

HIEROGLOSSIA

A PROPOSAL

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The following essay is based on a lecture given at Waseda University in December, 2002. In it, the author, a former visiting scholar at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, and professor of Japanese Buddhism currently working on Japanese poetry on the Lotus Sutra, attempts a broad cultural framework for encompassing the relationship between Chinese-language scriptures and the Japanese paraphrases that were considered a religious practice by medieval monastic poets.

The purpose of this short essay is to expand on some remarks I made in a booklet I published a few years ago in Japanese,¹ in order to bring together scattered facts of cultural history and to define a phenomenon which should be the object of a more systematic research.

Although I have always endeavored to keep in mind William of Ockham's warning against the unnecessary multiplication of beings and have for the most part tried not to be contaminated by the all too common French disease of coining new words and forging trendy concepts supposed to explain more or less everything, in the end, I yielded to the temptation myself and proposed to academia a term I felt necessary. Although it is not meant to explain anything, it does help define an area that has not, to my mind, been sufficiently considered as a matter of investigation, despite its importance. Thus I took the bold step of coining the term *hieroglossia*² to express a *fact* and a *lack*.

1. 『二一世紀の漢文——死語の将来』; English subtitle: *Kanbun for the xxist Century: The Future of Dead Languages*, Nichibunken Forum, nr. 122, International Research Center for Japanese Studies, Kyoto, 2002.

2. At least as far as I know this is the first time the term is used in this sense, although *hierology* might have been more appropriate, given that it already existed in ancient Greek (*hierologia*) in a meaning rather close to the one I have in mind ("sacred or mystical language or discourse"). However, it

A Common Cultural Pattern

The fact, if we can speak with any assurance of a *cultural fact*, is as follows: I found that one of the most permanent cultural traits in the written cultures of Eurasia³ (including the Northern part of Africa and Ethiopia) is precisely the phenomenon I am calling *hieroglossia*. By this I mean the sum of relations that develop between a language perceived as a central or founding element in a given culture area (this language being the *hierogloss*) and a language or languages that are perceived as being dependent, not historically or linguistically, but ontologically or theologically, on that hierogloss. Within a hieroglossic relationship, the language perceived as dependent, often called the “vulgar tongue” or “vernacular” (or, as I will call it, “laogloss”), is clearly considered not to be self-sufficient. The “vulgar tongue” will either supply its vocabulary, be it abstract, religious, or philosophic, by borrowing massively from the hierogloss, content with simply adapting the foreign terms to its own phonetic system; or it will undertake, through the work of the clergy and literati, the much more subtle and deep task of reconstructing its own vocabulary, reorientating its conceptual links on the basis of the hierogloss and attempting to reestablish within its own frame the mental association of the model tongue. New associations of ideas may develop within the laogloss, but these will be understood as enriching and concretizing the potentialities of the hierogloss. This new phenomenon within the laogloss will thus be considered an exegesis of the hieroglossic original, but not a true innovation. Such a hieroglossic relationship seems to obtain in all the religious and cultural areas of Eurasia.

The *lack* I wish to address is this: In most cases of hieroglossia, the hierogloss itself is what is currently labelled a “dead language,” that is, a language that is no longer the mother tongue of a sufficient number of people to allow it to evolve further as a living language. It is for all purposes a “frozen language,” although with certain qualifications and nuances that will be taken up later. This historical

would likely have been ambiguous in modern languages, as most people would take it to mean “study of the sacred.” The word *hieroglossia* exists in ancient Greek as well (at least under the adjectival form *hieroglossos*, “speaking a divine or prophetic language”), albeit in a somewhat different meaning that should not interfere with the present one, inspired as well from the neologism *diglossia*, coined by Charles Ferguson in 1959, which seems to have rendered some service to research to judge from its wide adoption. The distinction between diglossia and hieroglossia will follow later in the text.

To be sure, there is some risk in claiming paternity for a newfangled term in this globally intercommunicating world, but a search on the Internet for *hiéroglossie* and *hieroglossia* yielded only one occurrence, and that only on some search engines: *hieroglossia*, referring to my book mentioned in note 1, where I gave the word a Greco-Latin form following the construction of the term *diglossia*.

3. It should be added at this point that limiting my *tour d'horizon* to Eurasia does not mean that Africa, ancient America, or Oceania are irrelevant to the study of hieroglossia. On the contrary, I am convinced that many interesting examples could be found in these continents, as can be seen for example in the classical study of Michel Leiris, *La langue secrète des Dogons de Sanga* (Paris, 1948). For my part, I must confess all but total ignorance in these matters.

freeze is one of the main factors contributing to its hieroglossic status, which is why we sometimes see that the religious dimension of a hierogloss follows on its classification as a traditional “dead,” or at least definitively settled, language.

Unfortunately, historians and philologists are constrained to narrow their researches to a severely limited spatial and temporal field. This is no doubt for the best, since to do otherwise would risk falling into amateurism—the very thing I fear I shall be accused of in what follows. Moreover, linguists seem, by definition, to be interested only in languages in evolution. “Dead” languages are taken up as a legitimate object of research only if they go back to the period when they were “living,” that is to say spoken. Although most scholars are dimly aware that the same phenomenon is to be found in other fields than their own, they tend to regard the written survival of a sacred or traditional language that has long since disappeared from the scene, as a kind of historical aberration. And not only an aberration, but evidence of a certain cultural backwardness if not a sign of the control exercised by a privileged class on the rest of society.

This all too simplistic view is certainly the most generally held, and it is routinely repeated even in recent studies, always with the same naïveté—or disingenuousness—and the same tone of virtuous indignation. It would suffice if those who avail themselves of the illustrious title of historian to do the historian’s work and investigate a little further than their own age to discover that the endurance and universality of this phenomenon invalidate the available sociological and mechanistic explanations. I would go further. We would have been better off if the knowledge of a dead language were enough to secure tyrannical control over people. To impose the study of Latin declensions or Chinese poetry at school seems to me a very minor form of oppression. Typical of that oversimplified interpretation, resulting from excessive confinement to a single field, is the book by Prof. Françoise Waquet, *Le latin ou l’empire d’un signe*, which is regrettably the only monograph of some breadth, albeit very partial, on Latin hieroglossia in modern Europe.⁴

As I have said, linguists are by definition only interested in living languages, those that are learned as mother tongues and wander freely from mouth to mouth. Nowadays they even seem to prefer oral forms of speech to the written

4. Cf. the well targeted criticism on that work by Prof. Terence Turnberg in the Latin journal *Melissa* 110 (2002), 7–9. For an overall historical survey on Latin in Europe, the little book by Joseph Farrell, *Latin Language and Latin Culture* is highly recommended. To be fair, there are also a host of pious ejaculations on the Latin language, as *Le latin immortel* by M.-M. Martin (Paris, 1966) or B. Lécurieux, *Le latin langue de l’Eglise* (Paris, 1964, 2000), that contribute nothing to our understanding of the phenomenon apart from testifying to the enthusiasm it generates in certain circles. The same may be said of the innumerable academic apologies for the Latin language that fail to take into account other cultures, one of the best being perhaps Jacques Perret’s *Latin et culture*, (Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, nd.). See also the work of Paul Berry cited in the bibliography, a work that seems promising but that I have been unable to consult.

word. One can hence easily understand that dead languages—that is, languages mainly transmitted by writing or learned in a traditional form of study and not by the “natural” way—inspire little interest in them. When linguists study a dead language, they concentrate mainly on materials produced in an age where it was considered to be living. Thus it is that the Latin language is now an object of great interest by linguists in Japan and the West, in the same way that meticulous and exciting researches are conducted on archaic Chinese. Needless to say, I do not intend to criticize linguists or linguistic research. Their methods are perfectly suited to their aims and it is only logical that they exclude dead languages from their fields of investigation, as these have ceased to develop and are unresponsive to the stimuli of history.

