

LANGUAGE

It is impossible to survey the languages of the ancient world without mentioning peoples whose historical significance lies outside the time limits of this unit. They are briefly discussed, therefore, so that this overview of ancient languages will not be fragmented and incomplete.

LANGUAGES OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

As we have seen in earlier units, people have possessed language for close to a million years. In fact, it is difficult for us to talk about human beings before they possessed the gift of language since language and humanity are so intricately interwoven. The existence of language in the distant past is, however, only a hypothesis based on the conviction that no human-like society could have existed without the capability of language. If we attempt to reconstruct very early languages, we are quickly forced to give up. There is no way for us to know or learn about them; they are lost forever to human curiosity and scientific inquiry. Our study can begin only with the period after the spoken language became the written word. This is not to say, however, that the decipherment of ancient scripts automatically solves all problems of language. In the area of classification, some languages are still an enigma to us. Thus, while pursuing our subject, we must understand that we are again treading on uncertain ground and that some of our findings are, by necessity, only tentative.

The Agglutinative Languages

In the world today there is a wide-spread, though not very large, group of people who speak languages commonly classified as agglutinative. This group of languages, called the Ural-Altaic, includes the Finno-Ugrian and the Turkic-Mongolic groups. The chief languages of the Finno-Ugrian group are the Finnish, Hungarian, and Estonian; the Altaic group includes the language spoken by the present-day Turks in Turkey; the Uzbek, Kirghiz, Turkoman, and Kazak spoken in the Soviet Union; and the Mongol and Manchu spoken in Mongolia and China.

Agglutination is a special form of inflection. While the inflected languages of such Indo-European languages as Greek, Latin, Slavic, and some of the Germanic languages add suffixes, the number of affixations is limited and, more importantly, the stem usually undergoes a change in the

process. In the case of the agglutinative languages, a large number of suffixes and prefixes are added to the stem with little or no change to it. An example can best illustrate this point. In Hungarian, for instance, the sentence *You lost your best ones (best sons)* is rendered the following way: *Elvesztettetek a legjobbjaitokat*. The underlined parts contain the prefixes and suffixes together with the linking vowels necessary for the construction of the utterance. If we look at the last words in the sentence again, we see that it is built around the word *jo* which means "good." With this as a starting point, the language adds the prefixation *leg* and suffixation *bbjaitokat* to create the idea "your best ones," which is expressed in English in three words.

Although the Ural-Altaic group of languages constitutes the prime example, the process of agglutination is not confined to it. Some of the African languages also contain agglutinative characteristics. We must recognize the fact, however, that a relationship between languages does not always mean a racial or ethnic relationship. People under extreme pressure or prolonged exposure to another language may change their native tongue. In this process the earlier language is usually lost forever unless it is revived artificially as is the case with the Hebrew language of the Jews in our own time. A modern example of this change of language by a whole nation is demonstrated by the Bulgarians. The original Bulgarians were Turkic people who spoke an East-Turkic tongue. Yet after they conquered the Slavic elements on the Balkan peninsula where their country now lies, they gradually gave up their original language and now speak the tongue of the conquered Slavs.

The Sumerian Language

The Sumerians still constitute the greatest mystery among the Near Eastern people. Even today we are not certain about their ethnic origin although historians and linguists have proposed many hypotheses. Some believe that they came from India and were offspring of the people who created the Indus Valley civilization. Others relate them to the Dravidians of present-day India. Still others believe that they stemmed from the Elamites who occupied the low and highlands east of the Tigris River since prehistoric times. Although it is quite impossible to pinpoint exactly the racial ancestry of these people, one fact has been established: they were neither a Semitic people (contrary to the belief held for a while by some scholars) nor Indo-Europeans. Since physical characteristics eliminate the possibility of African origin, this leaves us with the third large group of people of Eurasia--the Ural-Altaic. Linguistically, this choice seems to be the most justified since the language of the Sumerians was agglutinative, the type of language spoken by many people of the Ural-Altaic group. However, it must be stressed that no definite link has been found to any of the languages mentioned above beyond their agglutinative characteristic.

The Sumerians developed a high level of culture. Sumerian became the principal spoken and written language of southern Mesopotamia throughout the third millennium B.C. The Sumerians invented cuneiform writing,

created literary works, produced dictionaries and built large-scale libraries. At the beginning of the second millennium they lost political supremacy and their language died as a spoken tongue; however, it continued to be used in religious rituals and functioned as the classical language of the area for another two thousand years.

