

## Giuseppe Veltri

# Linguistic Scepticism

εἴπερ γὰρ φύσει τὰ ὀνόματα ἦν καὶ μὴ τῇ καθ' ἑκάστον θέσει σημαίνει, ἐχρῆν πάντας πάντων ἀκούειν, Ἑλλήνας βαρβάρων καὶ βαρβάρους Ἑλλήνων καὶ βαρβάρους βαρβάρων.<sup>1</sup>

Although the expression ‘linguistic scepticism’ today refers primarily to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, specific problems concerning the philosophy of language were already being discussed in Antiquity. Linguistic scepticism therefore is a common terrain of the epistemological strategy of sophism and scepticism, and the dependence of the latter on the former is no longer *terra incognita*.<sup>2</sup> The goal of the following article is less to search for common strategies of both groups than to present a peculiar aspect of significance for sceptical strategies: the discussion of the translatability of words in other languages as an example of the debate on nature-convention (*fysei ē thesei*) in ancient philosophy. My specific interest here will focus on this discussion as reflected in (Jewish) Hellenistic and rabbinic literature and on the intriguing, but nevertheless dogmatic, view of the untranslatability of the divine language (*lešon ha-qodeš*) *per se*.

We will begin with the analysis of an important source, the Greek prologue to the *Wisdom of Sirach*, also known as *Ben Sira*.<sup>3</sup> The Greek translator of the original Hebrew of the book of Shim'on, son of Yeshua', son of El'azar ben Sira, called *Sofia Seirach* in the Greek and *Ecclesiasticus* in the Latin tradition, begins his work by introducing his grandfather's (or ancestor's) wisdom text and explaining the difficulty of translating it. I dealt with this topic in another publication from 2006.<sup>4</sup> In the following, I will take into consideration the criticism of my contribution and respond to it. My special focus here, which has not been considered until now, is also to take into account the argument of Sextus Empiricus, who definitively addresses the same problem of the translation of words, but from another perspective, namely as an example of the alleged natural connexion between words and things.

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1 Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Grammarians*, VII, § 145.

2 See the chapter by Nicholas Rescher, “Greek Scepticism’s Debt to the Sophists,” in idem, *Essays in the History of Philosophy* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1995): 51–70, here 67, reprinted in idem, *Cosmos and Logos: Studies in Greek Philosophy. Topics in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt a.M.: Ontos Verlag, 2005): 63–87; cf. *ibidem*, 82, for the use of the expression.

3 I still do not understand the mixed form used by authors who speak of Ben Sirach.

4 Giuseppe Veltri, *Libraries, Translations, and “Canonic” Texts: The Septuagint, Aquila and Ben Sira in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

## The Translator of *Ben Sira* and the *isodynamata*

Modern scholarship often quotes the Greek prologue to *Ben Sira* as the earliest testimony of the difficulty of translating a book. The common opinion of the prologue among specialists is that the author is speaking of the impossibility of word-for-word translation,<sup>5</sup> or ‘that the Greek text he had written was often semantically not very close to his Hebrew original.’<sup>6</sup>

The grandson<sup>7</sup> stresses a fundamental problem of translation as follows:

For the same things uttered in Hebrew, and translated into another tongue, have not the same force in them: and not only these things, but the law itself, and the prophets, and the rest of the books, have no small difference, when they are spoken in their own language.<sup>8</sup>

The author claims that in reading or hearing his translation the audience may find something ‘not of equal force’ (*isodynamein*) when spoken in Hebrew or translated into another tongue. How could his readers ascertain the difference between the original Hebrew and a translation?<sup>9</sup> If they could read Hebrew, they did not need the translation; if not, they would not have noticed any difference.

Yet, this difference should be noted, Stefan Schorch would add, because it is a fundamental one between the Hebrew original and its translation, since the ‘Greek text has a small substantial and aesthetic agency onto his audience,’ and he concludes: ‘on the basis of the divinity of the Hebrew, the Hebrew text has more meaning than the Greek one.’<sup>10</sup> Using the terminology of sceptical philosophy, I would call this a dogmatic position because of the *a priori* (‘von vornherein’) statement by Schorch.<sup>11</sup>

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5 J.H.A. Hart, ed., *Ecclesiasticus* (Cambridge: University Press, 1909): 267.

