

Tongue-tied in Eden

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Humphrey Tonkin

The great Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure was among the first to break free of old notions of historical linguistics and comparative philology to ask serious questions about the nature of language itself. His *cours de linguistique générale*, compiled by his students at the University of Geneva from their lecture notes, change the nature of linguistics. Saussure developed a theory of signs that sought to describe the relation between language on the one hand and reality on the other. *Language* is a system of signs, he argued. A sign contains two elements – signifier and signified. The signifier is a word or a group of words forming an utterance, and the signified is the idea that that word or group of words represents. One can perhaps think of the two as object and word: an object has a name, and that name is a linguistic artifact. But Saussure understood the process as essentially abstract: what matters is not the object but our perception of the object, and what matters is not the word but the meaning behind the word. The sign is essentially arbitrary: there is no inherent connection between signifier and signified, but only a connection that is a product of convention.

[Even as Saussure was working in Geneva, the American pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce was also puzzling over signs. He posited a three-part structure, involving the form of the sign, the mode of interpretation of the sign, and the object that the sign signifies. Thus a given word in English has a semantic field attached to it, and the mobilization of that semantic field around the word allows us to identify the object, or objective, to which it refers. If we encounter a red traffic light (symbol), we know that red lights mean that traffic must stop (thought), and we stop (referent). The terms I use here are not Peirce's, but those of Ogden and Richards 1923]

Saussure was interested above all in language as a system, and many others joined him in the exploration of linguistic structures. Saussure and others pointed out that all language is conventional, since it is based on the history of meaning: words mean because of precedent, and the language that we use is the accumulation of precedent in a particular cultural and social context. Thus we can only utter history, only rehearse and reformulate the linguistic past, which is at the same time our cultural and social past. But words also mean because they exist in the context of other words: no single word, and no single utterance, can be said to mean, absent a context. Thus meaning is a product of the totality of language and its context. The essence of structuralism is interconnectedness.

We think of language as a mechanism for describing: language is a device that we use to make sense of the world, of phenomena, and of the abstractions that human consciousness possesses the power to create. It is in some sense a way of taming the

world, of reducing its relationships to relationships of grammar and syntax. Indeed, if the sign is essentially arbitrary (there is no houseness in the word house, nor *maisonité* in the French word *maison*, nor *Hausheit* in the German word *Haus*: these are arbitrary and conventionally determined words for an essentially similar phenomenon), it is also essentially autonomous.

[I should add, however, that this word is itself a good term through which to emphasize the limitations of translation: languages like English and German, and northern languages generally, make a distinction between house and home; for the most part Romance languages do not: the French, at a pinch, can distinguish between *une maison* and *un chez-soi*, but there are not two clearly separated concepts as there are in English or German – perhaps, some argue, because a home is a place in which one shelters from bad weather, whereas in more southern climates one moves freely from inside to outside, only retreating into one's house to escape the heat of the sun. Northern homes are all windows; southern houses are all shade. These semantic differences are products of culture and climate and in this sense are *not* arbitrary: Lévi-Strauss points out that the sign is arbitrary *a priori*, but ceases to be arbitrary when it is embedded in a culture. But the fact remains that the particular combination of phonemes that makes up the word “house” in various languages contains nothing of houseness in it: the word is as it is because it is as it is in other Germanic languages, and not because it contains magic]

Language, then, can be described as an autonomous system. In this sense, language does not in fact *describe* or *reflect* reality but *constructs* it. We can use language to describe things that (as Sir Philip Sidney put it several centuries before) “never were in nature.” Language is play as well as descriptor. Robin Dunbar suggests that the origins of language lie in the need for social communion: just as the apes spend hours grooming one another, whether there are nits to be found or not, so *homo sapiens*, having developed a voice box in one of those punctuations in equilibrium that Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould describe as evolutionary moments (the voice box, physical anthropologists tell us, came very quickly), uses language as a substitute for grooming. We tell one another stories – indeed a very large proportion of our conversational interactions with others constitutes storytelling. We spend relatively little time communicating solid information. Language is a means of display, of self-expression, of identity, of social convergence and divergence. Together we engage in what sociologists of knowledge have called “the social construction of reality.” The French sociologist Emil Durkheim suggested that no activity, including and in particular linguistic activity, can be separated from its context: our behavior is socially determined by the indicators of our culture.