The Elamite Language

Of uncertain origin, the Elamites were a people who, as early as the fifth millennium B.C., lived east of the Tigris River. The country was sometimes called Susiana and its capital, Susa, was one of the famous cities of the ancient world. Sculpture and other artifacts indicate that the earliest inhabitants of the area were negroid people, whose fate is unknown, since the Elamites themselves were not negroid. Their language was neither Semitic nor Indo-European but a type of agglutinative tongue similar to that of the Sumerians, although no definite link between the two languages has yet been established. It seems probable, however, that instead of belonging to the Ural-Altaic language group, the Elamite language was related to some of the Caucasian languages.

The Hamito-Semitic Languages

The Hamito-Semitic languages are spoken by a fairly sizable group of people who occupy an enormous area comprising all of Africa north of the Sudan and a large portion of the Near East. The original homeland of the Semites was probably present-day Saudi Arabia (Arabian peninsula) from where they spread to the east reaching Mesopotamia, to the north along the coastline of the Eastern Mediterranean, and to the west into Africa.

We know very little about the original location of the Hamitic languages. Their distribution is also much more limited now, although at earlier times most of the people in North Africa spoke some form of this language. It has been replaced by the Semitic Arabic dialects only as a result of the Islamic conquest of the Mediterranean shoreline of Africa. Yet even today some 200,000 people in Libya and other North African countries speak a Hamitic tongue such as Berberic and Libyan. Another contemporary center of Hamitic is the eastern corner of Africa, where a few million people speak Cushitic.

The Hamito-Semitic languages have a number of features in common. Nevertheless, the relationship of these two large language groups has not yet been established beyond doubt. The similarities are mostly in the areas of phonetics and grammar.

The relationship among the Semitic languages is much closer than that among the Hamitic. The most salient characteristic of the Semitic languages is their triliterality, which means that their words usually contain three consonants that remain more or less constant throughout the transformation of the basic word. In other words, the vowels change but the consonants do not. For example, in Semitic the root *ktb* ("write") can

be changed into *kataba* ("he wrote"), *katib* ("the writing one"), *kutiba* ("it was written"), and *kitab* ("book"). As we can see, the consonants remain constant, and the differences in meaning are expressed by changing the vowels only. This characteristic of the language was utilized when the first phonetic alphabets were invented by the Semitic people. These early alphabets showed only the consonants of the words.

As we have seen earlier, the people who created the earliest civilizations in the Near East were non-Semitic and non-Indo-European. However, there are indications that the Semites also settled in Mesopotamia quite early. Their presence in the area during the third millennium B.C. can be ascertained by some Semitic place names used by the Sumerians.

The Akkadian Language--Babylonian and Assyrian (Semitic)

Akkadian was the language both of the Babylonians and Assyrians who began settling in Mesopotamia as early as the middle of the third millennium B.C. The Old Akkadian language represents the oldest written evidence of Semitic speech. The language was spoken by a large group of people everywhere in Mesopotamia after the fall of the Sumerian Empire in the second millennium; however, Sumerian continued to be used as the language of religion and intellectual pursuit. The two languages existed side by side for a long period of time, but the Akkadian kept its Semitic characteristics despite the influence of the Sumerian. This coexistence gave rise to the first known bilingual culture, a bilingual educational system, and bilingual as well as single language dictionaries. Literary works in both languages were included in the school curriculum, but Akkadian literature remained highly indebted to the Sumerian tradition.

The Akkadian language reached its peak as a language of culture at the end of the third millennium B.C., at which time the Old Akkadian split into Babylonian and Assyrian. In the middle of the second millennium, the Babylonian language became the language of diplomacy and the lingua franca in the Near East and was even studied by Egyptian scribes.

The Aramaic Language (Semitic)

The Arameans were originally the inhabitants of Syria, so they belonged to the North Semitic group. At the beginning of the first millennium B.C. they were able to extend their political influence over a part of Mesopotamia for a short while. However, the Assyrians began a slow process of recovery and reestablished their rule over this area again during the eighth century B.C., putting an end to Aramaic political independence.

Yet, ironically, the political and military defeat of the Arameans heralded an era of Aramaic linguistic influence in the Near East comparable only to that of the Akkadian. The transplanting of so many Arameans from Syria to Mesopotamia made it possible for them to "Arameanize" Mesopotamia. Soon the Aramaic language became the lingua franca of the whole Assyrian Empire; in fact, it became the language of diplomacy,

trade, and literature. It proved itself of such dynamic quality that a thousand years after the political decay of the Arameans, it was still used by the Near Eastern people, including such vastly different empires as the Assyrian, Persian, and Macedonian. It also became the language of the Jews, spoken by Jesus and his apostles. It was one of the earliest languages to be written in the new phonetic alphabet invented by the North Semitic people. Only the rise of Islam as a potent religious-cultural movement in the seventh century A.D. broke the spell of Aramaic and brought about its virtual extinction.