6 James Barr, *The Typology of Literalism in Ancient Biblical Translations* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979): 43; see also Dries De Crom, “Translation and Directionality in the Hebrew-Greek Tradition,” in *Complicating the History of Western Translation: The Ancient Mediterranean in Perspective*, eds. Siobhán McElduff and Enrica Sciarrino (Manchester and Kinderhook, NY: St. Jerome Publishing, 2011): 77–87.

7 There is no necessity to translate this as ‘nephew’, as I suggested in my *Libraries, Translations, and “Canonic” Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 2006): 201; see also Marko Marttila, *Foreign Nations in the Wisdom of Ben Sira: A Jewish Sage between Opposition and Assimilation* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2012): 6–7.

8 I am following here the translation by Lancelot C.L. Brenton. The RSV has ‘sense’ instead of ‘force’.

9 See also the article by Benjamin Wright III, “Access to the Source: Cicero, Ben Sira, the Septuagint and their Audience,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 34 (2003): 1–27.

10 Stefan Schorch, “Sakralität und Öffentlichkeit. Zum Problem jüdischer Bibelübersetzung,” in *Dialog der Disziplinen. Jüdische Studien und Literaturwissenschaft*, eds. Eva Lezzi and Dorothea M. Salzer (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2009): 60.

11 *Ibidem*: ‘dass die Äußerung vielmehr die fundamentale Differenz zwischen einem hebräischen Text und seiner Übersetzung behandelt. Nach dem Enkel Ben Siras herrscht zwischen beiden von vornherein keine *isodynamie* (wörtlich “Kraftgleichheit”), weil der griechische Text eine geringe inhaltliche und ästhetische Wirkkraft auf seine Leser ausübe. Aufgrund der Heiligkeit des Hebräischen hat ein hebräischer Text von vornherein mehr Bedeutung als ein griechischer.’

We will see that there are other factors and linguistic elements which let us depart from the commonly accepted antagonism between the holy language and its translation into Greek.

The first consideration is that the author is not speaking of a well-established original text written in the holy language, but only of his experience as a translator, for if we presuppose that the author is speaking of an (established) written text, then we proceed from false assumptions. In fact, the grandson uses only the word for ‘hearing’ and not for ‘writing’: the differences between the grandfather’s original book as well as the Torah, the books of prophets, and the other books do not concern the written, but the oral forms. Some reflections on this are called for. The author is not dealing with the general problem of translation, but with precise expressions or idioms (*tisin tōn lexeōn*) which are different if spoken in a language other than Hebrew (*en autois hebraisti legomena*).

Following a first look at the participle *legomena* with regard to linguistic usage in the common Greek (the *koinē dialektos*), it is apparent that the *media vox* refers to the pronunciation, or something spoken, not to a written translation.<sup>12</sup> But there is a more cogent argument that weakens the idea of an alleged semantic discussion of the value of translation: the use of *hebraisti* in the common Greek of the Second Temple period. The term *hebraisti* occurs before the first century only once, precisely in this prologue to *Ben Sira*. As used in the first century CE, in almost all the sources I have examined it refers to the common and spoken language of the Jews.<sup>13</sup> I infer this lexical assumption from the fact that both Josephus and the author of the Fourth Gospel use *hebraisti* for Aramaic terms.<sup>14</sup> The confusion is understandable if we regard *hebraisti* as the corresponding denomination for *hellenisti* in referring to the Greek language, in other words, as an expression for the *koinē dialektos* of the Jews. This is also the lexical use of *ivrit*, which does not occur in biblical Hebrew<sup>15</sup> but only in post-biblical texts and denotes either the language of the Jews in general (as opposed to *la’az*, ‘foreign language’),<sup>16</sup> the common everyday language among the Jews,<sup>17</sup> or the particular Old Hebrew script which was replaced by the Square script (*aššurit*) still in use today.

12 See the Gospel of John 4:25; 11:16; 20:24; 21:2 and the Acts of the Apostles 9:36.

13 On this aspect, see Giuseppe Veltri, *Eine Tora für den König Talmi: Untersuchungen zum Übersetzungsverständnis in der jüdisch-hellenistischen und rabbinischen Literatur* (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1994): 118–119; idem, *Gegenwart der Tradition: Studien zur jüdischen Literatur und Kulturgeschichte* (Leiden: Brill, 2002): 57–59.

