CHAPTER 1.1

Introduction

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This part opens our presentation of the phenomenon of plurilingualism by focusing on the phenomenon itself, and on how the existence of linguistic diversity was acknowledged, in stories, texts, and correspondence, in various cultures and periods. Exemplary texts demonstrate some of the ways in which scholars attempted to devise various kinds of causal explanations in order to account for the ubiquity of plurilingualism. We see that some scholars implied or asserted specific evaluations, which could be moralistic, or more philosophically analytic. Some concentrated on the social ramifications, either divisive or cohesive, to which plurilingualism could be thought to lead, while others were more concerned with the opportunities for amusement provided by the translation process. The following pages provide a brief introduction to a few of the more important themes and contents of the specific texts that are presented in this part; the reader curious to know more about linguistic diversity as a phenomenon in human history and throughout the world is referred to the general introduction of this volume, which provides further material concerning the history and theory of language diversity in general terms.

For the history of reflection on plurilingualism in the Western tradition, the story of the Tower of Babel in the Hebrew Bible (Chapter 1.2) has been an indispensable foundation and an unfailing source of inspiration. A volume on plurilingualism could hardly begin with a more appropriate text. The diversity of languages is revealed here not to be the original human condition, but a later, vastly inferior state resulting from divine punishment of human arrogance, and it is associated with the spatial dispersal of humankind throughout the world. Earlier than and differently from any available historical experience, humans are imagined to have once lived together and been able to understand one another because they all spoke the same language; by contrast, in the real world that we see and have always known, languages are diverse and distances are vast. Even put in these terms, there are oddities about this story. What exactly is the relation implied between the multiplication of languages and the scattering of peoples? Would it not have been enough, if Jahweh had wanted to be sure of thwarting human ambitions, for him just to have made people incomprehensible to one another, without addi-

tionally dispersing them in space? And for that matter, why should speaking the same language have entailed mutual understanding in the first place? In our world, it is a manifest fact that it very often does not. And why should speaking different languages result necessarily in mutual incomprehension? Are there not interpreters and translators and dictionaries available in abundance?

Part of the effectiveness of this story resides precisely in its sovereign disregard for such everyday considerations. It focuses our attention instead upon what we might call the metaphysical dimension of language as an instrument of social power, and it answers the fundamental but implicit human question of why it is that humans do not have the power of gods, by responding that it is because they live apart from one another and speak different languages. For part of the tradition that arises from this story, spatial dispersion and linguistic diversity are nothing more than challenges to be overcome, contingent handicaps that must and can be vanquished by the very same human effort and presumption that led to their imposition as divine punishments in the first place: ever faster mechanisms of spatial locomotion and ever more encompassing global languages are the technical devices by which many humans have attempted in vain to transpose the fictive mirage of a single monolingual community from a mythic origin to a utopian future. But the capital of Esperanto is always Babel; the name "Esperanto" may mean "hope" but its destiny is always failure.

In fact, the story of the Tower of Babel is only one of two reflections on the origin of language to be found in the Hebrew Bible, and it needs to be read together with that other passage for its full significance to be revealed. In Genesis 2:18, Jahweh decides that the human he has created, Adam, needs a helper. So in the following verse (2:19) He produces out of the ground all the wild animals and birds and brings them to Adam in order to see what he would call them: and whatever name Adam decided to call them, this was to be their name. (In fact, Jahweh had already created all the land animals at Genesis 1:24, and their existence, together with the fish and birds, is presupposed at 1:26.) In the next verse (2:20) Adam gives names to each species of birds and of wild and domestic animals; but it turns out that none of them can be the kind of suitable helper that Jahweh sought for Adam, so He puts Adam to sleep and creates Eve as his suitable helpmate.

Adam's language is freely invented by human imposition, is apparently limited to the names of the species of living things, and is intended as part of a divine project to provide a social community for the single human being that Jahweh had first created. Of course this attempt fails—animals cannot speak back to Adam, neither can they share his language nor can there be any possi-

bility of translation between them. Adam can call a dog, "dog," but a dog cannot call Adam anything except "woof." So Eve will have to be invented as a necessary supplement in order to provide the first human interlocutor for Adam, and all future human linguistic communities will grow out of this first absolutely monolingual family. Is the language of Adam the Hebrew that he seems to have spoken with Jahweh, and if so, is it the same language that would later go on to be spoken by the builders of Babel? Or was Adam's language a kind of primordial Hebrew, different from all later versions? To put the question differently: was Hebrew one of the languages of the post-Babel babble? The story raises this question, but it does not answer it.

