Introduction: Awakening to Linguistic Otherness

In his book *The Search for the Perfect Language*, the renowned historian Umberto Eco offers an interesting observation on the appearance of the tower of Babel in medieval art along with the development of linguistic thought in contemporaneous European scholarship:

A quick look at the iconographic history increases our curiosity. There are no known representations of the Tower of Babel before the Cotton Bible (fifth or sixth century). It next appears in a manuscript perhaps from the end of the tenth century, and then on a relief from the cathedral of Salerno from the eleventh century. After this, however, there is a flood of towers. It is a flood, moreover, that has its counterpart in a vast deluge of theoretical speculation originating in precisely this period as well.¹

The book that you hold in your hands, or read on your screen, is, in a way, a modest prequel to Eco’s widely acclaimed volume. It focuses on a much earlier time, commonly known as Late Antiquity, and seeks to identify the first trickles of what would later become the “flood of towers” and the “vast deluge” of linguistic reflections in the High Middle Ages. Here we will explore early Christian ideas about foreign languages, linguistic history, and linguistic diversity and investigate how language differences and language-related socio-cultural stereotypes were drawn into the process of constructing and negotiating distinctly Christian and specific confessional identities – the process which preoccupied many Christian intellectuals in the late antique Mediterranean.

Late Antiquity was a crucial time when Christianity underwent a transformation into a large-scale intellectual and social movement. The growth of the Christian population over this period expanded the scope in

¹ Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, 17. A spectacular floor mosaic depicting the construction of the tower of Babel was discovered in 2018 in a fifth-century synagogue at Huqoq in Israel. This important early precedent, however, does not affect the general truth of Eco’s observation. See www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/2018/11/jonah-tower-babel-huqoq-ancient-synagogue-mosaic/.
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which adherents of the new religion interacted with cultures and people speaking a wide range of different languages. Those for whom cross-linguistic exchanges had previously been a professional necessity or a condition of their daily life started to wonder what their newly acquired religious affiliation expected from them in terms of their relations with speakers of other languages. Christian intellectuals, in their turn, began to develop various interpretive approaches to one’s speaking a tongue foreign to them and to speculate about linguistic diversity. Their linguistic thought has little in common with modern language science, but provides valuable insights into their worldview and is revealing of broader late antique culture.

The title of this book, *The Slow Fall of Babel*, is meant to be a metaphor for changes in the linguistic views of the increasingly Christianized elites in the late antique Mediterranean and the ways they experienced and conceptualized linguistic differences. Babel, in this case, is more than just a reference to a biblical story about a single dramatic event in the distant past that allegedly changed the linguistic makeup of humanity once and for all. It is rather an allegory of the predominantly monolingual or bilingual worldviews typical of ancient Greco- and Latinophone intellectuals prior to the advent of Christianity. Although the history of the Mediterranean before Christianity was not lacking in episodes of cross-linguistic interaction, the majority of Greek intellectuals were living and pursuing their inquiries within the self-sufficient, virtually monolingual entity of their home culture. The cultural space of the Roman elite was intrinsically bilingual; they were deeply engaged with Greek language and culture, but other languages rarely became a worthwhile subject of consideration. The gradual erosion of this perspective is the slow fall of Babel that took place in the hearts and minds of at least a good number of early Christian writers and intellectuals, whose compositions have survived and who represented various languages and literary traditions. This step-by-step process included discovering and internalizing the fact that there were multiple other languages in the world as well as subsequent attempts to interact with their speakers within the distinctly Christian paradigm.

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3 The term “folk linguistics” encapsulates the type of linguistic speculations that originate in spontaneous observations people make about different languages. This is similar to what we will explore here, yet with a difference in that for the purposes of this study we will focus on linguistic observations made by the members of ancient literary elites, for it is mostly their views that are attested in the primary sources on which we will be working. See Bugarski, “The Interdisciplinary Relevance of Folk Linguistics.”
This experience became formative for the development of specific Christian identities in later periods. Scholars have long discussed the manifestation of gender, racial, and ethnic identities in the various religious traditions. This book is an attempt to demonstrate that language is just as important for the understanding of the religious processes in the past as the categories of gender and race, especially if one studies the history of early Christian communities in the traditionally multilingual and multicultural regions of the ancient Mediterranean and the Near East. Christianity brought about not only a rise in the use of non-classical languages in literary compositions and the epigraphic record, though this is important, but also a shift in language prestige. Whereas it had previously been linked to the powerhouses of politics and education, now prestige was also connected to religious performances and experiences, which were mediated by a whole range of languages beyond Greek and Latin. The appearance of new language performances as forms of specifically Christian religiosity makes the question of how Christian elites conceptualized the use of different languages all more crucial to investigate.

