cost-effective instructional model, in which more advanced pupils taught those at lower levels. By employing capable students as classroom assistants, the system enabled a single teacher to educate large numbers of pupils at minimal expense (Doğan, 2013, p. 53). In this context, the missionaries' first educational undertaking was the organization of four Lancasterian-type schools for the Greek community in Istanbul (Kocabaşoğlu, 1989, p. 59). Within approximately one year, the number of such schools increased to around thirty. The model was subsequently expanded to various regions of Anatolia—including Adana, Ankara, Bitlis, Erzurum, İzmit, Konya, Sivas, Van, Diyarbakır, and Merzifon—where schools for girls, boys, and mixed-gender education were established. Although initially designed for non-Muslim communities, Lancasterian-type schools were not confined exclusively to minority populations. In the course of the nineteenth century, similar institutions were also established for Turkish Muslim pupils, particularly in urban centers where educational reform and pedagogical experimentation were already underway (Prime, 1877, p. 164). Compared with contemporary Muslim and minority schools, missionary-run institutions appeared more attractive in terms of both instructional methods and educational materials. This advantage stemmed from their more participatory pedagogical approaches and relatively advanced teaching resources.

The political, social, and administrative transformations of the Tanzimat period were accompanied by far-reaching reforms in education. Alongside Lancasterian-type schools, the New England-style college model—rooted in the American educational tradition—began to exert an increasing influence within the Ottoman educational landscape. These colleges introduced a more advanced and relatively secular form of schooling, characterized by modern curricula, Western pedagogical methods, and multilingual instruction. In this respect, they differed markedly from traditional *medreses* and community-based schools, and translation emerged within these institutions not merely as an auxiliary skill but as a core educational practice.<sup>5</sup>

Beginning in the 1870s, the American missionary educational system gradually developed a dual structure consisting of religious (evangelical) and secular tracks. The religious track extended from primary and secondary education to theological

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<sup>5</sup> Prominent examples of this model include Robert College in Istanbul, Harput American College, the International College of Smyrna (İzmir), Anatolia College in Merzifon, Talas Boys' College, and the Bursa Girls' School.

seminaries, while the secular track advanced from primary and secondary schooling to the college level. Although the conceptual foundations of this dual structure were articulated in the 1870s, it was fully institutionalized during the 1880s.

An examination of missionary school curricula indicates a strong emphasis on multilingual education, within which translation formed an integral component of language instruction. Language teaching extended beyond basic literacy to include grammar, reading, composition, and, in several cases, translation exercises. Instruction was by no means confined to English; rather, missionary schools adopted a deliberately multilingual curriculum in which students were educated in several local and regional languages alongside English. This approach is evident, for example, in the curriculum of the girls' boarding school in Talas, which included courses such as Arithmetic, Armenian Grammar and Translation, Greek Grammar, Algebra, Geography, Physiology, Ottoman Turkish, Bible, Composition, *Miftah* (Ottoman Grammar), Old Testament History, and the Life of Jesus, alongside music courses (Kocabaşoğlu, 1989, p. 159). A similar structure can be observed in a high school in İzmit, where instruction was conducted in Armenian and English. The Armenian-language curriculum comprised Grammar, Reading, Composition, Classical Armenian Grammar and Translation, Literary History, and Reading and Composition in both Classical and Modern Armenian. The English-language curriculum included Elementary and Advanced Grammar, Etymology and Analysis, Reading, Syntax and Composition, English Literature, History, Philosophy, and Bible Studies. Taken together, these examples suggest that translation was embedded within broader language-learning practices and functioned as one of several instructional tools supporting multilingual education in missionary schools.

Beyond institutional frameworks, missionary schools invested substantially in human capital. Their graduates—including teachers, translators, administrators, and other educated intermediaries—often went on to occupy influential positions within both missionary institutions and local educational environments. By mediating between Western educational models and Ottoman society, these individuals facilitated the circulation of pedagogical norms and institutional practices beyond the missionary school system itself. Consequently, the impact of American Board education was transmitted not only through formal institutions and curricula but also through the subsequent professional and social trajectories of those trained within these schools (Yıldız, 2015, p. 239).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Western-style schools established by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) exerted a significant, though largely indirect, influence on the transformation of the Ottoman educational repertoire. Rather than seeking to replace existing institutions, these schools functioned as models of alternative educational practice, introducing new pedagogical approaches and curricular structures that gradually reshaped educational expectations within the Empire. By foregrounding secular knowledge alongside religious instruction, missionary schools articulated an educational vision that resonated with broader Ottoman reformist agendas, particularly those that took shape in the aftermath of the Tanzimat. This influence was reinforced through the material and organizational

presence of missionary schools. Purpose-built school buildings, well-equipped classrooms, printed textbooks, and access to libraries created a visible form of institutional competition with Ottoman state schools. Such competition did not go unnoticed by the Ottoman administration, which increasingly sought to regulate, monitor, and reform its own educational system in response. In this sense, American Board schools contributed indirectly to the acceleration of educational reform by exerting structural pressure on the state to modernize schooling practices and expand access to education.

Beyond their institutional and material impact, missionary schools also operated as sites of cultural and ideological mediation. Through education and translation, these institutions played a role in shaping communal identities and, in certain contexts, fostering emerging forms of national consciousness among minority populations. Education and print culture thus functioned not merely as technical tools but as central components of a broader missionary strategy aimed at cultural transformation, extending the influence of American Board schools well beyond the classroom.

