



MARIO PEI

Theories of Language Beginning

BORN IN ROME, Mario Andrew Pei (1901–1978) came to the United States after his father's drugstore business failed in 1908. He was seven years old and spoke Italian, but he quickly acclimated to English while attending a parochial school in New York City. At Francis Xavier High School, Pei learned Latin and Greek and added a modern language, French, to his repertoire. He went on to City College, graduating cum laude in 1925. He taught at City College while earning his Ph.D. at Columbia University in 1932. Pei taught briefly at Rutgers, the University of Pittsburgh, Brigham Young University, and Seton Hall University. In 1937, he returned to teach at Columbia and stayed on as a professor for thirty-three years. He became an eminent linguist and penned more than fifty books covering a wide range of subjects from language to politics, and because he was a great cook, even to Italian cuisine. Pei was extraordinary in that, though he was a ranking linguistic scholar, he was also a gifted, popular writer who could make the study of language intelligible to the interested reader.

Esperanto, a synthetic language, has been connected with Pei because in 1958 he published *One Language for the World and How to Achieve It* and then sent a free copy to every head of state in the world. Pei advocated that world leaders choose a single language to be taught as a second language to every child in every school in every country. That way, people would be able to communicate with each other with much greater understanding than was then possible. Teachers of Esperanto viewed it as universal because it contained elements of most modern languages, which is why Pei became associated with it and ultimately supported those who wished to make it a worldwide phenomenon. He knew that any child

was capable of learning several languages from infancy on, and thus his suggestion would prove no hardship for children.

Pei himself was fluent in many languages. Italian, English, French, and Spanish were his primary languages, but he was said to be conversant in over thirty others. He wrote several books on languages, including *The Italian Language* (1941), *The Story of Language* (1949), and *The Story of English* (1952), the latter two of which were both best-sellers and named to the Book of the Month Club. After the publication of these books, his articles discussing language were frequently published in newspapers and popular magazines.

Pei's Rhetoric

Because Pei imagined his audience to be people interested in language but not to be specialists or linguists, he adopted a very direct and fundamentally simple style. His sentences are brief and compact, his paragraphs are relatively short, and his approach is very straightforward. He begins with a number of theories of language's beginning, using an essentially comic approach in naming his categories: the "bow-wow" theory, the "ding-dong" theory, the "pooh-pooh" theory, and so on. His use of these terms alerts us right away that he is avoiding the technical language used by advanced researchers.

Apart from relying on categories to organize his essay, Pei depends heavily on enumeration. He has four kinds of theories of language origins, two ancient sources of theories, two theories of how language devolves into dialects, and two ways language sounds change.

Once he has dealt with his proposed categories of theories, he moves on to reference examples of thinkers who mused on the origins of language. He begins with discussing the ancients—the Stoic and the Epicurean philosophers—then jumps to the eighteenth century and modern-language specialists. He even remarks on modern experiments with children who had been isolated before they began to speak. Pei uses the technique of contrast when he cites animal sounds as a potential origin of speech, remarking on their sameness over generations as opposed to the variety of human speech over the same time span.

The changeability of languages over time is another topic that he treats with some care; then he moves on to changes in sound and dialects. He refers to very ancient languages, such as Sanskrit, Sumerian, Akkadian, and even to Native American languages. His contrast among the oldest records of Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin

introduces important texts, such as the Vedic hymns and the Homeric epics. Finally, Pei talks not about the origin of language but about the origin and development of words themselves, such as *wine*, *mules*, and *gum*.

Pei's essay introduces us to some of the complexities of language that any researcher must face in trying to imagine language's origins.

PREREADING QUESTIONS:

WHAT TO READ FOR

The following prereading questions may help you anticipate key issues in the discussion of Mario Pei's "Theories of Language Beginning." Keeping them in mind during your first reading should help focus your attention.

- What is the "bow-wow" theory?
- Why are we unlikely to develop an adequate theory of language's beginnings?
- How do words change?

Theories of Language Beginning

God, that all-powerful Creator of nature and architect of the world, has impressed man with no character so proper to distinguish him from other animals, as by the faculty of speech.

—QUINTILIAN

Language, — human language, — after all, is but little better than the croak and cackle of fowls, and other utterances of brute nature, — sometimes not so adequate.

—HAWTHORNE

If there is one thing on which all linguists are fully agreed, it is that the problem of the origin of human speech is still unsolved.