Durkheim leads us rather directly to the assumption that language determines thought, rather than thought language. The debate over this issue has been fierce and unending. When Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf launched this idea, building on Durkheim and on Wilhelm von Humboldt and others, they were denounced as reductionist and determinist, and certainly the more extreme expression of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is easy to refute. The fact that Chinese has no future tense is not an indication that the Chinese are incapable of thinking about the future (they just do it in a different way), nor is it particularly interesting that the so-called Eskimos have large numbers of words for

so-called snow – and that therefore we as English-speakers are somehow incapable of thinking creatively about varieties of snow. But discourse does seem to determine behavior, at least in the broadest sense.

The Greeks and Romans told the story of Orpheus, whose musicianship (or singing: he became the type of the poet) caused rocks and trees to move, and wild beasts to lie down together (this image of the peaceable kingdom is contained also in Isaiah 11, regarded by Christians as a prophecy of the coming of Christ – and wonderfully depicted in a famous painting by Edward Hicks, in the Worcester Art Museum [around 1833], one of no less than a hundred versions of the painting that he did). Orpheus' lute allowed him to pacify the dog Cerberus in his visit to the Underworld to bring back his beloved Eurydice, carried away by Pluto. If his journey failed, it failed because of human frailty, and because even Orpheus could not overcome death. But, when, later, Orpheus was torn limb from limb by the screaming Maenads, followers of Bacchus, and thrown into a river, his severed head sang on as it floated. Orpheus embodies the dream of the poet, the dream of language not as the servant of reality but as its creator. His art, and the agony of longing that accompanied it, pushed at the edges of our universe, and at the limits of cause and effect: "Orpheus' lute was strung with poets' sinews," one of Shakespeare's characters declares. Fundamental to the story of Orpheus is the notion that language *is* magic, that it contains a power that only the poet can unleash. In English we speak of *spelling* correctly, as though putting the letters in the right order resembles a magic formula. Jehovah was the first speller. Out of his perfectly spell-checked language emerged a universe – out of the spirit moving on the waters came the voice of creation, the first imagination. And the imagination, writes Keats in a memorable phrase "is like Adam's dream: he awoke and found it true."

Which brings me to Eden.

Clearly, there are two ways of thinking about language. There is the simple notion that language is a code developed by human beings to communicate with one another. It is fundamentally inert, animated only by its intersection with the consciousness of a speaker of language. It is also, particularly in its written form, a grand storage system, a Dewey Decimal System of human knowledge. In this sense, language follows experience: the second, experience, is antecedent to the first, language.

But the Bible tells us something quite different. If the spirit of God was present from the first and, as Milton puts it, "with mighty wings outspread / Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss," it is language that creates order out of chaos.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.
And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. (Genesis 1.1-3)

No greater evidence of the power of the third person imperative could possibly be adduced: "God said, Let there be light: and there was light." The "form" that language

imposes on the world is not (and this is what is important) simply God's way of explaining phenomena: God, like anyone else, needs language, but his language *really does* shape the world. The opening of St. John's Gospel, describing this divine word, this *logos*, puts it like this:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

The same was in the beginning with God.

All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

In him was life; and the life was the light of men.

And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. (John 1.1-4)

That light shining in the darkness, that was not comprehended, not swallowed up, by the darkness, is the light of the first day, and it shines within us, John suggests. Above all, God *is* language, and language is the great creator. "Language," writes Shelley in *Prometheus Unbound*, "is a perpetual Orphic song ... Of thoughts and forms which else senseless and shapeless were."

Chapter 1 of Genesis tells us how the world was made in six days. Chapter 2 tells us what happened next.

And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.