Recently, there has been an increase in scholarly interest in the sociolinguistic situation in the ancient Mediterranean, resulting in the fundamental contributions of J.N. Adams, Fergus Millar, Bruno Rochette, Roger Bagnall, Arietta Papaconstantinou, Hannah Cotton, Robert Hoyland, Jonathan Price, David Wasserstein, T.V. Evans, D.D. Obbink, Scott Johnson, and many others. My research builds on the works of these scholars but seeks to shift the attention to how various Christian elite groups in Late Antiquity conceptualized their own or someone else’s languages, how these ideas informed their perception of Self and Other, and to what extent language became a factor in shaping their religious identities.

Only a few earlier studies have centered on the interplay between sociolinguistic reality and linguistic ideas attested in religious narratives. Raymond Person has addressed the question of how the Hebrew Bible reflects linguistic and cross-linguistic interaction. He has drawn attention to the ways in which biblical narrative portrays the relationship between

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3 Adams, Bilingualism and the Latin Language; Adams, Janse, and Swain (eds.), Bilingualism in Ancient Society; Millar, Religion, Language, and Community in the Roman Near East; Millar, Rome, the Greek World, and the East, vol. 3; Millar, "Ethnic Identity in the Roman Near East, AD 325–450"; Rochette, Le latin dans le monde grec; Bagnall, Everyday Writing in the Graeco-Roman East; Papaconstantinou (ed.), The Multilingual Experience in Egypt; Cotton et al. (eds.), From Hellenism to Islam; Evans and Obbink (eds.), The Language of the Papyri; Johnson, "Introduction: The Social Presence of Greek."
social differentiation and languages in use. Christine Cooper-Rompato has analyzed the late medieval hagiographical accounts describing females’ miraculous proficiency in foreign languages and the use of the topos of xenoglossia as an instrument for crafting the image of a holy person. Deborah Gera has brilliantly expounded ancient Greek ideas on language, its beginnings, and its role within society and has provided an important methodological framework for my research. My book, like hers, is not an investigation of the socio-linguistic situation in the ancient Mediterranean per se (although the issue remains an important backdrop for the discussion), nor is it the history of the Greek, Syriac, and Latin languages over the period or a systematic account of ancient linguistics and grammar theories. All these previous studies demonstrate the benefits of the approach I will undertake, but they do not focus on Late Antiquity. To the best of my knowledge, there has not yet been an attempt to carry out such an integrated study in the scholarship.

One of the main questions the book raises is to what extent Christian elite groups objectified language as a part of their identity. According to the basic definition, objectification is the act of representing a process, action, or relation as an object or thing. The term has acquired negative connotations in many social contexts. In the field of cognitive studies, however, objectification is considered an essential element of cognition and self-cognition. It implies a reflexive mode of perception and interaction that leads to a conscious apprehension of cultural phenomena that had previously been taken for granted. A typical example of objectification is the episode when Jourdain, the protagonist of Moliere’s play The Bourgeois Gentleman, discovered that he had been speaking prose for more than forty years without knowing it. But just as Jourdain needed the concept of poetry to understand what prose is, one needs to be involved in cultural and social interactions with others in order to objectify one’s own language, ethnicity, cultural practices, etc.

Dictionaries and grammar books are the major cultural artifacts that explicitly treat language as an object. There are, however, much more subtle ways in which not only professional linguists but also lay people using language objectify it. This reveals itself in their thought patterns and in the attention they pay to languages they are exposed to. Inquiring about...
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objectification of language by early Christians, we inquire about their linguistic awareness, i.e. to what extent they were actively aware of their linguistic code as being something different from the language that the alloglottic Other used.