The Canaanite Language (Semitic)

The ancient name of Palestine was Canaan, which, before the arrival of the Hebrews (Jews), was inhabited by the Canaanites, a Semitic people who probably entered the region while migrating northward from their original homeland somewhere in the Arabian peninsula. Their language constitutes one of the two main branches of the North Semitic group; the other branch is Aramaic.

The latest excavations at Ugarit (Syria) shed light on the high level of culture reached by the Canaanites as early as the sixteenth century B.C. They must have possessed an excellent understanding of language since they probably were one of the earliest people to develop and use a phonetic alphabet. Their literary works are also very significant, especially for a better understanding of the Old Testament of the Jews.

The Hebrew Language (Semitic)

The Israelites replaced the Canaanites in Palestine when they nearly exterminated them in a very bloody battle. At the time of their victory, they spoke Hebrew, a Semitic language closely related to the Canaanite, Phoenician, and other North Semitic tongues. The early books of the Old Testament were written in this language. It was, however, gradually replaced by Aramaic as a spoken tongue about the middle of the first millennium B.C. Aramaic was the language used by Jesus, and many of the later books of the Old Testament were written in it. It continued to be the language of the Jews throughout the Middle Ages, while Hebrew mixed with Aramaic was used and taught by the rabbis in much the same way that Latin was used by the Catholic church. The Hebrew language is now being revived by the new Jewish state reestablished in Palestine.

The Phoenician Language (Semitic)

As is the case with many ancient peoples, the origin of the Phoenicians is not quite clear. According to some they came from the Persian Gulf; others claim they were related to the Minoans of Crete, and still others believe they were Semites. As a historical fact we can state that at the time of their appearance in history during the middle of the second century B.C., they spoke a Semitic language which was related to the Canaanite,

the original language of Palestine.

Their homeland was a narrow strip on the eastern shoreline of the Mediterranean Sea west of Syria, not longer than about a hundred miles. There they built their magnificent cities of Tyros, Sidon, and Byblos. It is from Byblos, incidentally, that the name for our Bible is derived. The Greeks named books *biblos* after this city because its most important produce was papyrus, the material used in the making of books.

The Phoenicians were probably the greatest traders of the ancient world before the Greeks. They established trading posts and colonies all around the Mediterranean littoral including Carthage and the present-day cities of Cadiz in Spain and Marseilles in France.

For two thousand years the Phoenicians were thought to have been the inventors of the alphabet, but the latest archeological findings reveal the existence of a Semitic alphabet which predates the Phoenician. It would seem, then, that the Phoenician writing system, like the Aramaic, derived from an earlier North Semitic script. It still remains true, however, that the greatest contribution of the Phoenicians to our civilization was the transmission of the alphabet to the Greeks, who developed it further and adjusted it to their Indo-European language.

The Phoenicians disappeared as a nation during the Hellenistic period when they assimilated the Greek language and culture.

The Old Egyptian Language (Hamitic)

The Hamitic languages are not so well understood and researched as the Semitic group. They also constitute a less prominent group in history except for one outstanding language that can be classified with some certainty as a Hamitic tongue--the language of the old Egyptians.

As is the case with almost all the people of the ancient Near East, the racial origins of the Egyptians are not clear. However, it is evident that the inhabitants of the Upper Kingdom and of the Lower Kingdom came from two different ethnic groups. From the linguistic point of view, these two peoples spoke a fairly uniform language that lasted for some 4,500 years though showing constant change throughout its existence. It was basically a Hamitic language reflecting, however, considerable Semitic influence, especially in its vocabulary.

The Old Egyptian slowly changed into Coptic, the name of the popular Egyptian dialect into which the New Testament was later translated (after the third century A.D.). This dialect existed until the sixteenth century A.D. as a spoken language, and it is still the liturgical language of the Coptic church. The present inhabitants of Egypt speak an Arabic language.

The Egyptians developed one of the early systems of writing, although the early stages show Mesopotamian, notably Sumerian, influence. They established outstanding schools in which students were exposed to an

exacting discipline in the language arts, and they possessed large-scale libraries with thousands of papyrus scrolls. They also created literary works that, like those of other ancient people, began in the area of religion but came, at least as early as 2000 B.C., to include secular writings as well.

The Indo-European Languages of the Near East

The third large group of languages spoken by some people in the Near East is the Indo-European. We are treating these people last because they entered the area belatedly, only during the last centuries of the third millennium B.C. They are, nevertheless, very important for us for two reasons: (1) they decisively influenced the later history of ancient times; and (2) our own language, English--as most of the other European languages--belongs to the same family of languages.