In any case, the story of the Tower of Babel interprets this Adamic primitive language from the perspective of the real inescapability of plurilingualism and from the conviction of the fundamentally hubristic nature of mankind. If the language of Adam was a failed attempt on the part of Jahweh to create a community of all living beings of which man was only a privileged part, the language of Babel is an equally unsuccessful attempt, this time on the part of mankind, to create a powerful dominion in which it is man who will become the ruler over the gods. It is worth noticing in this connection that the story tells of both a city and a tower, and that it mentions them both twice. If the city represents the human ambition to live in one place (which is thwarted by the scattering of humans throughout the world), what does the tower signify? Is it merely symbolic, something to indicate human ambitions that stretch up high above the earth? Would Jahweh have really been so worried about a mere symbol? But a tower can also have a highly practical function: and in fact *migdal*, the word for "tower" in this passage, can also signify a siege tower, of the sort that had been used since the eleventh century BCE by the Babylonians and Assyrians to attack the heavily fortified cities of their enemies. Perhaps then what really worries Jahweh, sitting enthroned in anxious splendor in his heavenly city, is not the city down there on the earth that humans are building in Babel, but the tower that he can see rising up as it grows daily and that threatens someday to loom menacingly above his very own walls.

This Hebrew story is not unique, either in its positing of an original natural monolingualism, out of which the multiplicity of existing languages developed by diversification, or in its negative evaluation of real plurilingualism; but, compared with the other selections presented in this part, it is quite unusual in its drastically moralistic condensation and systematic interweaving of these two themes.

By contrast, the Greek sources presented here tend to employ what we might term historical or philosophical approaches in trying to come to an understand-

ing of the phenomenon of plurilingualism. That is, they attempt to integrate this single phenomenon into the context of a larger account either of the gradual development of human civilizations or of the causal processes that determine observable biological and cultural facts. Of course this does not mean that the conclusions at which these texts arrive can be viewed as being largely acceptable by modern linguistics, history, or other sciences: our own basis of evidence is now much vaster than theirs and over the centuries modern scholarship has tried to develop more highly refined canons of argumentation. And yet the degree to which these Greek accounts tend to eschew drastic moralization in favor of larger explanatory hypotheses is striking.

To be sure, *barbaros*, the Greek term for people who speak languages other than Greek, is generally pejorative. But this common ancient usage does not reflect any sort of condemnation of plurilingualism per se but instead a remarkably complacent Greek sense of pride in what the Greeks themselves, especially after their successful resistance to the Persian invasions of the early fifth century BCE, perceived to be their own cultural superiority compared with the other peoples with whom they came into contact around the Mediterranean. No ancient Greek ever suggested that Greek should become the universal language, nor that world peace would be established or that foreigners would be improved if they were made to learn Greek.

Herodotus (Chapter 1.3) devotes considerable attention to language as an important social institution that provides a crucial contribution to characterizing the peoples he describes in his ethnographic and historical work. Herodotus's world is one that is filled with a fascinating plurality of languages, all different, all remarkable. While his own linguistic interest in other languages (and in his own) tends to be restricted to nouns, and especially to proper names such as those of the gods, it is noteworthy that he does not hesitate to derive Greek words and institutions from non-Greek cultures, and that in his panoramic historical generosity he not only imagines long-term sweeping linguistic developments but can even conceive that the Athenians themselves, autochthonic though they were, might once have spoken not the Athenian language but a different one he calls Pelasgian. We may guess that in at least some of these cases Herodotus wants to astonish his Athenian audiences by uncovering for them the non-Greek roots of their most cherished usages and institutions—and yet the very fact that he did so with such extraordinary success remains an important testimony to the implicit limits of Greek monolingualism. Four centuries later, at the end of the first century BCE, Strabo (Chapter 1.7) shows how the science of ancient geography, which had undergone considerable development in the wake of Alexander the Great's expeditions in the fourth century BCE, continued to discuss the question of what it meant

to speak a 'barbarian' language, still in terms of Homer and now too in those of the Carian people.