Surely such a judgment is myopic, since it is entirely possible to construct a philological history of dead languages. But that would consist of a history of their teaching and how they correlate to the level of education: the higher the level is, the more “correctly” those languages accord with traditional criteria concerning their writing or speech, and the less the influence of the vernacular is to be felt in their oral or written realization. There is no denying that very important studies have been done on the different degrees of influence from the hierogloss to the laogloss, and vice versa, as for example studies on the contamination of Japanese on the Sino-Japanese (*kanbun*) texts, or traits of Old Church Slavonic in the grammar of the Russian literary language. Yet no one would sustain that this belongs to the mainstream of linguistic research; moreover, such studies are generally centered on the history of the vernacular and not on the hierogloss itself.

The phenomenon of the survival and cultivation of dead languages has therefore to be approached differently, since linguistic research has little to offer of itself. Once a catalogue has been made of all the grammatical mistakes produced under the influence of various vernaculars by those writing or speaking a dead tongue—arranged according to regions, countries, and epochs—little will be left to discuss.

A more or less sociological approach would be equally frustrating. There is no more reason to neglect such an approach any more than a linguistic one, but I fear it would be particularly slanted and susceptible to bias. Indeed, sociological research into the use of dead languages unavoidably falls into the rubric of diglossia and the ensuing consequences are predictable, as can be seen from what the scholar N. Srinivas has called *sanskritization*, a term that should cover at least in part what is of our concern here, but which now seems to have become a tag in an ideological fight drifting further and further from what it originally purported to define. The same can be said of diglossia, a very useful category for encompassing a variety of socio-linguistic situations from the creole languages to Modern Greek. If hieroglossia is reduced to a particular aspect of diglossia,

it is all too evident that only sociolinguistic approaches will be deemed appropriate to its study, and we will land ourselves back in the same pattern of social domination, an unhappy prospect if we remember that exploiters elaborated much more efficient instruments of exploitation than the use of dead tongues.

The same sociolinguistic brackets of diglossia can be set around the recurrent accusation of “elitism” being cast at certain vestigial forms of European pedagogy that continue to preserve the study of classical languages. Professor Waquet, referred to above, subscribes to the custom and indeed makes it one of the mainstays of her essay. She has apparently been unaware that the paradigm has shifted and that nowadays, at least in the French educational system she is concerned with, Latin has been replaced by mathematics, with apparently the same flaws that should make them the target of more or less the same criticisms. Latin was an instrument of selection, but so now is mathematics; Latin is of no use for pupils preparing for adult life in society, but that is also the case with arithmetic, especially nowadays when handheld computers can take care of all the calculations necessary to daily life. For a grammar school child today, studying Latin or Greek offers little in the way of social success; it simply means taking on an unnecessary burden for the sheer love of learning. But here we are already far beyond the scope of sociolinguistics.

There is another argument for the uselessness of studying Latin and Greek proposed by the same author and proceeding from a deep misunderstanding of the phenomenon insofar as she fails to locate it within the broader frame of hieroglossia. It is often remarked that there is no use learning those languages, since everything has been already translated and it should be enough for the general reader to read ancient works in modern translation. This, to my mind, is a quintessentially jejune argument, as one could say quite the same thing about English: nobody would be able even to read a significant part of what is translated each year from English into French, so why bother learning English when you can go your whole life reading Anglo-Saxon authors translated in French? Or again, the same holds true for Japanese or Russian authors. But apart from that, it is simply wrong to say that everything has been translated. We are not even close.

The claim that the whole of Latin literature has been translated ignores completely the much longer period when Latin was no longer used as a living language, but cultivated as a dead, or simply written, language. Of the output spanning more more than a thousand years, from the sixth to the eighteenth centuries,⁵ only a small fraction has ever been translated. There is not yet a com-

5. I could choose arbitrarily either the death of Boethius (“the last Roman”) in 525 or the death of Isidore of Sevilla in 636 to mark the “end of living Latin.” For a *terminus ad quem* I choose the date of publication (1741) of the last Latin literary work to have had a general influence in Europe, the

plete modern translation available of the works of Erasmus, or even of the Latin works of Petrarch, Pico della Mirandola, or Giordano Bruno, to mention only some of the more illustrious names, not to mention the host of medieval theologians and philosophers who used Latin exclusively in their compositions.

The Persistence of Ancient Languages

There is yet another essential trait of hieroglossia that is in no way limited to Latin. While the cult of “natural” or “living” languages has had the effect that in Europe not only philologists but also linguists are bent on narrowing their focus to only those periods when the literary output was in a living language, the fact is that the literary history of the sacred and traditional languages by far exceed the “natural” period. Let me quote a few examples.

As we noted earlier, the living literary period for Latin extended from the third century BCE to the sixth century CE, and the “hieroglossic” period from the sixth century to the present day—less than a thousand years on one end, and one thousand four hundred years on the other.⁶

Things are more complex with Greek, but also more significant. The Homeric tongue, which one may date back to the eighth century BCE, was already dead, if indeed it was ever spoken at all and not simply used as the idiolect of wandering poets, when Homer became a reading manual for the whole of the Hellenic world. The Attic dialect, the one used by Plato and the tragic dramatists, became settled during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE and thereafter was cultivated artificially. Thus Lucian of Samosate, who flourished in the second century CE and even today appears lively and witty to those few schoolchildren who study Greek, was actually writing in a language so utterly dead in his own time that he sought to resuscitate it as the champion of the “atticizing” school. In his day “common” Greek, or *koinē*, which had come to the fore in Alexander’s empire, had won the day to become the language first of the Eastern Roman Empire and then of the Greek Orthodox church until the nineteenth century. One has only to read the translations made by the fourteenth century Byzantine scholar Maximos Planoudes⁷ of the great works of Latin literature or, much later, those

Underground Travel (Nicolai Klimii Iter Subterraneum) by Ludvig Holberg (Ludovicus Holbergius; 1684–1754), a work which, as most modern scholars seem to keep forgetting, was originally written in Latin before being translated into Danish. Needless to say, Latin writing has been cultivated even into the twenty-first century, although translations are far more numerous than original works. One of the most recent is the translation of Patrick Süskind’s novel *Das Parfum* as *Fragrantia* by Nicolaus Gross (Fundatio Melissa & Musée de la Maison d’Erasmus, Brussels, 2004).