The alloglottic Other – the Other that speaks a different language – is one of the most important concepts in this book. It is also the one that is notoriously difficult to define, and not only because “a language is a dialect with an army and navy,” as the popular saying tells us. As we will see, the lines that demarcated alloglottic otherness in the past may or may not run where the modern linguistic science puts them. Historically, there have been situations in which dialectical, stylistic, or contextual varieties of what had been previously considered a single language started to be perceived by its own speakers as actual different languages. These developments often have little to do with criteria defined by linguists today. The history of post-classical transformations of Latin into Romance languages and popular reflections on this process, for example, provide lots of materials to study where the real and imagined lines of alloglottic otherness run and when and why they become important.

A sociolect – a variant of language associated with a particular social group or class and thus implying certain social distinctions – may be tendentiously conceptualized as a different language. One can easily imagine social contexts in which linguistic peculiarities of a sociolect speaker would be regarded as a more important factor in differentiating between the Self and the Other than actual foreign languages. The classical study of Pierre Bourdieu, for instance, offers a brilliant critique of social habits, including discriminative and manipulative practices, that developed on the basis of speech differences between speakers of the same French language. Bourdieu argues that linguistic utterances have a certain “value” that varies by different communicative contexts or “markets.” The practical competence of educated high-class speakers who know how to navigate different markets gives them the important “linguistic capital” and enables them to take advantage of switching speech registers up and down as a situation requires, while those of lower social strata, for whom their specific parole is

8 Michel Banniard in his *Viva Voce* shows the gradual process of realization of the increasing “allophonie” of Romance languages from Latin and Carolingian attempts to remedy the situation.

9 Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*. Another important study is Labov, *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. 
Language of a poetic composition may have been perceived as different in kind from that of prosaic speech. While some literary poems were highly stylized and probably very difficult for everyday people to comprehend, the practice of composing religious hymns in local dialects or in low key versions of the elite language was very widespread in the ancient Mediterranean and is attested across different traditions. Such hymns in vernaculars were easy to remember and chant. The idiosyncratic character of their language, coupled with the contentious and often heterodox ideas that these hymns were meant to popularize, resulted in labeling their performers as the Other by those who did not share the same beliefs.

This book adopts a somewhat simplistic approach to defining the alloglottic Other in Late Antiquity. I will focus primarily on instances when ancient writers discussed languages that they perceived as foreign and when their understanding was not much different from what we would designate by the same concept today. These criteria are not, of course, unproblematic. Taking our lead from the ancients, we begin to tread on the shaky ground of their linguistic terminology. For example, what is the difference between “Syriac” and “Aramaic”? Modern scholars define Syriac as a late Aramaic dialect, originally the language spoken in fourth-century Edessa and Nisibis that gradually spread its influence geographically west and south and became a literary idiom employed by Christian speakers of other Aramaic dialects. Ancient authors, however, did not think along these lines. They sometimes employed the two terms – “Syriac” and “Aramaic” – interchangeably, but on other occasions their use seems to depend on the communicative situations they were describing. “Syriac” may have functioned as a link to indigenous traditions of Semitic Christianity, while “Aramaic” evoked associations with former imperial powers of the region. It may well be that the two distinct language names

Moreover, the strategies one chooses to navigate different linguistic markets are remarkably gendered. Both Labov and Bourdieu make observations that working-class women are more likely to adopt prestigious forms of speech than working-class men. Yet men usually take the lead in developing new vernacular forms of expression. Adopting prestigious forms of speech for men comes “at the cost of a double negation,” namely, their working-class social identity and their masculinity, for the preference for refined expressions would render them effeminate’ see Thompson, “Editor’s Introduction,” 18.

See epic poems by Nonnus of Panopolis or the hexameter poetry by Gregory of Nazianzus.

For example, the hymns of Bardaisan and those of Manicheans, Arius’ Thalia, and Augustine’s Psalm against the Donatists. In his Panarion, Epiphanius of Salamis mentioned Hierakas who composed hymns in Coptic and in Greek (Epiph. haer. 3.5.67-3.7 (GCS 37:136, lines 9–12)).
were meant to convey the status of a speaker, rather than vocabulary or grammar distinctions, and that ancient writers viewed socially the entities that we tend to perceive philologically today. The lack of terminological consistency on their part, however, prohibits any certainty. Yet, the baseline idea of a foreign language is important for this book. I will only briefly touch upon the subject of unintelligible ecstatic speech, of the language of God and that of angels, and I will skip over the otherwise exciting topic of animal languages almost completely. These themes will be of our interest only when they inform our discussion of early Christian ideas about foreign languages.