This language family is also called Indo-Germanic--a name preferred by German scientists and disliked by speakers of the Romance languages--and also Aryan, which is really another word for Iran, and for this reason is better avoided. Indo-European is the most neutral and most comprehensive name for this language family, coming closest to the true, original distribution of its speakers. The geographical distribution of this family is truly tremendous. In our present era especially, speakers of this language group inhabit all five continents of the world. More specifically, almost all European languages belong to it, as well as some languages in the Near East (Persian, Afghan, Beluch, Armenian, etc.) and many languages of India (Hindi, Hindustani, Bengal, etc.).

The original settlement of the proto-Indo-European has not been definitely established. Central Asia, Scandinavia, the banks of the Danube, and the Caucasus (the south shores of the Caspian Sea) were alternately believed to be the place. It is generally held, however, that the original Indo-European invaders came either from Europe through the isthmus of the Dardanelles (present-day Turkey) or through the mountains of the Caucasus or even through the gap between the Caspian and Aral Seas.

The Indo-European languages display a highly inflected form of the language parts (excluding English, which really constitutes an exception). A remarkable aspect of this huge language family is that several thousand years after the inception of the original or parent language, the member languages still show considerable similarity in many important ways.

The major groups of the language family consist of the European branch (divided into Germanic, Romance, Slavic, and Celtic) and the Near and Middle Eastern branch (made up of present-day Persian, Hindi, Hindustani, etc.).

The first Indo-European people who were able to develop a high level of culture were the Indo-Aryans. These people, however, were not the first to develop a civilization on the Indian subcontinent. Before them, a high level of civilization existed in the Indus Valley (Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro), which some scholars believe antedates the Mesopotamian

developments and, in fact, might have influenced it. The other center of culture was developed by the Dravidians who occupied the lower part of the peninsula.

The Aryans at the time of their invasion of the Near East possessed a much lower level of civilization than the people whom they attacked and eventually conquered. The pattern was very similar to that of the Germanic tribes attacking and infiltrating the Roman Empire at the height of the Latin civilization. The Aryans were equally successful in their attempts to overrun the northern part of India and establish themselves there on a permanent basis.

Again, like their European brothers, the Aryans of India developed their own culture as early as the second millennium B.C., by which time they must have possessed a language advanced enough to support a literature. This language was Sanskrit. It is of special interest to us because the first documented passages of an Indo-European language were written in it. The linguistic similarity between the basic languages of the Indo-European family and Sanskrit is certainly impressive. Let us briefly compare the numbers one to five in Sanskrit with those in Greek, Latin, German, and English:

<u>Sanskrit</u>	<u>Greek</u>	<u>Latin</u>	<u>German</u>	<u>English</u>
<i>eka</i>	<i>heis</i>	<i>unus</i>	<i>eins</i>	<i>one</i>
<i>dva</i>	<i>duo</i>	<i>duo</i>	<i>zwei</i>	<i>two</i>
<i>tri</i>	<i>tria</i>	<i>tres</i>	<i>drei</i>	<i>three</i>
<i>tshatna</i>	<i>tettara</i>	<i>quattuor</i>	<i>vier</i>	<i>four</i>
<i>pantsha</i>	<i>pente</i>	<i>quinque</i>	<i>funf</i>	<i>five</i>

Sanskrit has been praised as one of the languages par excellence in the history of Indo-European linguistics. It was certainly a very refined language, as is revealed by the great literary masterpieces of the Indo-Aryans, the Vedas. It was not spoken by the common folk but was the language of scholars, writers, and poets. The common people spoke, however, a language similar to the classical form of Sanskrit. The relationship between the two was similar to that between the Latin spoken by the aristocrats of Rome--senators, consuls, poets, writers--and the tongue of the people, Vulgar Latin.

We do not know whether or not the Vedas were written down earlier than our records show. Our earliest written version of the Vedas dates back only to the middle of the first millennium B.C. although they were already in existence in a spoken form as early as the fifteenth century B.C. They were actually songs transmitted orally from generation to generation. The word *veda* means "knowledge" or "wit."

The first attempt to write Sanskrit was made in the ninth century B.C. The Aryans apparently borrowed the alphabet used by the Arameans in Mesopotamia and out of it developed the Indian writing called Brahmi. The Sanskrit language became, as time passed, more and more detached from real life. The new vocabulary of the language was generated by scholars

for scholarly use only, thus making the language more and more artificial. Meanwhile the living language also continued to develop and change. By the fifth century B.C. Sanskrit gave way to a new language called Prakrit. Now the two--Sanskrit and Prakrit--stood in a relationship to each other that was similar to that of Latin and Italian during the Renaissance. The further development and diversification of Prakrit led to the languages of present-day India, such as Pali, Hindi, Hindustani, and Urdu.