14 See *Liber Antiquitatum* 3:252 and Gospel of John 5:2. With the exception of Josephus, *hebraisti* occurs only in the so-called *corpus Iohanneum*: Gospel of John 5:2; 9:13; 9:17; 9:20; 20:16; Apocalypses 9:11 and 16:16.

15 See Edward Ullendorff, “The Knowledge of Languages in the Bible” [in Hebrew], in *Studies in the Bible Presented to Professor M.H. Segal by His Colleagues and Students*, eds. Yehoshua M. Grintz and Yaakov Liver (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sepher, 1964): 145.

16 Only in the Tosefta; see *Tosefta Megillah* 2:6; 3:13.

17 *Mishnah Giṭṭin* 9:17; *Tosefta Bava Batra* 11:8; *Mishnah Yadayim* 4:3 and 4:5.

If the author is speaking of spoken rather than literary language, we should raise the question of the meaning of *legomena en hebraisti*: does he intend to point out that the ‘force’ of Hebrew emanating from the Hebrew letters and words cannot really correspond to their rendition in the Hellenistic idiom? I think rather that he is polemically countering a diffuse conviction among Egyptian Jewry of the existence of an autonomous development in Jewish literature and wisdom on the basis of the Septuagint translation, as seen by Aristeas and Philo of Alexandria. According to the latter writers, the Septuagint was the perfect copy of the Hebrew original; Philo even speaks of two sisters:

(38) Yet, who does not know that every language, and Greek especially, abounds in terms, and that the same thought can be put in many shapes by changing single words and whole phrases and suiting the expression to the occasion? This was not the case, we are told, with this law of ours, but the Greek words used corresponded literally with the Chaldean, exactly suited to the things they indicated. (39) For just as in geometry and logic, so it seems to me, the sense indicated does not admit of variety in the expression which remains unchanged in its original form, so these writers, as it clearly appears, arrived at wording which corresponded with the matter, and alone, or better than any other, would bring out clearly what was meant.<sup>18</sup>

A perfect translation, according to Philo, requires perfect synonymy. The Jewish philosopher of Alexandria explains this fact, speaking of homonymy and synonymy in general: ‘everyone will allow that homonymy and synonymy are opposites, homonymy meaning one name applied to one object, synonymy many names applied to one object.’<sup>19</sup> He continues:

There are other names which are different though one thing is meant by them (*allai d’eisi prosrēseis diaphoroi kata sēmainomenoy henos*), as ‘arrow’, ‘shaft’, ‘dart’; for the thing discharged at the mark from the string of the bow is called by all these names. Again, the instrument which does as well as sails for propelling a vessel is called an ‘oar’, ‘scull’, ‘rowing-sweep’.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast to Philo’s vision of translation theory, the author of the prologue to *Ben Sira* claims that the translators (and he himself) were not able to produce an ‘isodynamic’ copy of the original words. We have to stress here that the grandson is quite aware of the topic he is tackling, because the term in this context, *isodynamein*, is a technical word of ancient grammar to denote synonymy whereas *diaphoros* is the antithetical term for designating semantic differences. Let me quote some examples taken from Polybius’s *Histories*:

Since, among those authors who were contemporaries of Aratus, Phylarchus, who on many points is at variance and in contradiction with him, is by some received as trustworthy, it will be useful or rather necessary for me, as I have chosen to rely on Aratus’ narrative for the history

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<sup>18</sup> *De Vita Mosis* II: 38–39.

<sup>19</sup> *De Plantatione* 150.

<sup>20</sup> *De Plantatione* 152.

of the Cleomenic war, not to leave the question of their relative credibility undiscussed, so that truth and falsehood in their writings may no longer be of equal authority (*hina mē to pseudos en tois syngrammasin isodynamoun apoleipōmen pros tēn alētheian*).<sup>21</sup>

Polybius charges Phylarcus (third century BCE) with partiality to Cleomenes and at the same time unfairness toward his contemporary Aratus. He speaks of falsehood and truth in their writings, which cannot be, for that very reason, of *equal* authority. The stridence of the contrast between opposing components, between historical ‘truth’ and ‘partiality’ (even falsehood), leads to the conclusion that *isodynamein* is semantically more than a minor matter in translating; rather, it can absolutely corrupt the original meaning. Another passage in the same work reads as follows: ‘for an introductory summary is not only of equal value to a prologue but even of somewhat greater [value], while at the same time it occupies a surer position, as it forms an integral part of the work’ (*tēs gar proektheseōs ou monon isodynamousēs (pros) tēn prographēn, alla kai pleiōn ti dynamenēs*).<sup>22</sup>