Theories have not been wanting. Some are traditional and mythical, like the legends current among many primitive groups that language was a gift from the gods. Even as late as the seventeenth century, a Swedish philologist seriously maintained that in the Garden of Eden God spoke Swedish, Adam Danish, and the serpent French, while at a Turkish linguistic congress held in 1934 it was as seriously argued that Turkish is at the root of all languages, all words being

derived from *gines*, the Turkish word for "sun," the first object to strike the human fancy and demand a name.

Other theories may be described as quasi-scientific. One hypothesis, originally sponsored by Darwin, is to the effect that speech was in origin nothing but mouth-pantomime, in which the vocal organs unconsciously attempted to mimic gestures by the hands.

Several theories are current among linguists today, but with the distinct understanding that they are as yet unproved and, in the nature of things, probably unprovable. They have been given picturesque names, which proves that linguists, too, can be imaginative on occasion.

The "bow-wow" theory holds that language arose in imitation of the sounds occurring in nature. A dog barks; his bark sounds like "bow-wow" to a human hearer. Therefore he designates the dog as "bow-wow." The trouble with this theory is that the same natural noise is, apparently, differently heard by different people. What is "cock-a-doodle-doo" to an Englishman is *cocorico* to a Frenchman and *chicchirichi* to an Italian.

The "ding-dong" theory sustains that there is a mystic correlation between sound and meaning. Like everything mystical, it is best discarded in a serious scientific discussion.

The "pooh-pooh" theory is to the effect that language at first consisted of ejaculations of surprise, fear, pleasure, pain, etc. It is often paired with the "yo-he-ho" theory to the effect that language arose from grunts of physical exertion, and even with the "sing-song" theory, that language arose from primitive inarticulate chants.

The "ta-ta" theory that language comes from imitation of bodily movements is further exemplified in the Darwinian belief described above.

The ancient Greek philosophers, who gave some attention to the problem of the origin of language, allowed themselves to be led afled by their speculative leanings. Pythagoras, Plato, and the Stoics¹ held that language had come into being out of "inherent necessity" or "nature," which is begging the question, while Democritus, Aristotle, and the Epicureans² believed it had arisen by "convention" or "agreement." How this agreement had been reached by people who had no previous means of mutual understanding they did not trouble to explain.

Leibniz,³ at the dawn of the eighteenth century, first advanced the theory that all languages come not from a historically recorded

¹ **Stoics** Greek philosophers who felt a life of virtue and public service produced happiness.

² **Epicureans** Greek philosophers who felt the pursuit of comfort and pleasure brought the greatest happiness.

³ **Gottfried William Leibniz (1646-1716)** Philosopher who examined language as well as the mind/body relationship.

source, but from a proto-speech. In some respects he was a precursor of the Italian twentieth-century linguist Trombetti,⁴ who boldly asserted that the biblical account of the Tower of Babel is at least figuratively true, and that all languages have a common origin. A contemporary linguist, E. H. Surtreant,⁵ presents a novel theory which, though slightly paradoxical, has its merits. Since all real intentions and emotions, he says, get themselves involuntarily expressed by gesture, look, or sound, voluntary communication, such as language, must have been invented for the purpose of lying or deceiving. People forced to listen to diplomatic jargon and political double-talk will be tempted to agree.

On at least three recorded occasions attempts were made to isolate children before they began talking to see whether they would evolve a language of their own. One such attempt was made by the Egyptian king Psammetichos, the second by Frederick II of Sicily about 1200, the third by King James IV⁶ of Scotland around 1500. These attempts, lacking scientific controls, proved inconclusive. More recent cases of children who had allegedly grown up among wolves, dogs, monkeys, or gazelles have added little to our knowledge, save that the human child, though ignorant of human language when found, takes to it readily and with seeming pleasure, something that his animal playmates are incapable of doing.

Animal cries, whether we choose to describe them as "language" or not, are characterized by invariability and monotony. Dogs have been barking, cats meowing, lions roaring, and donkeys braying in the same fashion since time immemorial. The ancient Greek comic poets indicated a sheep's cry by Greek letters having the value of "beh"; in modern Greek, those letters have changed their value to "vee." The sheep's cry has not changed in two thousand years, but the Greek language has.

Human language, in contrast with animal cries, displays infinite variability, both in time and in space. Activity and change may be described as the essence of all living language. Even so-called dead languages partake of this changeability, as evidenced by the ingenious combination devised by the Vatican to express the ultramodern

⁴ **Alfredo Trombetti (1866-1929)** Linguist and member of the Italian Academy who believed all languages went back to a single source.

⁵ **Edgar Howard Surtreant (1875-1952)** Linguist who wrote on the origins of language. He also wrote a study of the Hittite language, one of the world's oldest.