Another major methodological problem is the apparent elusiveness of the very phenomenon we try to study. How could we possibly detect the dynamic of linguistic awareness among different early Christian intellectuals and groups? So far scholars have been making the most of epigraphic and papyrological material to learn about actual language use in antiquity. Linguistic sentiments expressed in larger narrative compositions have been often left aside, for it is not obvious how these anecdotal observations and abstract theories of Christian literati could benefit our understanding of the social dimension of human interaction in the past. Yet, this is exactly the body of evidence we will primarily focus on. Despite being indirect and speculative, such linguistic observations are invaluable in that they provide some general coordinates that enable us to at least chart the terrain and start the discussion of how linguistic otherness was conceptualized in late antique Christianity. There are several promising avenues we will be exploring in this book.

First, we will follow early Christian commentaries on language-related phenomena described in the biblical narrative, such as the tower of Babel and the Pentecostal gift of tongues. We will inquire when, how, and why these quite obscure episodes started to be positively read as stories about the start of linguistic diversity and speaking in actual foreign languages and what implications the corresponding exegetical choices had for the formation of distinctly Christian and specific confessional identities in Late Antiquity. For early Christian writers, the Bible was often the first thing they turned to in order to satisfy their curiosity about many subjects, including languages. Their commentaries demonstrate an astonishing variety of thought on what appears to be a few succinct scriptural remarks on language use. Given the growing influence of the Bible as a point of reference for the explanation of historical reality in this period, the passages

Fögen, “Antike Zeugnisse zu Kommunikationsformen von Tieren.”
in question and their interpretations had an important impact on the Christian understanding of linguistic history and linguistic diversity. They incited various theoretical speculations about the meaning and purpose of multilinguality in the newly Christianized universe.

Second, we will analyze metalinguistic comments in early Christian narratives. Metalinguistic comments are the remarks on the use of different languages made by late antique authors. They perform what Roman Jacobson describes as the metalinguistic function of language, i.e. glossing the code in which communication takes place. For example, in the Life of Antony, Athanasius of Alexandria somehow surprisingly inserted a comment: "One day he [Antony] came forth and . . . said to them [monks] this in the Egyptian tongue (tē Aigyptiakē phōnē)."

The passage acknowledges the linguistic code used by the protagonist, brings it to the reader's attention, and thus performs a metalinguistic function. With regard to their function, this and similar remarks can be defined as metalinguistic comments. Other examples include a narrator's references to code-switching, the concurrent use of more than one language in the same conversation; to diglossia, a situation in which two languages or dialects are used for different communicative purposes within a single community; to foreign or loan-words in one's speech; to interpreters and translators; and to learning foreign languages. The metalinguistic comments in early Christian literature constitute a major data set that has not yet attracted scholarly attention. Yet it reveals important information about the objectification of language by Christian intellectuals or, in other words, their linguistic awareness.

Related to metalinguistic comments are larger depictions of mundane and miraculous linguistic skills and events in Christian literary compositions. Hagiographical narratives are especially promising in this respect. Comparing the ways in which multilingual individuals and communities had been traditionally depicted in Greek and Latin literature with those attested in the texts written from a distinctly Christian perspective, we can

14 Roman Jacobson thus explained how this function works within a single lexical code of English: “Imagine such an exasperating dialogue: ‘The sophomore was plucked.’ ‘But what is plucked?’ ‘Plucked means the same as flunked.’ ‘And flunked?’ ‘To be flunked is to fail in an exam.’ ‘And what is sophomore?’ persists the interrogator innocent of school vocabulary. ‘A sophomore is (or means) a second-year student.’” (Jacobson, “Closing Statement: Linguistic and Poetics,” 356). The metalinguistic function, however, is not limited to this type of equational sentence. "Are you speaking in English or what?" is another example of when language is used to talk about language itself.

catch a glimpse of the shifts in perceptions of the alloglottic Other that Christianity brought forth.