## **8. Discussion: Translation, Cultural Repertoire and Planning in the Ottoman Context**

The findings of this study can be most effectively interpreted through the analytical framework outlined in the theoretical section, particularly with reference to the concepts of cultural repertoire, culture planning, and translational agency. Rather than treating the American Board's activities as a collection of isolated missionary practices, the analysis demonstrates that these activities constituted a coordinated intervention in the organization and transformation of the Ottoman cultural polysystem.

Within this perspective, the missions of the American Board can be understood as key sites of deliberate intervention in the host culture's repertoire. The Board's educational institutions, printing houses, and translation projects functioned as interconnected domains of cultural activity that enabled the circulation of new forms of knowledge and practice within the Ottoman cultural polysystem. These processes, however, did not operate uniformly but were shaped by specific linguistic and communal contexts, leading to differentiated patterns of cultural uptake.

This uneven process is most clearly observable in the expansion of the cultural repertoire through the systematic translation and dissemination of religious, educational, and scientific texts. Through these practices, the American Board introduced new textual genres, discursive forms, and epistemological models into the Ottoman context, including religious tracts, catechisms, school textbooks, and periodicals such as *Avedaper*. In line with Even-Zohar's (2010) conceptualization of "import" and "transfer," these materials can be understood as externally sourced cultural elements entering the system through translation. Their significance, however, lies not only in their introduction but also in their integration into local structures of use, particularly within schools and print networks. In this sense, translation enabled new cultural options to become available and operational within specific segments of society.

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The findings further suggest that processes of selection, translation, simplification, and dissemination contributed to a reconfiguration of the available cultural repertoire.

At the same time, these developments point to the role of translation in processes of cultural planning. The selection of source texts, the prioritization of particular target languages, and the emphasis on specific domains of knowledge reflect a coordinated effort to promote certain elements of the repertoire while limiting others. Translation thus emerges as a strategic instrument through which the American Board influenced what became readable, teachable, and legitimate within the system, thereby reshaping cultural hierarchies and value structures. In this respect, missionary activity can be understood as a form of culture planning in Even-Zohar's sense.

These processes were further shaped by the role of translational agency. Translation was not carried out by isolated individuals but by actors operating within institutional frameworks. Missionaries functioned simultaneously as translators, educators, editors, and publishers, exerting influence across multiple stages of cultural production. This multi-layered agency allowed them to shape not only the production of translated materials but also their circulation and reception, positioning them as active participants in the transformation of cultural norms and practices.

The implications of these dynamics are also evident in processes of language formation and standardization. The repeated translation of religious and educational materials into Armenian and Bulgarian contributed to the stabilization of these languages. Through revision, pedagogical use, and print reproduction, linguistic forms were codified and disseminated across broader communities, indicating that translation played a constitutive role in the development of linguistic infrastructures.

Equally significant are the pedagogical and epistemological dimensions of translation. The integration of translated materials into educational settings shaped not only language acquisition but also practices of reading, interpretation, and knowledge production. Embedded within institutional routines, translation contributed to the internalization of new cognitive and cultural frameworks, extending its impact beyond texts to the formation of subjectivities. The use of translated textbooks and catechisms, for example, promoted structured, text-centered learning practices and standardized modes of knowledge transmission.

Taken together, these findings indicate that translation functioned not as a neutral linguistic operation but as a mechanism of intervention in the Ottoman cultural system. By shaping the circulation of knowledge, structuring educational practices, and contributing to the formation of linguistic and epistemic frameworks, translation played a central role in broader processes of sociocultural transformation. These findings, while grounded in a specific historical and institutional context, point to broader implications for understanding translation as a structuring force in processes of cultural and epistemic transformation.

## 9. Conclusion

This study has sought to reposition missionary translation in the Ottoman Empire by approaching it not as a secondary textual activity, but as a historically situated and institutionally embedded practice. By shifting the analytical focus from individual translations to the broader configurations in which they were produced, circulated, and used, the study reframes translation as a central mechanism in broader processes of sociocultural transformation.

In this respect, the study highlights the broader implications of missionary translation for understanding how cultural and epistemic transformations are structured. Missionary translation emerges not only as a practice of mediation between languages but also as a process that shaped modes of reading, learning, and knowledge formation. This perspective invites a reconsideration of translation as an active component in the organization of cultural and intellectual life, particularly in multilingual and reform-oriented contexts.

More broadly, the study contributes to ongoing debates in translation studies by foregrounding the role of institutional and historical conditions in shaping translational activity. It suggests that the impact of translation cannot be fully understood without accounting for the infrastructures, agents, and systems of dissemination that enable its operation. In doing so, it aligns with and further advances approaches that move beyond text-centered models toward a more expansive understanding of translation as a socially embedded practice.

Finally, this study points to several directions for future research. Further investigation into the reception of translated materials across different communities would provide a more nuanced understanding of how such interventions were appropriated, negotiated, or resisted. Comparative studies across different missionary or imperial contexts could help determine the extent to which similar dynamics emerge elsewhere. In addition, closer attention to micro-level translational practices—such as strategies of adaptation, revision, and paratextual framing—would complement the broader perspective developed here and deepen our understanding of translation as both a systemic and situated practice.

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