6. It may be added that Latin is by far the most alive of the dead languages on the Internet.

7. See his Greek version of Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy: Boëce, De la consolation de la philosophie. Traduction grecque de Maxime Planude*, ed. by E-A. Bétant (Geneva, 1871; reprint Amsterdam, 1964).

made by the scholar and adventurer extraordinary Demetrios Galanos (1760–1833), who translated Sanskrit works like the *Hitopadeśa* in a good classical Greek, to realize that the literary history of the ancient Greek tongue spanned nearly three millennia and was by no means restricted to the first thousand years to which most scholars would like to contain it.⁸

Sanskrit is particularly interesting in this regard. Here is a language that “died” long ago, but the most famous literary monuments of which, in contrast to those of Greek and Latin, include both the period when it was alive and that after it died out. If European students had applied to Sanskrit the categories they used for Greek and Latin letters after the revolution of humanism, they should have stopped with the Upanishads and considered all later production as boneless imitations. And that would have meant no more Kalidasa, no more Dandin, no *Gītagovinda*, and no *Kathasaritsagara*, all luminaries of a language that was cultivated well after it become frozen in time. This was never a question in India. It was a matter of course for pundits as well as those in other castes to think and compose in Sanskrit. Not before the nineteenth century and the development of modern attitudes did the relevancy of such activity come to be questioned.

In China, if the *Analects* of Confucius or even the works of Zhuangzi or Mencius often give the impression of spoken speech directly recorded, or if we think we can find in the *Guofeng* part of *The Book of Odes* lively reflections of oral poetry, it seems that the rupture between spoken and written speech was definitively consumed by the Han dynasty. From that time on, with certain notable exceptions, especially in Buddhist literature, the written language, severed as it was from the tongue of the people, was the only accepted medium until the birth of *baihua* or vernacular literature, which can be dated in several ways but was firmly established during the Ming dynasty. The confrontation between literary and colloquial language, *wenyan* and *baihua*, lasted well into the twentieth century and has not yet completely disappeared. We may recall that between the two World Wars, there was a debate raging inside the Chinese community in Malaysia (whose usual Chinese dialect was so different from the Mandarin speech being promoted at the time for new literary creation as to appear a totally foreign language) concerning the option for Mandarin. Not a few writers simply advocated a return to Zhuangzi’s style, which in fact was not as alien to them as Peking’s parlance.

In Japan the classic literary language is based on the Kansai dialect, but it must have diverged in a significant way from the spoken tongue by the end of the Heian era. Although subtle qualifications need to be introduced and the

8. This does not include the Mycenaean period, which would bring us further back by half a millennium. I will not deal here with the diglossia of modern Greek, which could be seen as a narrower aspect of the hieroglossic question. Of this, more later.

“hybrid Sino-Japanese style” (*wakan konkōbun*) treated separately, we can say in general that from the end of the Heian period until the end of World War II, not only literary works, but also scientific, technical, and legal texts were for the most part written in a perfectly frozen, “dead,” language. For example, the Japanese Civil Code, inspired by the French Code Civil which the French writer Stendhal regarded as a narrative model for the novelist, was compiled in that highly artificial, pseudo-classical language, and it was not until the final decades of the last century that jurists complied to the new trends and eventually had it transposed into modern Japanese language.

The situation in Japan was further complicated by the fact that the diglossia between classical (or written) and modern (or spoken) Japanese was part of a larger hieroglossic complex where the use of classical Japanese (*bungo*) paralleled the widespread written use of verbalized classical Chinese in Japanese (*kanbun*). Classical Chinese, which, as we have seen, had long since ceased to be a spoken language on the mainland (if indeed it had ever had been), has been in use in the Japanese archipelago longer than the Japanese language itself. The oldest written remnants found in Japan are all in Chinese, though it is a matter of considerable debate whether traces of the Japanese vernacular are to be found in them. Taking both languages together until the end of the nineteenth century, and taking into account all the monastic documents, literature in the widest sense of the term, and texts in “near-Chinese” (*hentai-kanbun*), it is entirely possible that the sheer volume of texts written in Chinese in Japan slightly exceed what was written in Japanese.

I could mention any number of other instances of the survival of dead tongues with Tibetan, Tamil, Mongolian,⁹ or the very interesting case of Armenian (see below), or even, to go back further to ancient Sumerian.¹⁰ And we ought not forget Syriac, based on a language whose spoken form must have disappeared around the sixth century, although scholars have succeeded in tracing its literary history down to the thirteenth century. Indeed, a modern student has produced rich evidence for the literary output in Syriac until the twentieth century, and one can still find it cultivated on the Internet.¹¹ Here, however, I prefer to introduce two languages belonging to the same linguistic family but whose destiny has been very different, and which have been involved in deep, frequent, and even conflictive relationships: Hebrew and Arabic.

9. As should be obvious, I persist in considering diglossia a subclass of hieroglossia.

10. See the article by Piotr Michalowski, “The Life and Death of the Sumerian Language in Comparative Perspective,” electronic version of an article to be published in *Acta Sumerologica*, <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~piotrm/DIGLOS~1.htm>.

11. I am speaking here of classical Syriac, not of Neo-Syriac or the so-called Assyrian language. See Macuch in the concluding bibliography.

One often hears that modern Hebrew is the sole example of a dead language brought back to life. Extinct for at least two thousand years, ever since the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman army in the first century CE (or even earlier, by some accounts), Hebrew reappeared quasi-miraculously on the lips of the people in the twentieth century, thanks to the genius and labors of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, a savant of Lithuanian ascent who emigrated to Palestine in 1881 and made up his mind while crossing the Bosphorus to speak nothing but Hebrew with his wife. He is, so the legend goes, the first person in modern times to raise his children in Hebrew and thus restore it to the status of a living language.

Eliezer Ben-Yehuda's life is fascinating indeed, and one cannot read it without feeling oneself carried away by his burning desire to see Hebrew restored as a living, even national tongue. But to claim that the revival of language after a hiatus of twenty centuries is his doing is really an oversimplification.¹² Actually, as the Australian linguist Dixon reminded us some years ago, the Hebrew language had never ceased to accompany the Jewish people throughout its history as a hierogloss. The state of language that was resuscitated in the course of the twentieth century was definitely not the idiom of biblical times, but a tongue much more fluid and richer in vocabulary and grammar which had developed in hellenistic and medieval times. Although its morphology was more or less stabilized, the Hebrew tongue that was cultivated by religious scholars and poets came under the influence of Greek and Aramean languages first, then of Arabic, and later of the European languages, among which it stood as fast as a symbolic fortress of identity for a people. Immutable in its *raison d'être*, its architecture underwent numerous minor changes and adjustment in the course of history. This characteristic can be extended to hieroglossia as a whole: sacred and traditional languages only *seem* to be immutable because the overall grammatical and semantic structure appears to hold steady over the centuries, but actually, insofar as they are not confined to ritual chanting but are positively cultivated, they cannot avoid a living relationship with surrounding vernaculars and soak up their influence.