And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field. (1.19-20)

What was God doing, and what was Adam doing? Was this a kind of experiment: show objects to the infant man and have him name what he sees and call the result language. Phoneticians tell us that babies are capable of expressing, and do indeed express, all sounds of which the larynx and the organs of speech are capable. Over time, they eliminate those that have no significance in the language system to which they are exposed, focusing only on those that do have significance – much as Praxiteles found sculptures in blocks of marble by chipping off the superfluties. In this sense, language learning is not a process of expansion, but a process of contraction, as the fingers close over an object when we grasp it. But was Adam's language acquisition arbitrary, then? Or did he *read* the book of God's works, laid out for him in Eden, and find the birdness in the bird, the wolfness in the wolf, the fishness in the fish, because there was no division between signifier and signified? Did God deliberately *avoid* teaching Adam *His* language because he feared the possible outcome, the sorcerer's apprentice effect? Is this God the joker or God the earnest parent?

Most thinkers over the years have believed that the language spoken by the sinless Adam in the Garden was the perfect language, or at least the *most* perfect language (have you

noticed that when you use the word *most* with the word *perfect* it actually detracts from that perfection?). Hebrew is the leading candidate for the divine language, though some thought it was Swedish. In more ancient times, Augustine went for Hebrew but Theodoret of Cyrillus for Syriac. In the sixteenth century comparative linguistics was founded in part in the efforts of learned people to find evidence of the original language (the so-called *Ursprache* or language of Adam) in the languages of the world. The Swede Andreas Kempe published a satirical pamphlet in the late seventeenth century in which he posited that Satan seduced Eve in French, Adam spoke Danish, and God spoke Swedish. After Sir William Jones, working for the East India Company in Calcutta at the end of the eighteenth century, posited the existence of an Indo-European, or Aryan, “family” of languages stretching from northern India to Iceland, Sanskrit became the language of choice for speculation on the divine origins of language – and also potentially the key to a wholly secular inquiry into the origins of language, through a kind of linguistic paleontology stretching backwards in time. Johann Gottfried Herder and others identified a second group of languages, which they called Semitic languages, the languages of Shem, in reference to the departure of the sons of Noah in different directions across the world and in contradistinction to the Japhetic or Indo-European languages. It was Herder who first suggested the relationship of language to nationhood, suggesting that national unity depended on a single language – an idea espoused

More likely than any of this speculation, the divine language was a language in which signifier and signified were one and the same, and to speak was to be and to do. It was an idea that many eminent thinkers in the seventeenth century thought was at least imitable by human beings. If grammar and logic are our means of making sense of the world, could one not create a philosophical system in which the relations among things could be described in grammatical terms, and hence to speak language aright might be to understand aright? The idea had appeal to Descartes, who, in a famous letter to the Abbé Mersenne, dreamed of such a language. Bishop John Wilkins, the secretary of the Royal Society, began work on such a language in the 1650s, and his speculations animated the thinking of Leibnitz, whose system of mathematical logic was inspired in part by such efforts at linguistic classification, and Isaac Newton, who was also attracted by the idea of creating a language that would facilitate thought rather than (as many thought was the case) impede it. Jonathan Swift’s Laputans carried around large sacks of objects in order to communicate with one another, having established that the most perfect language is in fact the things themselves: they eliminate the distance between signifier and signified by abolishing signifiers altogether, much as a cartographer might decide that the best map is the world itself. As Swift suggests, this is the absurd logical conclusion to which such searches for linguistic perfection lead.

In Eden, where Adam was claiming linguistic kinship with all God’s creatures (I have returned recently from a trip to the Lakota nation of South Dakota: their idea of the kinship of all animate objects coincides remarkably with the image of Adam naming the creatures) soon things went badly wrong:

And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD

God amongst the trees of the garden.
 And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou?
 And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was
 naked; and I hid myself.
 And he said, Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree,
 whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?
 And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of
 the tree, and I did eat.

Hearing the voice of the Lord calling, the man and the woman do not reply. They do not know what to do: they are tongue-tied before God. Indeed, they do the opposite of what is expected: they hide rather than show themselves. They seek cover for their nakedness. They embark on the first blame game. It is an image of the unraveling of language, of the breakdown of the instantaneous connection of cause and effect, and the identity of language and truth. Who have they been talking to, and what language did they use to do so? Does Satan speak God's language, or has he somehow corrupted the language that Adam learned or acquired? Regardless, we know the outcome. As Milton puts it:

For now, too nigh
 The Arch-Angel stood; and, from the other hill
 To their fixed station, all in bright array
 The Cherubim descended; on the ground
 Gliding meteorous, as evening-mist
 Risen from a river o'er the marish glides,
 And gathers ground fast at the labourer's heel
 Homeward returning. High in front advanced,
 The brandished sword of God before them blazed,
 Fierce as a comet; which with torrid heat,
 And vapour as the Libyan air adust,
 Began to parch that temperate clime; whereat
 In either hand the hastening Angel caught
 Our lingering parents, and to the eastern gate
 Led them direct, and down the cliff as fast
 To the subjected plain; then disappeared.
 They, looking back, all the eastern side beheld
 Of Paradise, so late their happy seat,
 Waved over by that flaming brand; the gate
 With dreadful faces thronged, and fiery arms:
 Some natural tears they dropt, but wiped them soon;
 The World was all before them, where to choose
 Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
 They, hand in hand, with wand'ring steps and slow,
 Through *Eden* took their solitary way. (PL 12.625-649)

But this is not the last word on language in Genesis. If the Garden of Eden and its loss is, as it were the pastoral story of the fall, there is another story of the fall, not about the

naming of living things, but about the construction of a great building. We enter the Bible through two alternative visions: of a garden existence and of a social existence. Noah saves the creatures that Adam so carefully names: the naming in the garden is a kind of passenger list for the Ark. But the return to dry land leads directly to the human penchant for building things. In Chapter 3 of Genesis we lose our garden, and in Chapter 11 we lose our city:

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.
 And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there.
 And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them throughly.
 And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar.
 And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.
 And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.
 And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.
 Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.
 So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.
 Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth. (11:1-9)

The two images of the fall are matched, at the end of the Book of Revelation, with two images of redemption: the holy city, the New Jerusalem, in chapter 21, the divine response, as it were, to the urban collapse of Babel, and the river of life and the tree of life in chapter 22, the divine response to the loss of Eden garden. The fruits of the tree of life “were for the healing of nations.”

The story of the tower of Babel is a story of the collapse of human cooperation through the disruption of human communication. If, as most anthropologists would argue today, the human species has a single source, that we are indeed descended from the same parents, linguistic diversity is not in itself an obvious outcome. Linguistic geographers argue that language difference is a product of migration, of settlement patterns, and of relative isolation. They point to maps of the world's languages that show that linguistic diversity is far greater in the tropics, where self-sufficiency is easier to attain without mobility, and far less in less warm climates, where a nomadic existence required direct communication over distance.

They also argue that linguistic diversity is no more a curse than is biodiversity. Indeed, they frequently assert that the maintenance of linguistic diversity, and the wisdom and

ways of thought that each language contains, is important for human survival. Even those who do not accept this expression of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (that unique ways of thought are contained within individual languages) recognize that language difference offers opportunities for identity difference: it is a way of anchoring populations and giving them a sense of self that is different from other people's senses of self.

But these ideas, while latent in the work of linguistic anthropologists, indeed in the very history of anthropology in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, have only recently risen to prominence. For centuries, the principal concern was the search for linguistic unity. If the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries looked for it in the language of philosophy, the nineteenth and twentieth looked for it above all in the creation of so-called a posteriori languages – efforts to simplify or regularize existing languages or to take elements from existing languages and mould them into an easily learned and fully expressive world language. Relatively few people saw such a language as a substitute for existing languages, but they argued, with some justification, that if everyone were to learn a second, simplified language, they could maintain their own languages but communicate internationally through this planned, or constructed language.

Such languages (and there were literally hundreds of such language projects – which continue to today) mostly never escape the desks of their creators. A few have, over the years, generated some interest. Johann Martin Schleyer created in the 1870s and early 1880s a language called Volapük, which gathered quite a following – stimulated above all by the genuine language difficulties in Europe, where populations were becoming more mobile, businesses were becoming more internationally connected, and the invention of trains and steamships and the telegraph and vacations left large numbers of moneyed people with no means of communicating with people in the countries they increasingly frequently visited. [I should add that humans had invented not only trains but also Charles Darwin, and evolution was rapidly pushing out intelligent design and Adamic language as an explanation for human speech.] Volapük failed in part because it was not particularly easy to learn, but mostly because its creator insisted that his was the last word on how it should be learned and used. As soon as the movement for Volapük expanded beyond a certain minimum, Schleyer became increasingly insistent about linguistic discipline.