Polybius’s text is of importance here because he is comparing two literary forms or genres: the introductory summary and the prologue. The prologue has the function of advertisement, or in Polybius’s words, ‘fixes the attention of those who wish to read the work and stimulates and encourages readers in their task,’<sup>23</sup> while the introductory summary gives the main events (in each Olympiad)<sup>24</sup> at the outset. The genres are not comparable. Another cogent example:

The Aetolians, after some further observations about the actual situation, decided to refer the whole matter to Glabrio, committing themselves ‘to the faith of the Romans, not knowing the exact meaning of the phrase, but deceived by the word ‘faith’ as if they would thus obtain more complete pardon. But with the Romans to commit oneself to the faith of a victor is equivalent to surrendering at discretion (*para [de] Rhōmaiois isodynamei to t’eis tēn pistin auton encheirisaí kai to tēn epitropēn dounai peri autou tōi kratounti*).<sup>25</sup>

The Aetolians did not understand that to commit themselves to the ‘faith’ of the Romans did not mean to ‘obtain a more complete pardon,’ but was equivalent to ‘surrendering at discretion.’ This is linguistically a complete misunderstanding, to their disadvantage.

In all these examples, the expression ‘to have equal force’ means, linguistically speaking, the perfect semantic and meta-semantic consonance between two different things. ‘To not have the same force’ means, on the contrary, to be simply antonyms, and hence for translation praxis to be fully unsuitable, because it suggests the wrong

<sup>21</sup> Polybius, *Historiae* II, 56.2. All English translations are from *The Histories of Polybius* (London: Heinemann; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1922–1927).

<sup>22</sup> *Historiae* XI, 1a.4 (fragment).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>24</sup> As we know, the ancient Greeks followed the event of the Olympiad in indicating the date.

<sup>25</sup> *Historiae* XX, 9.9–12.

meaning. 'To have equal force' means to be perfectly synonymous with something, whereas a 'different' word ('difference' = *diafora*) denotes a basic similarity, but by no means an equal force, as Philo's vision of the Septuagint claims.

To explain the meaning of *Ben Sira*, and partially contrasting with my approach to it, Dries De Crom<sup>26</sup> has analysed the use of *isodynamein* in Greek prose from the fourth to the first century BCE. He began with the meaning 'to sound equally loud'<sup>27</sup> for musical instruments, or in general of 'to have equal measure' in Timaeus,<sup>28</sup> or 'to have a same (logical) value' in Eudemus.<sup>29</sup> His interest is attracted by the use of *isodynamein* in Berossus's *Babyloniaca*:<sup>30</sup> 'The roots that grow in the marshes are edible. They are called *gongai*; and these roots are equivalent to barley.'<sup>31</sup> He states that there is no translation here, but rather a statement of equivalence between the roots and barley. I do not understand his further statement: 'he specifically states that *tas rhizas tautas* are equivalent to Greek *krithai* not the word *goggē*' (p. 105). Too much precision can generate confusion, for Berossus defines *goggai* as roots and 'these' are equalised to *krithai*. This of course is not a translation, but an equalisation between two different plants so that the reader can understand what is meant.

De Crom refuses the grammatical characterisation included in the first two instances I quoted from Polybius above because 'the concepts themselves are under scrutiny, not the words or their meaning' (p. 106). However, he accepts the last example, in which Polybius speaks of the 'fatal misunderstanding' (p. 107) between *pistis* and *deditio*, as appropriate. De Crom's position is similar to mine in that he avoids any reference to translation between languages and opts merely for a non-equivalence between words. The semantic use of *isodynamein* is also attested in Aristonicus<sup>32</sup> and of course by Philo of Alexandria, as I dealt with above.