The Puristic Trend

This brings me to yet another digression on the subject of linguistic purism. Even within a hieroglossic system there can occur sharp oppositions between rigorists or purists on one side, and laxists, moderates, or libertarians on the other. Some writers or learned groups may decide to follow the language usage

12. See his autobiography, *Le rêve traversé*, ed. by Gérard Hadad, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 1998 (first edition in 1988), together with the memoirs of his son Ithamar Ben-Avi, *Mémoires du premier enfant hébreu*.

of a certain period, or even of a certain author held to be the model of pure and good language, and cast aspersions on all less strict or more eclectic authors who deviate from this grammatical and stylistic norm, forging for themselves a more personal style elaborated according to models of sundry times and places.

In Latin this situation is exemplified by the great polemics surrounding Ciceronianism that raged in the sixteenth century. One might even define the European Renaissance, from a purely philological point of view, as the shift from medieval Latin—a most striking example of the evolution of a dead language that we have alluded earlier. Under the influence of vernacular vocabulary and syntax, medieval Latin, while keeping more or less the morphology of classical Latin, had acquired a general appearance much closer to spoken languages¹³; from the time of Petrarch in the fourteenth century erudite writers appeared claiming to have returned to the high linguistic style of antiquity and to have imposed on themselves a strict compliance to its style and usage. Beginning with Italy, the rest of Europe gradually followed suit in looking back to the ancient canons. Soon enough, however, a rift appear within the camp of those who came to be known as “humanists.” If they all discarded without regret the “gothic” or “scholastic” style of their elders, the degree of the strictness with which they adhered to ancient models varied. One need only read the flexible and easy flowing style of Erasmus in his *Colloquia* or *Adagia*, which gives the impression of reading an author writing in his mother tongue, in contrast to the much heavier and more pompous style of Julius Caesar Scalinger or Antoine Muret, to realize how the same notion of classical language took widely different forms in the concrete. Purists would refuse to use vocabulary not found in Cicero or Caesar. In fact, they would not even consider the looser style of Cicero’s letters a suitable model, but held fast to his orations and philosophical dialogues. Some would even go so far as to refuse to use verbs in persons or tenses, or nouns in cases that were not attested to in Cicero’s canonical works.

Accordingly, certain scholars have argued that this resurrection of classical Latin was the very reason for its demise a century or two later. Had the literati remained content with the much simpler Latin flourishing at the end of the Middle Ages, it would have been more readily and more widely accessible and hence would have kept a status close to a vernacular. As for myself, I cannot agree with that view, but it is an interesting proposal and deserves closer investigation.

Something of the same phenomenon can be seen in a still more striking form in the quarrel that pitted the two main centers of the Armenian culture in

13. There are solid grounds for arguing that medieval Latin what nothing more than the continuation of vulgar Latin as spoken at the end of antiquity, something that would have been natural in regions speaking Romance languages. Dante seems to hold this idea in his *De vulgari eloquentia*.

Europe against each other in the monasteries of the religious order known as the Mekhitarists in Venice and Vienna. Founded in the eighteenth century by the famous Armenian priest Mekhitar (1676–1749), who had rallied the church of Rome, the order that took his name took as its mission the salvaging of the Armenian nation. In the effort to lift it out from under oppression and obscurantism, they brought modern European culture and sciences to the people, subscribing to the idea current at the time that the best way to defend Christianity among the oriental nations was first to transform the clergy into a cultural élite who could raise the rest of the population to the level of Europe. Like most languages, Armenian is divided by linguists into three main levels. The first of these is the classical tongue, or *grabar*, which is the language of the translations of the Bible and the Church Fathers as well as of the body of original literature that grew out of them from the fifth century CE onwards. Second, we have middle Armenian, which flourished after the twelfth century; and third, modern Armenian, which is itself divided into two principal dialects: the eastern dialect, which is the official language of now independent Armenia, and the Western dialect that survived in the diaspora to Lebanon, Europe, and America after the slaughter of the prominent Armenian community in Anatolia in the beginning of the twentieth century.

The Mekhitarists engaged themselves in the intensive and admirable enterprise of translating not only religious texts, but literary and historical works as well from European languages into classical Armenian, among them the writings of Latin poets, Greek historians, and medieval theologians. Then an unexpected dilemma surfaced. Progress in philology led to the recognition of two slightly distinct levels in classical Armenian, or *grabar*: a first period dating roughly from the year 400 to the middle of the fifth century, and a second beginning from the second half of the fifth century, when new grammatical forms unknown in the earlier age appeared.

The nineteenth century saw an unexpected rise of purism, with some monastic writers claiming to hold to the oldest and purest style for translations and original writing, and banning all subsequent innovations. Against this view, others objected that it is absurd to renounce forms well attested in prestigious authors. Things got bitter and the two opinions hardened into opposing camps, the Vienna monastery holding fast to the earlier, “Golden Age Armenian,” and the monastery of San Lazzaro in Venice representing the more liberal attitude.¹⁴ With the turn to the twentieth century, the feud drew to an end as the monks abandoned the classical language in favor of modern Western Armenian, a decision all the more regrettable in that the language of independent Armenia

14. See Martiros Minassian, *Manuel pratique d'arménien ancien*, Klincksieck, Paris, 1976, 24, and Marc Nichanian, *Âges et usages de la langue arménienne*.

has now become Eastern Armenian.¹⁵ I had the occasion to ask a monk of San Lazzaro if the practice of writing in *grabar* still existed and was told that it does not. Classical Armenian is now a passive hierogloss, studied only with an eye to comprehension and not actively cultivated. It, too, has fallen victim to the lack of understanding of the phenomenon of hieroglossia and the accompanying cult of spoken language, after a dazzling but brief period of revival, possibly inspired both by the example of the Latin Renaissance of Europe and by the great wave of renewal of classical Arabic language and literature known as *Fahda*, in which Christian Arabs of Lebanon played an important part.¹⁶

After digressing on a number of problems unique to hieroglossia and wanting in the same form in living languages,¹⁷ we may return to Hebrew, more or less the same debate over purism is to be found, particularly in the first generations of the modern literary revival of the nineteenth century. What is often presented in literary history as the first modern Hebrew novel, *Ohevet Tsion* or *The Love of Sion* by Abraham Mapu (1808–1867), a short narrative, is written in a *calque* of biblical style as regards to grammar, syntax, and vocabulary, which led to debates as to how to define the form of language to be adopted by Hebrew writers. The question was not an easy one, as shown by the work of Shmuel Iosef Agnon, the most famous Hebrew novelist of the twentieth century, who came up with a solution of his own. While not submitting blindly to biblical language, he introduced assorted elements from a wide range of antique and medieval texts. Steeped as he was in traditional learning, he refused to yield to the lure of spoken everyday Hebrew as he heard it around him in Palestine. A winner of the Nobel Prize for literature and venerated as one of the founding fathers of modern Hebrew literature, Agnon seems, unfortunately, not very accessible to the younger generations, lacking the traditional religious education to appreciate him. In a word, his is the world of Hebrew hieroglossia, while younger Israeli

15. Space prohibits me from speaking of Coptic, a language that the Muslim conquest of Egypt gradually obliterated from the early Middle Ages. Though no longer spoken, it survived mainly as a liturgical tongue under its northern form the so-called Bohairic dialect; the southern dialect, Saidic, vanished altogether. In the modern attempts at reviving Coptic, a minority favors rejecting Bohairic in favor of Saidic, which is thought to be “purer” for reasons of its antiquity and for the renewed prestige it earned with the unearthing of the Nag Hammadi gnostic library, whose texts are written in a dialect close to Saidic. Altogether, we cannot help being reminded of the dilemma facing ancient Armenian.