Finally, various kinds of language-related value judgments and quality statements that reveal the socio-cultural stereotypes writers in Late Antiquity held about foreign tongues and their speakers constitute another valuable data set for our study. The proverbial saying commonly attributed to Socrates, “Speak so that I may know thee,” is as true now as ever. The first thing each new group of my students notices as soon as I walk into class for the first time and open my mouth is my foreign accent – and I had better be aware of it and address the issue straight away! This may not save me from their uninvited curiosity, but at least I minimize the chances of them holding against me the popular stereotypes bolstered by Hollywood movies and similar kinds of cultural products. Even in today’s increasingly globalized multicultural and multilingual world, where people are constantly exposed to various linguistic influences and experiences, whether one likes it or not, we attribute certain characteristics to, for example, an abstract Italian, or Spanish, or Russian speaker. The Google search engine is quick to prompt you into thinking that the French language is “beautiful,” while German is “harsh” and “angry.” These explicit or implicit clichés and biases are deeply embedded in our mentality. When people overhear a conversation in a foreign language, they often turn their heads only to confirm a preexisting set of stereotypes. With due adjustments, the same applies to the human experience in Late Antiquity. Syriac writers would habitually note that the Greek language is unnecessarily florid and pretentious, while their Hellenophone or Latinophone contemporaries would return the favor, labeling Semitic languages as rude and barbarian and describing their sounds as “puffing and hissing.” It is one of the purposes of this book to tease out the language-related stereotypes attested in early Christian writings in order to glean a better understanding of the symbolic meaning, relative prestige, and contextual use of languages in Late Antiquity.

Within its first few centuries, Christianity reached speakers of Latin, Coptic, Syriac, Gothic, Ethiopic, Georgian, Armenian, Arabic, and numerous other languages. They were all “foreign language speakers” with respect to each other. Experiences of bilingual and multilingual individuals undoubtedly complicated the picture further. This presupposes a mind-boggling variety of perspectives, and, unfortunately, not all of them are adequately reflected in primary sources. Therefore, our analysis will be Mediterranean-centric. It will account for positions articulated by Greek, Latin, and Syriac writers. There will be a few instances when I engage with
Coptic narratives, but I do not have enough materials at my disposal to make a case for a distinct set of ideological and rhetorical strategies dealing with foreign language speakers that developed in the Coptic milieu. Paradoxical as it may seem, the existing body of Coptic literature, even though it originated in late antique Egypt, a multilingual area par excellence, and despite providing uniquely rich data for the study of actual cross-linguistic interactions in the past, does not yield much in terms of loaded metalinguistic remarks, judgmental statements, or larger theoretical speculations about languages and distinct exegetical approaches to language-related biblical passages. The question of why the Coptic voice is somewhat underrepresented in the linguistic discussions that greatly preoccupied Christians elsewhere is tremendously important and needs to be specially addressed in a different place. Here I would just like to take the opportunity to briefly mention a point that will be elaborated on later in the book – namely, that living in a milieu where the coexistence of several languages was an essentially normal situation does not necessarily lead to more conscious reflections on the subject of languages and to a higher degree of linguistic awareness. In fact, quite the opposite may be the case.

The chronological limits of the present work, as is often the case with studies like this, are not easy to justify. The famous advice Alice received in Wonderland, “Begin at the beginning, . . . and go on till you come to the end: then stop,” may sound simple, but its practical application in historical research raises questions, especially when the extreme points on both ends are quite tentative. Our discussion overall begins when early Christian writers first started to address the issue of languages, linguistic diversity, and linguistic history in the second and early third centuries. This includes Justin Martyr, Tatian, Theophilus of Antioch, Hippolytus of Rome, Irenaeus of Lyon, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Tertullian. The core of our analysis will engage with writers living in the fourth to sixth centuries and representing the Greek (Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius of Alexandria, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Jerusalem, Epiphanius of Salamis, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, and Theodoret of Cyrrhus), Latin (Hilary of Poitiers, Filastrius of Brescia, Jerome, Rufinus of Aquileia, Ambrose of Milan, Ambrosiaster, Augustine of Hippo, John Cassian, and Victor of Vita), and Syriac (Aphrahat, Ephrem, Narsai, Cyrus of Edessa, Jacob of Sarug, and Philoxenus of Mabbug) literary traditions.

16 Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass (Yearling: New York, 1992), 182.