To conclude on this aspect: De Crom is not against the semantic theory of synonymy between words as a premise for the perfect translation; he merely objects to my use of what he sees as inappropriate examples. He does not question the theory, but rather the instances that I quoted. The key aspect of this discussion is neither the concepts nor the words, and the circumstance that we are speaking of here is only of words and concepts and not of a language as a whole. That is an essential aspect if we consider Schorch's claim quoted above. Philo states that as a rule translations are imperfect because of the inappropriate synonymy of the words; only by a linguistic 'miracle' could the seventy-two translators be successful: 'so these writers, as it

26 Dries De Crom, "Translation equivalence in the Prologue to Greek ben Sirach," in *XIII Congress of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies, Ljubljana 2007*, ed. Melvin K.M. Peters (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008): 99–112.

27 Theophrastus fr. 89,7, ed. Wimmer. All the references are taken from the article by De Crom.

28 Fr. 207; ed. Marg (reference of De Crom).

29 Fr. 15; ed. Wehrli (reference of De Crom).

30 Fr. 1,2; ed. Jacoby, *Frag. Gr. Hist.* 680 (reference of De Crom).

31 All the translations are taken from the cited article by De Crom.

32 *Sign. Od.* In *Od.* 3,317; ed. Carnuth (reference of De Crom).

clearly appears, arrived at wording which corresponded with the matter, and alone, or better than any other, would bring out clearly what was meant.’<sup>33</sup>

If we read the Greek prologue to *Ben Sira* as a reaction to the widely held thesis of similarity, we can understand the author’s polemical allusions. The reference to the translation of the Septuagint is therefore deliberately reverent, but not positive: the seventy-two translators did their best, but in Palestine and Egypt there is no such thing as the twice-revealed truth, for wisdom is a product of Palestine, so the Egyptian Jews must be content with imperfect copies of it. If we assume that the Greek translation of *Ben Sira* dates from the first century, then the translator is criticising and opposing those who are receptive towards the Greek Bible. Also, Philo is sceptical towards the concept of possibility *a priori* of a perfect translation. The exception of the Greek Bible confirms the rule.

But why is it impossible to translate words into other languages? There are two explanations: the first is the sceptical proof as an answer to the Stoic belief of meaning by nature and not convention, which we find in Sextus, and the second is the magical force which invests only (some) divine words and originates from them.

## Sextus and the Non-Equipollence (*isologias*) of Nouns

Let us continue the discussion on translatability with Sextus Empiricus. In his ‘Against the Professors’, chapter VII, ‘Against the Grammarians’ (§§ 142–158), Sextus faces the question of nouns (*onomata*) and whether they are ‘naturally’ masculine, feminine, or neuter, or singular, dual, or plural:

How could the Grammarians’ stupidity decide whether names are due to nature or to convention (*fysei ē thesei*), or some to the one and some to the other, when even for those who have attained the summit of natural science it is no easy matter to settle because of the equipollence of the arguments on either side (*dia tas ekaterōthen isologias*)? Moreover, this view is confronted by a strong argument to which the Grammarians—even if they could [as men say] stand up against a bolt from a cross-bow—will be unable to discover any fitting reply.

If nouns exist ‘by nature’ and are not significant in each instance by reason of convention, then all men ought to understand the speech of all, Greeks that of barbarians and barbarians that of Greeks and barbarians that of [other] barbarians (... *echrēn pantas pantōn akouein, Hellēnas Barbarōn kai Barbarous Hellēnōn kai Barbarous Barbarōn*). But this is not the case; therefore, nouns are not ‘naturally’ significant (*ouk ara fysei sēmainei ta onomata*). This, then, they will not assert.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Philo, *De Vita Mosi* II: 39.

<sup>34</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Professors*, I:VII, §§ 144–145 (Loeb 1949, 86–87).



The debate on whether words and things are connected by nature or by convention is pre-Socratic and lasted at least into Late Antiquity.<sup>35</sup> The origin of the dispute did not primarily affect the linguistic aspect, but the concept of justice, as is proven by the fragment of Antiphon's 'On the Truth' in which he claims that Greeks and barbarians share an equal universal nature.<sup>36</sup> The interesting aspect of this discussion emphasised by Sextus is the argument about translation between languages or, better, the interchange between Greek and non-Greek (here *barbaroi*). According to him, nouns are not significant by nature and the proof is the diversity of speeches between Greek and non-Greek.