⁶ **Psammetichos . . . James IV** Psammetichos (fl. 400 B.C.E.) experimented by depriving two boys of human contact to see what their first natural word would be (it was "Becos"); Frederick II (1194-1250) knew many languages and promoted a court that produced the first sonnet; King James IV of Scotland (1473-1513) spoke six languages and promoted culture.

concept of "motorcycle" in Latin—*pirota ignifero latice incita* ("two-wheeled vehicle driven by fire-bearing juice").

In one sense, the reason for the changeability of language is as mysterious as the origin of language itself. In another sense, it is crystal clear. Language is an expression of human activity, and as human activity is forever changing, language changes with it. It seems at least partly established that language changes least rapidly when its speakers are isolated from other communities, most rapidly when they find themselves, so to speak, at the crossroads of the world. Among the Romance languages, a tongue like Sardinian, comparatively sheltered from the rest of the world, has changed little from the original Latin, while French, exposed to all inroads, invasions, and crosscurrents from the rest of Europe, has diverged the most. Arabic, long confined to the relative isolation of the Arabian peninsula, preserves the original Semitic structure far better than Hebrew, located in much-visited Palestine.

Many linguists hold that agricultural and sedentary pursuits tend to give stability to language, warlike and nomadic life to hasten its change. Lithuanian, the tongue of a population of peaceful farmers, has changed little during the last two thousand years, while Scandinavian evolved very rapidly during the Viking era. An influence exerted on language by climate has often been claimed, but never fully substantiated.

Whether much or little, all languages change in due course of time. A modern English speaker encounters some difficulty with the English of Shakespeare, far more with the English of Chaucer, and has to handle the English of King Alfred as a foreign tongue. A French speaker finds the fourteenth-century language of Francois Villon⁷ a little difficult, has considerable trouble with the twelfth-century *Chanson de Roland*, barely recognizes the tongue of the ninth-century Oaths of Strasbourg, and if he goes further back has to handle the documents there was never a break in the continuity of the spoken tongue of France or its speakers.

Two main theories have been advanced concerning the breaking-up of an original tongue into separate languages or dialects, and here again there is evidence of secret imaginative, even poetic leanings on the part of supposedly unemotional linguistic scientists. One is the "tree-stem" theory, whereby the parent language is supposed to act as a tree trunk, while new languages are branches or offshoots. The other

⁷ Francois Villon (1431-1463) Important French poet; he got in trouble for bawling and theft and was sentenced to death but had his sentence commuted to ten years' banishment from Paris in 1463. He was never heard from again.

is the "wave" theory, in accordance with which new languages and dialects arise and spread like ripples when you throw a stone into the water.

Two different modes of change in language sounds are recognized: the change may arise very gradually, almost imperceptibly, and be as gradually and unconsciously adopted by the speakers, or it may arise suddenly, as the result of an innovation made by one speaker who has prestige in the community and is therefore widely imitated.

It is estimated by scientists that some tens of thousands of years elapsed between the beginning of society and art (and, probably, speech) and the first appearance of writing. During these long centuries language continued to evolve, but we unfortunately have no record of that evolution. Linguistic records properly described as such are almost exclusively in writing. The oldest such records at our disposal are those of Sumerian, a language spoken in the Mesopotamian valley between about 4000 B.C. and 300 B.C., when it became extinct. The affiliations of Sumerian are undetermined, but it seems unrelated to the Semitic Akkadian spoken by the Babylonians and Assyrians, who invaded the Sumerian territory about 3000 B.C.

Almost contemporaneous with Akkadian are written records of ancient Egypt and China, both of which go back to almost 2000 B.C.

After this beginning, language records come thick and fast. Many languages of antiquity have disappeared, leaving few and scanty remains. Etruscan, Cretan, Iberian, and Gaulish, to cite a few better-known examples, are among the fallen. Other languages, like those of the North American Indians, are similarly disappearing today. For some dead languages our only records are a few inscriptions on coins or tombstones, or names of people, rivers, and mountains that have come down to us, like the Delaware Indian "Manhattan" and the Iroquois "Adirondack," which survive their originators. Heschius,⁸ a Greek lexicographer of the fifth century A.D., cites words from many ancient languages, including Egyptian, Akkadian, Galatian, Lydian, Phrygian, Phoenician, Scythian, and Parthian. It is a favorite pastime among comparative linguists to reconstruct extinct languages from a few words or inscriptions, in much the same fashion that paleontologists reconstruct extinct animals from a few fossil bones.