16. Ignorant though I am in these matters, I would venture the possibility of an influence by European humanism on the *Fahda* through the medium of the revival of classical Syriac letters, implemented by Rome with the founding of the Collegium Maronitarum. See Pierre Raphaël, *Le rôle du Collège Maronite Romain dans l'orientalisme aux xviiie et xviiiie siècles* (Beyrouth, 1950).

17. This is not to say that they are not found at all. One could, for example, cite the novel by Umberto Eco, *Lisola del giorno prima*, in which the author flatters himself not to have used a word unattested to in seventeenth century usage. There are also literary creations by Balzac and Anatole France pastiching medieval French. But those are limited examples of scholarly amusement verging on the prankish.

people received Hebrew as a vernacular, or laogloss, with much less essential links to traditional culture.¹⁸

The most patent case of active hieroglossia in the modern world is no doubt Arabic. Inasmuch as it is more commonly considered in terms of diglossia, the description of the case of Arabic has been partial and unsatisfactory. The fact is, written Arabic was virtually born with the Koran. Despite the tradition of “pre-Islamic poets” who are thought to have flourished in the “age of ignorance” and whose authority is sometimes invoked in lexical or grammatical matters, a number of scholars have come to assert that this comparatively limited corpus actually postdates Islam, or at least was radically refashioned well after the time of Mohammed. It is probably safe to say that literary (or “literal,” as it was sometimes called) Arabic is broadly modeled on the language of the Koran. Traits peculiar to the Koranic style have come to make it considered “inimitable.” Attempts to imitate it too closely, to the extent that it can appear as pastiche, is deemed blasphemy. There was at least one case in the twentieth century of a Christian translation of the Psalms whose Arabic appeared to approximate too much the style of the Holy Writ, evoking a volley of criticism from the circles of the devout.

What is more, the extremely exalted status accorded the Koran in Islam was cause for the Arabic language to become the hierogloss *par excellence*, in contrast to what has occurred in Judaism or Christianity. As is well known, in order to save Islam from the fate that Christianity suffered with the transmission from the Greek to the Latin world, or with the polemics against the Greek Septuagint translation from the Hebrew, it was decided at an early stage that the Koranic text should not be translated into any other language, the original Arabic being recognized as the only received text. The untouchability of the sacred text, together with the work of writers and grammarians, gave a durability to written Arabic. Even now, apart from texts pertaining to genres regarded as minor, like comic strips or comedy, written Arabic or Modern Literary Arabic (MLA) tries to adjust to classical grammatical standards, while the spoken language evolves on any number of levels bounded by daily dialect and sustained speech modelled on the written style. *Mutatis mutandis*, writing in Arabic nowadays could

18. I must mention here the question raised by linguists like Paul Wexler concerning the alleged change of nature in the Hebrew language after its adoption as a vernacular. They argue that it has lost entirely its original character as a semitic language (especially in the verbal system) and been transformed into a calque of European languages through the agency of Yiddish, the natural language of the majority of the first emigrants. In this regard Wexler takes an extreme position in *The Schizoid Nature of Modern Hebrew: A Slavic Language in Search of a Semitic Past* (Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1991). See also the Internet edition of a paper by Shlomo Izre'el: “The Emergence of Spoken Israeli Hebrew,” Symposium *Corpus Linguistics and the Study of Modern Hebrew*, Emory University, Atlanta, February 2000, which concludes: “The emergence of Hebrew as a spoken language was not the revival of a dead language, but the creation of a new language.”

be compared to writing in medieval Latin for the speaker of an Italian dialect. The only form of dialectal Arabic to be written systematically is the Maltese language, clearly belonging to the Maghreb dialect continuum in spite of its abundant borrowings from Italian, and written with the Latin script.¹⁹

The case of Arabic is so dazzling in its clarity and its singularity among modern languages that it is not often described as it really is: a language that should be called “dead,” relying on a grammar stabilized during the ninth and tenth centuries, which is both a sacred tongue and a language used at all the levels of modern life. In Arabic, all the failures that are attributed to diglossia are rectified by the simple fact of hieroglossia. That is why we can safely assume that its paradoxical situation is here to last, notwithstanding critics within and without.

Under the circumstances, it is not hard to see why religious translation is not often encouraged; when Islam spread to non-Arabic speaking peoples, only juxtalinear translations—glosses, so to speak—were tolerated, and that only for certain languages. The only acceptable way of gaining knowledge of the Koran was to learn classical Arabic, since no translation could ever measure up to the original. Only in modern times do we see a flourishing of versions in other languages, at first mainly out of literary interest, then out of concern for religious studies, and finally from the commitment of Westerners to Islam. The first European translations were made in Latin during the Middle Ages, the aim being to give clerics a direct knowledge of Christianity’s principal rival in the world as it was known to the West. This rejection of the basic principle of translation had lasting consequences in the Muslim world, parallels of which exist in other cases of hieroglossia but unique in their reach. Even if we leave aside the issue of scripts and confine ourselves to languages,²⁰ it is impossible to give even the broadest sketch of the situation. I content myself here with the examples of Persian and Hindustani, which seem to me typical.

Persian had been the language of an ancient civilization when the Persian empire was conquered by the Arabs at the end of the seventh century. At that time the language in use was mostly Middle Persian, or *Pahlavi*, but the Muslim invasion and the cultural upheaval that followed in its wake made room for

19. Maltese is also an interesting case of hieroglossia, with its partition of Arabic and Romance vocabulary according to categories involving strong religious elements, e.g. *sliem* “(interior) peace,” “serenity” v. *paċi* “peace” (as opposed to war). Cf. Joseph Cutayar, *Parlons maltais* (L’Harmattan, Paris, 1999), 119.