A similar concept is to be found in his 'Outlines of Pyrrhonism', II:214:

Now they at once assert that the sciences of natural objects exist whereas those of conventional objects have no existence and that with reason. For science claims to be a thing that is firm and invariable, but the conventional objects are easily liable to change and variation, because their character is altered by the shifting of the conventions which depend upon ourselves. Since, then, the significance of names is based on convention and not on nature (for otherwise all men, barbarians as well as Greeks, would understand all the things signified by the terms, besides the fact that it is in our power at any time to point out and signify the objects by any other names we may choose), how would it be possible for a science capable of dividing a name into its significations to exist? Or how could Dialectic really be, as some imagine, a 'science of things which signify and are signified'?

Sextus is indirectly addressing the function of the dialectics as the science (*episteme*) of the signifier and signified, calling to mind 253d I-e2 of Plato's 'Sophist'.<sup>37</sup> The reference to the Platonic dialogue between the Stranger and Theaetetus is not understandable at first sight, but is clearly implicitly involved. Sextus introduces the Dialectic as 'the science of things which signify and are signified'<sup>38</sup> in the discussion of Being and Not-Being of natural and conventional objects.<sup>39</sup> The significance of names should be considered in the sphere of Being according to the dogmatists, and that is questionable because barbarians call the same object by other names and we can also call other objects with different names (an implicit allusion to syno-

35 Eugenio Coseriu and Bimal K. Matilal, "Der φύσει-θέσει-Streit: Are Words and Things Connected by Nature or by Convention?," in *Sprachphilosophie. Ein internationales Handbuch zeitgenössischer Forschung*, 2. Halbband, 2 vols., ed. Marcelo Dascal et al. (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1996): 880–900.

36 See on this Rachel Barney, "The sophistic movement," in *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy*, eds. Marie Louise Gill and Pierre Pellegrin (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006): 77–97, here 82–83.

37 See Alfonso Gómez-Lobo, "Plato's Description of Dialectic in the 'Sophist' 253 d I-e2," *Phronesis* 22 (1977): 29–47; C.D.C. Reeve, "Motion, Rest, and Dialectic in the Sophist," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 67 (1985): 47–64.

38 ἡ πῶς ἐπιστήμη σημαίνοντων τε καὶ σημαινόμενων, ὡς οἴονται τινες, ἡ διαλεκτικὴ δύναται ἄν ὑπάρχειν.

39 Εὐθέως οὖν τὰς ἐπιστήμας τῶν φύσει φασὶν εἶναι, τῶν θέσει δὲ οὐδαμῶς.



nymy or to the arbitrariness of naming objects).<sup>40</sup> Ergo: the science of ‘the division of names into significations’ does not exist, because the nexus between signifier and signified is totally arbitrary, being not based on nature.<sup>41</sup>

We need to accentuate here that Sextus—in my opinion—is not emphasising the impossibility of equipollence for any language at all, but only of nouns, concepts, etc. Theories of ancient language deal with terms and their semantic value and not with language as a whole. This is more important the more we consider that the Greek estimation of Barbarian culture and education was very low.<sup>42</sup> However, I do not think that the low education of the non-Greeks is the decisive argument against the Stoic doctrine. The Stoics distinguished between<sup>43</sup> 1) vocal sound, the thing signifying (*semainon*), 2) a body (external object), thing designated by the vocal sound, and 3) the thing signified (*semainomenon*). In ‘Against the Logicians’ II 12, Sextus states that the last of these is incorporeal and that ‘which we apprehend as existing in dependence on our intellect, whereas the barbarians although hearing the sound do not understand it; and the thing existing is the external real object.’<sup>44</sup> This is an interesting aspect which introduces the following paragraph: the belief in the magical conception of the sound of (magical or sacred) words which do work onto the audience. The agency of the word is independent from the meaning. That is also a reason why these words cannot be translated, and that is the topic of the next paragraph.

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40 πάντες γὰρ ἂν συνίεσαν πάντα τὰ ὑπὸ τῶν φωνῶν σημαινόμενα, ὁμοίως Ἕλληνές τε καὶ βάρβαροι, πρὸς τῷ καὶ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν εἶναι τὰ σημαινόμενα οἷς ἂν βουλώμεθα ὀνόμασιν ἑτέροις αἰεὶ δηλοῦν τε καὶ σημαίνειν.