No document of the original parent language of our Western tongues, Indo-European, has ever been found or is likely to be found, since the language probably broke up into separate Indo-European

⁸ Heschius Greek philosopher of the fifth century B.C.E. who compiled a lexicon—which remains a valuable resource to this day—of words and their meanings.

languages before the invention of writing. By a comparison of the known daughter tongues, however, linguists are able to present a hypothetical but quite plausible facsimile of this unknown tongue.

The oldest languages of our Indo-European family of which we have records are Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin, in the order given. The approximate dates for each are 2000, 800, and 500 B.C. The original homeland of the Indo-European speakers is unknown, but the Iranian plateau and the shores of the Baltic are the places most favored. From a study of words common to all the Indo-European languages, it can be argued that the original Indo-Europeans knew snow, the birch, willow, and pine, the horse, bear, hare, and wolf, copper and iron. This would place them in the Copper-Stone Age, about 2500 B.C.

The oldest Sanskrit records are the Vedic hymns, a series of religious poems. The Homeric poems, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, mark the beginning of Greek, while for Latin we have a series of inscriptions, the oldest of which, appearing on a belt buckle from the city of Praeneste, reads: "Manius made me for Nummerius."

Among all the world's languages, the Latin-Romance group is the one of which we have the most complete unbroken history. Latin records run from 500 B.C. to the end of the Roman Empire and beyond, merging with nascent French in A.D. 842 and with nascent Spanish and Italian in 950 and 960, respectively.

Anglo-Saxon and Old English are synonymous terms. The Anglo-Saxon period lasted until the middle of the twelfth century, when the Middle English period began. Modern English begins about 1400. Approximately the same periods apply to Old, Middle, and Modern German. It is perhaps of interest to note that as late as the sixteenth century English, today the tongue of 230 million people, had less than five million speakers, being surpassed in point of numbers by German, French, Spanish, and Italian.

Words in our modern languages that can be traced directly back to the pre-Classical tongues of antiquity are relatively few. Our "wine" comes from the Latin *vinum* which Latin seems to have borrowed previously from Etruscan; the word *vinum* appears frequently in Etruscan inscriptions. "Mules" for "house slippers" may go back to Sumnerian, which called such slippers *mulus*. Our word "gun" comes from the Greek *kommi*, but Greek appears to have borrowed it from ancient Egyptian, where it appears in the form *qmit*; Coptic, Egyptian's closest modern descendant, has *komi*. "Cream" may have originally come from the Gaulish or Aquitanian *krana*, though some authorities ascribe its origin to Greek *chrisma*. The "ceana meena mina mo" used in childish games goes back to numerals used by the ancient Welsh tribes, and the Indo-European word which gives rise to our "ten" is

said to have been originally a compound of "two" and "hand," while "five" seems connected with "finger."

English "dad" is a word from baby talk, but the baby talk must have started early, since similar forms appear in many Indo-European languages; Gaulish has *tatula*, Gothic has *atta*, Welsh has *dad*, Russian has *otets*; and some Italian dialects have *tata*.

Animal call words have a long and interesting history. *Dil*, which was originally a call word for geese, became in Irish the word for "dear." "Hog," originally a pet name for a pig, which in sections of England is used for pet lambs and bullocks, gave rise in Irish to *og* ("young" or "little"). The use of "puss" or some very similar word or sound (*bis*, *pus*, etc.) to call a cat is common to the British Isles, Arabia, North Africa, Spain, Brittany, Italy, Scandinavia, Germany, and Holland. Such forms as *pucsi* in the Tamil of southern India, *pisci* in Rumanian, *piso* in Albanian testify to the widespread use of the form.

What are the chances that modern linguists, equipped with the powerful aids of present-day science, may one day break down the veil of mystery that enshrouds the origin of language? Frankly, very slight. The mightiest searchlight cannot cast a beam on what is not there. When man first began to speak, he left no material records, as he did when he first began to write. Hence, the truly scientific study of the origin of language can properly begin only with the beginning of written-language records.

All that the scientist in the linguistic field can do in connection with the beginning of speech is to observe what is observable around him (the speech of infants, the language of primitive groups, etc.), compare his observations with the earliest records and known historical and anthropological facts, and, basing himself upon those observations and comparisons, make surmises, which will be more or less plausible, more or less complete, but never scientific in the true, full sense of the word.

QUESTIONS FOR CRITICAL READING

1. Which of the four theories of language origination seems most plausible to you?
2. What are some of the reasons languages change?
3. What are Darwin's theories of the origin of language?
4. Why are the theories of the Stoics and the Epicureans inadequate?
5. Is language a gift of the gods?
6. What does Leibniz mean when he says all language comes "from a proto-speech" (para. 10)? Do babies create a proto-speech?
7. What gives a language stability (para. 15)?