20. The issue of sacred scripts and their relations with the profane, which we could call *hierographia* or, in French, *hiérogaphie* (a term that has been coined independently, I am pleased to say, by my young colleague M. Jean-Pascal Pouzet, a scholar of medieval English literature, in a paper that is to be published in the *Comptes rendus des séances de l’année 2004* of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres), is too vast to even hint at here. For Arabic script alone, it would involve not only the major languages of Islam—Persian, Osmanli and Oriental Turkish, and Urdu—but would cover a vast area from Malay, Javanese to Dutch through Serbo-Croatian and Albanese.

the rise of Modern Persian, which was committed to writing as early as the ninth century with an Arabic alphabet adapted to the very different phonetics of Iranian languages and became the medium of a rich literature. As was the case with English and Franco-Latin vocabulary or the languages of sinicized East Asia, the Arabic lexicon made an impressive entrance into Persian, surely accounting for between three-quarters and two-thirds of the vocabulary. The terms coming from the Arabic hierogloss would naturally relate to religion, ritual, and law, but they extended to philosophy, politics, and the arts as well, and even to basic daily vocabulary. As in other languages, we notice the important number of doublets, words of Arabic origin coexisting with their Persian synonyms and allowing a greater variety of expression.²¹

Sooner or later, the massive intrusion of foreign words into any language seems to elicit a strong reaction from the receiving side, and Persian was no exception. If anything, it reacted comparatively early, as one of the masterpieces of Persian literature, the *Book of Kings*, a long epic poem narrating the legendary history of ancient Persia, was composed by Firdausi (d. 1020 or 1026) in a style from which all Arabic vocabulary was banned as far as possible. That this was not a mere rear-guard action from a doomed world is shown by the resurgence in contemporary Iran of the same concern with restoring the integrity of the old language against what is felt to be a foreign invasion. One may mention here the writer Ahmad Kasravī (1891–1945), who sought to free Persian from the excessive use of Arabic words²² and was assassinated as a slanderer of Islam. There is today an Internet site called *Pure Persian Project* which posts lists of proposed Persian vocabulary to replace imported Arabic words. Unlikely as it is that a significant number of those revived or coined terms will ever find their way into the language, the persistence of this spirit of resistance over a millennium gives pause to think. We are not dealing here with some vagaries of cultural chauvinism, but with a deeply rooted tendency in the life of languages.²³

Hindustani illustrates another type of hieroglossic relation with Arabic. I deliberately use the somewhat old-fashioned name for this language which gradually came to be the *lingua franca* of the Moghul empire and was transformed from the eighteenth century, at the hands of great poets, into a refined medium

21. To pick examples at random from the Persian translation of the *Arabian Nights* made in the nineteenth century by Abdollatif Tajusi Tabrizi, I find on the same page *enām* and *pādaš* “reward,” *asar* and *nešāne* “sign,” *harakat* and *jombeš* “move.” (I have adopted the convenient transliteration system called Unipers which I discovered on the Internet.)

22. See Peter W. Avery *et al.*, *Modern Persian Reader III. Advanced* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 5.

23. These separations of heterogeneous lexica within the same language are not always hostile, as shown by the example of classical Japanese poetry (*waka*), from which all Chinese vocabulary is excluded. The same writer could cultivate both Chinese-style poetry (*kanshi*) and *waka*. This led to the very interesting development of Buddhist poetry in Japanese (*shakkyōka*).

written with an Arabian-Persian script and replete with borrowings from the same. From the nineteenth century on, non-Muslim Indians in Northern India felt the need to reappropriate Hindustani as a literary and official language. It began to be written with the old Indian script known as *devanāgarī* and was elaborated on the basis of the dialect called *khari-bolī*. One of the main tasks of the reformers was to replace Arabian-Persian borrowings with the learned Sanskrit lexicon. The political problems of the twentieth century and the Partition of India only fueled the desire to differentiate the two states of the same Hindustani language, now called Urdu and Hindi, the former being a distinguishing mark of Muslims, the latter being supported by Hindus and non-Muslims in general. While both “languages” are for the most part mutually intelligible in their daily usage, they diverge more and more drastically in their religious and learned vocabulary.²⁴ The dominance of English on the Indian subcontinent may well solve the problem in the not so distant future.

Hieroglossia and the “Three Monotheisms”

This might be the place to sketch, if only briefly, a comparison of hieroglossic relations in the “three monotheisms.” Given what has just been said, Arabic hieroglossia obviously leaves little room for vernacular languages, which are all peripheral to the Arabic sacred tongue. As a consequence, any tendency to linguistic purism that is not centered on Arabic looks to be opposed to Islam. This attitude, however, may not be not universal throughout the Muslim world. As far as I know, there is no purist trend in Urdu (a purist Urdu would be called Hindi), but Bengali offers a more complicated case in that even after the independence of Bangladesh, it did not develop into a dichotomy of Hindu and Muslim dialects. Moreover, modern literary Bengali is less fraught with Arabic-Persian borrowings than Urdu is.²⁵ Could it be that Indo-Aryan vocabulary was used in Bengali both for Hindu and Muslim notions? Be that as it may, the only language in the Islamic world that seems to have been granted a special religious status apart from Arabic would be Syriac, the language, according to Massignon, in which the individual judgment (as opposed to the collective Last Judgment) is carried out after the death of the individual. It is also believed that Syriac was

24. It is instructive in this regard to compare Urdu and Hindi translations of the Bible, where almost identical sentences differ only by the use of substantives from Arabic-Persian origin, on the one hand, and Sanskrit, on the other. See Stuart McGregor, “The Progress of Hindi, Part 1: The Development of a Transregional Idiom,” in Pollock, *Literary Cultures in History*, 912–57; and Harish Trivedi, *op. cit.*, 962–71.

25. But see on this question Sudipta Kaviraj, “Two Literary Culture Histories in Bengal,” in Pollock, *Literary Cultures in History*, especially 531, 541 (with note 53) and 542–3. Incidentally, I do not see any need to change the name of the language from *Bengali* to *Bangla*, any more than I would dream of requiring English speakers to refer to my language as the *Français language*, or me of theirs as *l’english*.

the language spoken by Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. This belief has not, to the best of my knowledge, had any impact on the use of Syriac within Islam, as to this day the preserve of Christians in the Middle East and has never been used by Muslim commentators for Koranic exegesis.²⁶ Belief in the uncreated and eternal nature of the Holy Book as coexisting with God from the beginning in the Arabic language—a belief that came to be symbolized with the concept of the Guarded Table or *al-luh al-mahfuz*, the archetypal eternal exemplar of the Koran, of which worldly copies are no more than a reflection—has contributed in no small way to giving that language a special place in the pantheon of hieroglossia.

In Judaism, of course, the sacred tongue is Hebrew. Although some scholars would not express it in those terms, it is difficult to explain any other way the expression *lashon ha-qodesh* or “tonghe of holyness,” which is reserved for Hebrew. (It is often used in Yiddish, for example.) True, the whole of the Hebrew Bible is not written in Hebrew. Apart from the Apocrypha that are written in Greek, parts of the Hebrew canon are written in Aramaic, an older form of the Syriac language. Although the role of Aramaic is still very restricted in the Bible, it held a place of considerable importance within Judaism for its role in the Targum and the Talmud. *Targum*, a word generally meaning “translation,” is used more specially for the originally oral vernacular translation of the scriptural verse read in a synagogue service. A ritual place was reserved for such translation practices already from early on in Judaism, contrarily to what prevailed in Islam. In Hellenistic times, the two main laoglosses used in Targum were Aramaic and Greek, both languages that defined the Middle East from Syria to Egypt at the time. For reasons most probably linked to the growing assimilation of the Greek language into Christianity, as well as to the role of the Septuagint version in the new religion, only Aramaic kept its liturgical role and forsook its oral status for a written one, witnessed by the fact that up to the present it figures in traditional midrash literature as small letters set alongside the Hebrew text of the Bible.