41 For a very similar argument, see Sextus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, III, 267–68: ‘Nor, in fact, is anything taught by speech. For speech either signifies something or signifies nothing. But if it signifies nothing, neither will it be capable of teaching anything. And if it signifies something, it does so either by nature or by convention. But it is not significant by nature because all men do not understand all when they hear them, as is the case with Greeks hearing barbarians talk or barbarians hearing Greeks.’

42 See Robert J. Hankinson, *The Sceptics. The Arguments of the Philosophers* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 34; but see also Ingomar Weiler, “Greek and Non-Greek World in the Archaic Period,” *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 9.1 (1968): 24 (for the ancient period). In Sextus’s period, the situation did not change and the Jewish Bible was completely unknown. On this aspect, see my forthcoming book *Alienated Wisdom. Jewish Philosophy between History, Myth and Scepticism* (forthcoming 2017; probably De Gruyter) and the literature quoted there in the first chapter (*sapientia capta*).

43 Here I am following Jacques Brunschwig, “Stoic Metaphysics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, ed. Brad Inwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 217.

44 Loeb’s translation; Brunschwig’s translation in “Stoic Metaphysics,” 217, is: ‘we grasp it in exchange [for the sound?] as subsisting along with our thought, whereas the barbarians [i.e., non-Greek speakers] do not understand it, although hearing the sound.’

## The Untranslatability of (Some) Magical Words

According to the *Corpus Hermeticum* XVI:1–2,<sup>45</sup> Asclepius called upon King Ammon to store the hermetic writings and did not permit any translations into Greek. He instructed that the contents of the revelation should be explained in the form in which they were revealed. The structure and external shape of the book (*ē syntaxis*) should be simple and understandable, while the meaning should be confused and concealed (*asafēs ... kai kekrymmenon ton noun tōn logōn*). If the Greeks were to try to translate ‘our language’ into theirs, the words would be more confused. ‘Only in one’s own language does the expression retain the meaning of the words. For the characteristic sound and the force of the Egyptian name possess the energy of their meaning.’<sup>46</sup> In contrast to the Greek language, the Egyptian words are not simply vocabulary items, but ‘sounds filled with energetic effect’ (*ēmeis de hou logois chrōmetha alla phōnais mestais tōn ergōn*).

The Neoplatonic philosopher Iamblichus supported the idea of the existence of sacred languages whose ‘names’ cannot be translated:

If one translates the names, they do not keep the same meaning. For among every people, there are certain concepts which are impossible to be rendered into the language of another people. On the contrary, if one translates these names, they do not keep the same force in the translated texts (*epeita kan hei oion te auta methermēneuein alla tēn ge dynamin ouketi phylattei tēn autēn*).<sup>47</sup>

Clemens of Alexandria followed Iamblichus’s onomastic theology when he postulated the existence of ‘barbarian’ peoples and thus languages (*hai prōtai kai genikai dialektōi barbaroi men*) whose words were more original and more primal (*physei de ta onomata echousin*), which was why their prayers were more effective than those of others. This was also the opinion of Origen in his discussion with Celsus when speaking of the ‘nature of the effective names’ (*physin onomatōn energōn*). In this context, he wrote:

If then, we shall be able to establish, in reference to the preceding statement, the nature of powerful names, some of which are used by the learned amongst the Egyptians, or by the Magi among the Persians, and by the Indian philosophers called Brahmins, or by the Samanaeans, and others in different countries; and shall be able to make out that the so-called magic is not, as the followers of Epicurus and Aristotle suppose, an altogether uncertain thing, but is, as those skilled in it prove, a

<sup>45</sup> *Corpus Hermeticum*, 2 vols., ed. Arthur D. Nock, transl. André-Jean Festugière (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1945).

<sup>46</sup> *Corpus Hermeticum* XVI:2.