If Herodotus and Strabo show the Greeks using the tools of ethnography and history in trying to come to terms with the plurilingualism they perceived all around them, the other Greek sources presented here testify to the attempts of philosophers to explain the existence of language diversity. Plato in his *Cratylus* (Chapter 2.3) had already discussed at length the topics of the origin of language(s) and the source of the validity of words, concluding that the names for things had been established by primordial name-givers but leaving unanswered the question whether they had done so by following nature or convention. Epicurus (Chapter 1.4) develops a complex model for explaining how language(s) originated: a first stage of a primitive language that arose spontaneously from nature (after all, birds and other animals produce sounds too) is followed by a gradual development over the course of various phases guided by convention. Language is a purely human achievement that is ultimately founded entirely upon nature. On this model, linguistic diversity can easily be explained in terms of the variety of natural circumstances that obtained at the beginning of the evolutionary process: every language reflects the natural environment of its speakers. A similar but rather simpler model is provided by Epicurus's Roman follower Lucretius (Chapter 1.4): his account of the development of language is an important chapter in the progress of human civilization, but here what counts exclusively is the ultimate origin of human languages in unreflected natural sounds (in this case, those emitted by infants), and there is no place at all for conventionalist interventions into this natural legacy. By contrast, for the first-century BCE historian Diodorus of Sicily (Chapter 1.6), whose views may well go back ultimately to the fifth-century BCE Presocratic philosopher Democritus, primitive language does indeed arise spontaneously as a fact of nature among the first humans, who are exposed to the dangers of their natural surroundings, but the diversity of languages attested throughout the world is entirely the result of convention, the agreement of local communities to use certain words to designate particular objects. In general, with the sole but important exception of Epicurus, who ascribed different languages to different natural environments, Greek philosophers tended to invoke local convention as their favored explanation for linguistic diversity.

Chinese reflections on the diversity of languages, as evinced in the texts presented in this part, display some noteworthy affinities with the Hebrew and Greek sources we have discussed so far, but also certain characteristic differences in conception and emphasis. In particular, the third-century BCE Chinese scholar Xunzi (Chapter 1.5) devoted considerable attention to the phenomenon of language diversification. He shares with the Greek sources a his-

torical approach to language development as an element within the gradual evolution of human society as a whole; but, like the Hebrew account of the Tower of Babel, he considers the plurality of languages to be a very negative phenomenon which represents a marked decline in the moral, political, and intellectual quality of the human world. Like all the thinkers we have considered, he sees in language an element of social agreement or convention (though he tends to interpret this above all in terms of harmony and cohesion); hence, like the other traditions presented in this part, he identifies in a society's language a crucial element of its social and political order. And he too, like the other authors in this part, is free from any notion of creating a universal language or of establishing a monolingual political system. But he differs from all of the thinkers we have considered in this introduction in certain crucial regards. First, he sees the problem of linguistic diversity entirely within the terms of the realities of East Asia: what matters is not the difference between languages spoken in different parts of the world by independent and autonomous peoples, but between those spoken and used for written communications by different elites of East Asia who wish to communicate with each other. It is the plurilingual reality of the East Asian imperial system, in which Chinese is only one of a number of languages, that worries him most. And second, he views plurilingualism as a problem of communication that can be fixed, at least to a certain extent: that is, he contemplates and recommends certain concrete steps which can mitigate the difficulties arising for his society from the plurality of languages. In particular, he recommends the careful study of existing standards of communication and a thoroughgoing adherence to them—in Greek terms, he is suggesting that thoughtful attention to convention can help to redress the ills of unguided nature. Third, his conception of nature involves not only Nature in the larger sense of the composition and structure of the world as a whole in which humans find themselves but also the particular and specific nature of individual human beings themselves, who speak the way they do not only because of general natural or social constraints but also because of their own innate idiosyncrasies. This individual nature sets a limit on the degree to which any program of rectification of names can hope for total success. And finally, he pays far more attention to the tensions and differences between oral and written language than the other thinkers in this part do—understandably, considering the nature of the Chinese writing system.

In contrast with Xunzi's text, which is rather abstract and prescriptive in nature, so much so that it has often been considered a work of philosophy, the final text selection in this part presents a very concrete historical instance of plurilingualism, Khitan children reciting Chinese poetry in twelfth-century CE China and inner Asia (Chapter 1.8). We see here how the differences between

languages could become an object of reflection, interest, and amusement for scholars—and not only for them. The methods that these local children used in order to understand and enjoy Chinese poetry—methods that Chinese adults could find laughable—were not altogether different from practices familiar from Japanese writing that allowed a whole culture to appropriate the treasures of Chinese culture. These ingenious children and laughing scholars provide a fitting conclusion for a part that considers not only the disadvantages attendant on the phenomenon of plurilingualism, but also the benefits and the opportunities that it can be understood to provide.