The other great domain of Aramaic was the Talmud (meaning “learning”) in its “Babylonian” edition, a massive body of texts transmitting the “oral” law of Judaism and the basis for religious practice. Unlike its predecessor, the *Jerusalem Talmud*, the *Talmud of Babylon* was written in Aramaic and the important place it had in Jewish life made it necessary for anyone aspiring to religious knowledge to learn the language. Even books of daily prayers still include verses or whole prayers in Aramaic.

26. This demonstrates the different direction taken by European research on Koranic language. For a recent example, see Christoph Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Korans: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* (Verlag Hans Schiller, 2004, 2nd edition).

Things did not stop there, however, and Judaism underwent a further development that saw Aramaic exalted to the point that one may wonder whether it had not come to equal the sanctity of Hebrew itself. This was the rise of Kabbala. As is well known, in the thirteenth century there appeared in the world of Judaism a book whose reception was extraordinary and which originated the most vigorous trend of Jewish mystical thought. The *Zohar*, or (*Book of Splendor*), is presented as the teachings on the hidden meaning of the Torah attributed to Simeon Bar Yohai, a scholar of the first century CE. Most likely in order to give his wonderful forgery an atmosphere of genuine antiquity, the author of the *Zohar*, Moses of Leon, chose to write it in an Aramaic style that, in Gershom Scholem's judgment, is largely idiosyncratic but succeeds in giving the text a peculiar and recognizable flavor. The veneration that was accorded the *Zohar* in some circles was so deep that, even though the work is directly accessible in the original text only to scholars steeped in its language, the belief arose that it was enough to touch the book or apply it to ailing parts of the body to benefit from its power. One can hardly get any deeper into hieroglossia, which is why I suggested that Aramaic came somehow to equal Hebrew in sanctity. Still, given that the *Zohar* purports to be a mystical exegesis of the Hebrew Bible, the hierarchy of the two languages remains in place.

It is perhaps this peculiar relationship between Hebrew and Aramaic that gave birth to an idea that I find very interesting for the understanding of hieroglossia. The twentieth century Cabalist Elie Benamozegh posits that the languages of mankind number seventy-two, each one revealing in its own translation of the Bible deep meanings that can be expressed only in that language.²⁷ Seen in this light, the languages become an integral element of hieroglossia; in them the sacred tongue displays the full wealth of its meaning. This idea is very close to the views underlying the practice of Japanese buddhist poetry (*shakkyōka*), as I hope to demonstrate at a later time. For now, it is enough to remark how the richest hieroglossic situations are those in which room is made explicitly for the "vulgar" tongues, these rising in status to the point that they arrive at the level of the sacred language.

Christianity presents a rather complex hieroglossic system. Up to the time of the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s, we find three languages with the status of sacred tongues:²⁸ Hebrew, Greek, and Latin (to which we may add biblical Aramaic, sometimes called by the old name of Chaldaic or Chaldean, an ambiguous appellation that sometimes includes Syriac). For Hebrew and Aramaic, as for Greek, the matter is simpler: the fact they are the languages of the two Testaments foundational for the Christian faith is sufficient to justify

27. See Charles Mopsik, *Cabale et cabalistes* (Paris, 1997, 2003), 172.

28. See Auvray et al. in the concluding bibliography.

their hieroglossic status. Latin, in contrast, was the civilized language of the Western Roman empire, and boasted a prestigious literature that was the basis of learning from late antiquity through the Middle Ages until modern times, after the demise of Greek culture in the West, but otherwise had no claim to the title of a sacred language.²⁹ The success of St Jerome's translation of the Bible in Latin completed in 406, the importance of the Latin Church Fathers, and the essential role of Latin in the expansion of the Church across Western Europe, not to mention the central place of the papacy as the heir of the Roman empire—all these things converged to endow Latin with a prestige and primacy that was sanctioned by the decision to authorize the Latin translation of the Bible, with the fitting appellation of *Vulgate*, as an authentic text divinely inspired, and to raise the Latin language to hieroglossic status.

Very similar developments took place in almost all languages of all Christian traditions of ancient origins: Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopian, and even Slavonic. The translation of the Bible into those languages, which often signalled the beginning of their literature, conferred a dignity close to the original Hebrew and Greek. Even with the renewal of the translation movement in Renaissance Europe, when Protestantism stimulated a wave of biblical translations in the vernaculars, each new “vulgar” Bible tended to become in turn a paradigm both on the literary plane as well as on the religious. One thinks at once of Luther's German Bible or King James version in English.

As an example of the natural evolution of religious texts along hieroglossic lines, we may cite the fate of Luther's Bible in America, where the Amish sect, whose members came from German-speaking areas of Europe, has kept it as the basis of their religious practice and the model of their written language (rather much the same as Catholic Europe did with the Latin language during the Middle Ages), while the language of daily life is a highly evolved German dialect. There are also cases where translations of the Bible counter the natural flow of the language, as we see in the sixteenth century Finnish translation, which imitated so closely the wording of the German version that it imposed a clearly recognizable biblical idiolect that held on for several generations against the opposition of purists and later attempts to produce translations more in keeping with the genius of the Finnish language.³⁰ We may argue that the King James version and Luther's translation are hieroglossic phenomena within English and German, something wanting in French, for example, where the same relation is rather oriented toward the Vulgate. Accordingly, many Anglo-Saxon novelists

29. The fact that the reason for Christ's crucifixion was appended to the Cross in Hebrew, Greek and Latin (according to Luke 23:38 and John 19:20) has been often invoked in apologetic literature as grounds for the sanctity of Latin.

30. See Aurélien Sauvageot, *L'élaboration de la langue finnoise* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1973).

have been able to take full advantage of this easily recognizable and so easily pastiched biblical idiolect, as we can see, for example in the examples of William Faulkner's *Light in August* or Cormack McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*.

These random remarks permit a clear contrast between the one-directional hieroglossia of Islam, on the one hand, and the multi-directional and variegated hieroglossia of Judaism and Christianity, for all their differences, on the other. At the same time, what makes the hieroglossic phenomenon itself rise above these and other analogies is the dominant and clear-cut concept of a sacred or holy tongue. Similarities are more easily perceived when seen from the outside. In particular, I suggest a glance at the situation obtaining in the Buddhist world or in the Chinese cultural sphere, the two of which at times overlap.

The question of language in Buddhism is immensely complex, though I confess I developed the concept of hieroglossia from my study of Japanese Buddhism. There I found a most transparent hieroglossic situation, indeed an exceptionally clear one and all the more interesting since it involves three languages: Sanskrit, Chinese, and Japanese. Premodern Japanese scholars did not define this situation as hieroglossia, but they have left us very articulate reflections on the religious quality of the relationship among those languages. Many of these scholars were also monks and poets, and simply felt the need to explain and justify what they were about. I leave the fuller problematic to another occasion and will simply note here that whereas the monotheistic world in its three religions had clearly defined some languages as having a status absolutely different from the others, Buddhism rejected that assumption a priori from early on, probably as a reaction against the too great preeminence accorded to Sanskrit in Indian Brahmanism, a situation that calls to mind its parallel in the monotheistic religions. In the course of history, we witness a reversal of this trend with the adoption of Sanskrit as the privileged language of the Great Vehicle, the fixation of Pāli as the one language of Theravāda, and finally the rise of a hieroglossic relationship between Chinese and Japanese within the theoretical framework of Buddhist thought.