The Aryan of India gave the world one of the earliest grammarians in the person of Panini, who lived in the fourth century B.C. His work established the science of philology, the scientific study of languages. Moreover, his grammar book, antedating our linguistic efforts by two and a half millennia, is so significant that it still ranks as the most successful and complete description of a language. Its discovery really started modern linguistics in earnest in the nineteenth century.

The Persian Language

The Persians were another people speaking an Indo-European language who successfully infiltrated the Near East. They probably came through the Caucasian Mountains and gradually occupied the mountainous areas north and east of Mesopotamia, roughly in the area of present-day Iran. Their original homeland is unknown. The earliest mention of them dates back to the ninth century B.C. when the Assyrians sent troops against them. After conquering their neighbor and fellow Aryans, the Medes, in the sixth century B.C., they established the Persian Empire, one of the greatest states ever ruled by a people.

Their language definitely belongs to the Indo-European family. The first written records of Old Persian come from the fourth century B.C. They were written in cuneiform following Mesopotamian custom, although they improved upon it by inventing a type of syllabic writing--in fact quasi-alphabetic--adjusted to their different tongue. The Old Persian language was very closely related to Sanskrit. Some of the vocabulary items were almost identical as the following comparisons reveal:

<u>Sanskrit</u>	<u>Old Persian</u>	<u>English</u>
<i>pitar</i>	<i>pitar</i>	<i>father</i>
<i>matar</i>	<i>matar</i>	<i>mother</i>
<i>bratar</i>	<i>bratar</i>	<i>brother</i>
<i>nama</i>	<i>nama</i>	<i>name</i>
<i>sta</i>	<i>shta</i>	<i>stand</i>

Old Persian developed into Zend, the language of the famous Avesta, the "Bible of the Persians"; and further development eventually led to the modern Persian spoken in Iran today.

The Hittite Language

Among the earliest Indo-Europeans who entered the Near Eastern area were the Hittites. They first appeared in the eighteenth century B.C. after crossing the Bosphorus. It is possible that they also came over the Caucasian Mountains as did their other Indo-European kinsmen. At any rate, they settled down in the area south of the Black Sea coast where Turkey is situated today and created an empire which equalled in might those of Egypt and Assyria. This area had earlier been inhabited by a racial stock of Armenoid type--dark, thickset people with sloping foreheads and large noses. The Indo-European conquerors, instead of exterminating them, intermixed freely with them and out of this mixture developed the Hittite people. Even their Indo-European language underwent certain changes, though keeping its basic linguistic features. It is interesting to note that this tongue was closely related to Greek and Latin; in fact, some of their words are close to the Germanic vocabulary.

<u>Hittite</u>	<u>Latin</u>	<u>German</u>	<u>English</u>
<i>vadar</i>		<i>wasser</i>	<i>water</i>
<i>ezza</i>		<i>essen</i>	<i>eat</i>
<i>uga</i>	<i>ego</i>	<i>ich</i>	<i>I</i>
<i>tug</i>	<i>tu</i>	<i>dich</i>	<i>you</i>
<i>kuish</i>	<i>quis</i>	<i>wer</i>	<i>who</i>

The Armenian Language

The last Indo-European people of this region to be discussed here is the nation of the Armenians. The Assyrians called them Urartu; the Jews, Ararat; and later generations, Armenians. Their language belongs to the Indo-European family. The Armenians were probably the earliest Indo-Europeans to enter the area where they live even today--the triangle formed by the Caucasus, the Black Sea, and the Ararat Mountain. The exact date of their arrival has never been determined, although they were known throughout the recorded history of the Near East. For centuries they were able to maintain their independence, but later they were conquered by the Persians, Romans, Turks, Russians, etc. In spite of their many hardships, tragedies, and near extermination (the Turkish slaughter of Armenians in this century), they live on and still possess their ancient language and culture.

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In a summary of this kind it is impossible to present a full account of all the languages and ethnic groups that appeared in the Near East in ancient times. Such an undertaking would take thousands of pages. It is enough to point out here that there were dozens of other nations and languages whose ethnic background and linguistic development were part of the fascinating early history of this area.

FOR FURTHER READING

- Durant, Will. *The Story of Civilization, Vol. I: Our Oriental Heritage*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1942. (Chapters 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 20.)
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