Volapük was followed by Esperanto, a much more successful enterprise – not because the language was better designed (though it was), but because its creator, the Polish Jew Zamenhof, recognized early on (taking his lessons from Herder and others) that if a language is to live it needs a community – and a community that owns its language. So Zamenhof set about creating such a community, working tirelessly to organize it, to supply it with translations of literary works, and to keep it focused on expansion rather than on arguments about linguistics. While such arguments inevitably caught up with it, they did so primarily for ideological reasons, as Zamenhof's dream of universal understanding (very much a product of the Jewish enlightenment, but tinged also with a certain mysticism) ran up against the “modern” practical approach of French chambers of commerce – but that is a story for another day.

Today, Esperanto not only lives on but flourishes, in a new climate in which, faced with the widespread death of languages before the march of English most particularly, the dissenters from the view of manifest linguistic destiny work to preserve linguistic diversity by offering an alternative to language spread, suggesting that a citizen of the world requires more than one language for more than one purpose – a language of identity, local and specific, and a language of worldwide communication, perhaps with other languages in between. Esperanto has become an ally not of linguistic unity so much as of linguistic diversity, and has pinned its political hopes on such a notion, in part in the context of the European Union and those parts of the world least responsive to the hegemony of English.

Planned languages, or languages that have been subjected to extensive planning, exist also at the regional level. Modern Hebrew is such a language, hewn systematically out of the ancient biblical Hebrew. Indonesian is such a language, adopted by the Indonesian independence movement and fashioned out of the old Malay trading language (and adopted as national language in preference to the widely-spoken language of the establishment Javanese). Chinese is really a written language system, rendered in speech in many different ways, ways that are often mutually incomprehensible. Basic English, developed in the 1930s and espoused by Winston Churchill, failed to take root, mostly because it proved unacceptable to English speakers and because its drastic limitation and simplification of vocabulary only served to produce a very high level of ambiguity.

But the notion that languages grow like plants, naturally and without interference, is a sentimental but fundamentally inaccurate notion. English does not develop as it does because its roots are buried somewhere in Stratford-on-Avon, but because people use it for their own practical purposes, and because elites and counter-elites push it in various directions.

As for Esperanto, there are those who see it as a kind of radical simplification of Latin, though in his original explanation of what he was seeking to do in designing Esperanto, Zamenhof's ideas were much more akin to the structuralists: he was a Saussurian *avant la lettre*. His ideas, as expressed in the 1887 preface to his language, seem to have been derived above all from Russian structuralist thought, particularly from the work of the Polish linguist (despite his French name) Jean Baudouin de Courtenay. In his awareness of the importance of convention, Zamenhof resembled Saussure – and it is perhaps no accident that one of the early adepts of Zamenhof's new language was none other than René de Saussure, younger brother of the linguist. And in Esperanto the word for *literature* is *literaturo*, which can also mean *litera turo*, tower of letters. Babel and human aspiration are never far away.

Recently, Jonathan Pool and Mark Fettes have suggested that there are five ways of addressing language diversity: by the learning of foreign languages, by translation and interpretation, by the adoption of a single ethnic language, by the adoption of a planned language for interlingual use, or by the creation of technological means of converting one language into another. François Grin and François Vaillancourt have pioneered the economic modeling of interlingual communication (not necessarily financial, but

economic) and they have been joined by Reinhard Selten and Pool in applying game theory to such models. Regardless of how we may feel about such efforts at rational management of language difference, it is clear that the search for a certain perfectibility, and a certain justice, lives on.

But Orpheus has not entirely left us, indeed cannot leave us, because the arbitrary system called language exposes in its interstices the constant possibility of new thought, new insight, new ways of finding out truth. Poets pursue language beyond the reach of language; ordinary folk battle with its limitations. Writing the *Sonnets to Orpheus* around 1920, Rainer Maria Rilke found, even in the darkness of human conflict, bright images of the Orphic legacy. “Ravaged by vengeance, at last they broke and tore you. / But the echo of your music lingered / in rocks and lions [*in Löwen und Felsen*], trees and birds [*in den Bäumen und Vögeln*]. You still sing there.” *Dort singst du noch jetzt*.