Of the three monotheistic hieroglossia, it may be noted, the Christian seems to have suffered the most in our days, especially in its Catholic form, with the fall in status of the Latin language after Vatican II. One surmises that the fact that Catholicism, unlike the other two monotheistic religions, could not focus on a single language with theological legitimacy may have been responsible for the dispersal and weakening. Protestantism went further still in that direction, with the result that hieroglossia would cease to be a factor in the evolution of modern Christianity. One may, of course, point to the revival of the Latin liturgy in the American Catholic church, as in some parts of Europe, but the purely liturgical use of a sacred tongue—or “passive hieroglossia” as I call it—is surely the least interesting and more often than not a foreboding of the disappearance

of a language in that it demands only minimal knowledge from the believers. A bilingual book of prayers is more than adequate in most respects.

Coexistence within One Language

We may now turn to yet another remarkable aspect of hieroglossia, one in which the sacred language takes on, as it were, a kind of independent life within the vulgar language, that is to say where its influence is not limited to the vocabulary or the semantic transfer, but where the grammar of the former continues to work in the latter.

A compelling example can be seen in the Persian language. As anyone who has studied Persian knows, even a smattering of the language requires familiarity with the Arabic grammar that governs the Arabic elements that have entered into the language. To take one concrete example from one of the most widely used handbooks, A. K. S. Lambon's *Persian Grammar*, pages 3 to 177 cover Persian language properly speaking, while pages 181 to 245 describe in brief all there is to know of Arabic morphology to be able to handle the Arabic vocabulary in Persian. One notices from the start that this minimal grammar has mainly to do with the noun, and only derived participial or nominal forms of the verb, while almost nothing is said of the personal conjugation of verbs. The reason is not hard to understand: the soul of a language, at least of an inflected language, resides in its verbal conjugations. Whereas it is a relatively simple matter to transfer nouns from one language to another, since they do not change categories but remain nouns they are accorded a relative stability. But it is hard to imagine one language using two different verbal systems at the same time, one imported and one native. When a verb is borrowed, it is mostly adapted to the native conjugation, as in the French *j'ai shooté* ("I took a shot," e.g., at goal), and Persian is no exception. The Arabic verb *fahima* "understand," whose verbal noun is *fahm*, became with the adjunction of a verbal suffix the Persian verb *fahmidan*, which is regularly conjugated. But only a knowledge of Arabic grammar can differentiate the shades of meaning between *qasd* "decision" in the sense of "taking a decision" (a verbal noun) and *masqud* "decision" in the sense of "something that has been decided" (passive participle), both coming from the same root *qsd*. The same holds for *mayl* "willingness, inclination" and *māyel* "willing" (active participle). Such formations are found by the thousands in Persian.

More remarkable still is the fact that Arabic pronominal suffixes indicating possession are sometimes applied to Persian words, as in the endearing locution *nure cašmi* "light of my eyes," where the Arabic suffix *-i* is for the first person of the singular, while *cašm* "eye" is pure Persian, the regular Persian way of expressing the same idea being *cašmam*.

But the most perplexing grammatical trait in Persian is perhaps the presence of the so-called “intern” or “broken” Arabic plurals, typical of a number of Semitic languages. Whereas modern Persian expresses very simply the plural by appending the suffixes *-ān* or *-hā* to substantives, Arabic nouns undergo an internal change in thirty or so possible patterns, only partially predictable from the form of the singular. As one example, consider the Arabic word *ketāb* “book,” the Arabic “broken” plural of which, *kotob*, coexist in Persian with the more colloquial form with the native suffix *ketāb-hā*. Obviously the ability “correctly” to inflect this Arabic vocabulary is a sign of greater literacy and confers, or at least once conferred, prestige on the user.

Moreover, the strong hieroglossic link between Arabic and Persian led to the current practice of quoting in the original Arabic whole verses from the Koran (which would not have to be translated in any case), or from other religious, philosophical, or literary works.³¹ In such cases, the cultivated reader is expected to know the whole of Arabic grammar. Deriving from this practice of integral quotation is the use of countless adverbial locutions, clichés, and proverbs that passed directly into Persian. It would be easy to give examples of the same practices in the Hebrew-Yiddish or Sino-Japanese hieroglossia.

Questions for Future Research

As intimated earlier, the study of the evolution of Buddhist poems composed in Japanese on the basis of excerpts from Chinese-language sūtras (*hōmonka*) led me to the notion of hieroglossia as a way to speak of the set of relations occurring between a particular sacred or traditional language and one or more languages considered dependent of this language for the higher truths of religion. It is essentially a religious phenomenon and hence may or may not develop along sociolinguistic lines and hence be susceptible to diglossia. But hieroglossia falls in the main outside the scope of sociolinguistics since there is no need for a minimum number of persons to make it worthy of study. The case of a single individual may be as fascinating as that of an entire religious community. The study of hieroglossia would involve the use of history of religions, literary studies, philology, linguistics, sociolinguistics, and even psychology. In effect it embraces the full relationship between language and religion to the extent that one at least of the languages involved is a sacred or traditional one.

After this admittedly somewhat muddled presentation, I would like to conclude by noting hieroglossic attitudes within historical Eurasian cultures, indicating some categories for further possible research:

31. See any page from one of the best read classical works of Persian literature, Saadi's *Golestān*. Modern editors have felt it necessary to give a Persian translation of the quotations.

- Discourse on supremacy, truth, or efficacy of a sacred language.
- Critical discourse aimed at a sacred language, especially in time of religious or scientific reform.
- The discourse of the affiliation of vulgar languages with sacred languages.
- Exegesis of religious texts: exegesis performed in the same language, or in another language. This admits of various possibilities, according to whether it is a “vulgar” language, another sacred language, or at least a language endowed with a certain prestige.
- Translations of religious texts.
- The shift, transfer, and adaptation of religious vocabulary.
- Religious polemics based on translations or borrowings in another language.
- The access of a “vulgar” language to religious status: the vying for sacrality.
- Liturgical and magic use of sacred languages (the two not to be equated).
- Language purism and religion or magic.

There are many other possible headings, any number of which I imagine will already have occurred to students of a given religious tradition after a glance at the ten points listed above. I deliberately refrain from giving precise examples for each of them, as the possibilities are well nigh infinite.

It is my hope that this new field of study, or rather this unifying term for ancient fields, will not be deemed an empty fantasy or a useless adjunct to an already overweight catalog of pompous and hollow neologisms, that at least it will help some to realize that what they have been doing relates to a wider world than they had previously thought.

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