<sup>47</sup> *Iamblichi de Mysteriis Liber 5*, ed. Gustav Parthey (Berlin: Nicolai, 1857, reprint Amsterdam: Hakert, 1965); Eric R. Dodds, *The Greek and the Irrational*, 3rd edition (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959): 293. See Peter Crome, *Symbol und Unzulänglichkeit der Sprache. Iamblichos. Plotin. Porphyrios. Proklos* (Munich: Fink, 1966): 56 ff.; Maurus Hirschle, *Sprachphilosophie und Namenmagie im Neuplatonismus: mit einem Exkurs zu “Demokrit” B 142* (Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1979): 45–48.

consistent system, having words which are known to exceedingly few; then we say that the name Sabaoth, and Adonai, and the other names treated with so much reverence among the Hebrews, are not applicable to any ordinary created things, but belong to a secret theology which refers to the Framer of all things. These names, accordingly, when pronounced with that attendant train of circumstances which is appropriate to their nature, are possessed of great power; and other names, again, current in the Egyptian tongue, are efficacious against certain demons who can only do certain things; and other names in the Persian language have corresponding power over other spirits; and so on in every individual nation, for different purposes.<sup>48</sup>

Origen's comments on holy names are clearly influenced by ancient theories of the magic of the word as a vessel containing a force that cannot be translated and transmitted to other languages. That is the reason the words Sabaoth, Adonai, Amen, and Hallelujah are preserved in Christian liturgy. Jerome takes a very similar position in his letter to Pammachius entitled 'On the Best Method of Translating' (*De optimo genere interpretandi*). He notes:

For I myself not only admit but freely proclaim that in translating from the Greek (except in the case of the holy scriptures where even the order of the words is a mystery), I render sense for sense and not word for word.<sup>49</sup>

The words in brackets are treacherous: 'absque scripturis sanctis ubi et verborum ordo mysterium est.' Here the ascetic monk of Bethlehem contradicts himself in the same letter in which he attacks Aquila's translation because of his literalism in slavishly following the biblical text.<sup>50</sup> If the order of the words is a mystery, how can they be translated if not by an exacting literalism? Most probably, a new tendency was slowly gaining authority and influence at this time in the Christian world, a theory which would become the moving force for the acceptance of the Kabbalah in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance: the sacred character of the Hebrew language, based in Judaism on the theological conviction that God spoke to Adam in the *lešon ha-qodeš*.

A glance at the semantic development of the expression *lešon ha-qodeš* suggests that the special emphasis on the Hebrew language as a sacred tongue was not possible until a certain point in Jewish history: when this language was no longer a spoken ver-

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<sup>48</sup> *Contra Celsum* 1:24; *Origène contre Celse*, vol. 1: 136–138; English translation by *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, transl. of the writings of the Fathers down to A. D. 325, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Edinburgh: T&T Clark; Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.M.B. Eerdmans, 1956). See Hans-Dieter Betz, "The Formation of Authoritative Tradition in the Greek Magical Papyri," *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, vol. 3: *Self-Definition in the Greek-Roman Papyri*, eds. Ben F. Meyer and E. P. Sander (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982): 162; Naomi Janowitz, "Theories of Divine Names in Origen and Pseudo-Dionysius," *History of Religion* 30 (1991): 359–372.

<sup>49</sup> *Epistula LVII ad Pammachium*, 5: 'Ego enim non solum fateor, sed libera voce profiteor, me in interpretatione Graecorum, absque Scripturis sanctis, ubi et verborum ordo mysterium est, non verbum e verbo, sed sensum exprimere de sensu.'

<sup>50</sup> *Epistula LVII ad Pammachium*, 11: 'Aquila autem proselytus et contentiosus interpretes, qui non solum verba, sed etymologia verborum transferre conatus est, iure proicitur a nobis.'

nacular, and was acknowledged only for its liturgical role. The expression *lešon ha-qodeš*, or *hiera glotta* with reference to Hebrew, is unknown in either Jewish-Hellenistic literature or the New Testament. However, it does appear in Mishnah, *Soṭah* 7:2–4.<sup>51</sup> In this passage, a distinction is made between the biblical *Parašat Soṭah*, which should be recited in all languages, and other *parašot* listed there, which must be recited only in the holy language.<sup>52</sup> In this case, the understanding of the text does not have priority, but rather the precise rendition of its letters. It is difficult to ascertain whether the theurgy of the spoken word played a role in this ruling or whether it was only due to exegetical reasons, according to the discursive principle *ko tomar* ‘so you have to say.’ Mekhila, *Baḥodeš* 2 illustrates this principle: ‘You have to recite in this way, in the holy language, in the same order, in the same situation, in the same way, without adding and without subtracting something.’

The problem of the Midrash is in adapting these *parašot* to other legal and exegetical cases or situations. The obvious intention is to consider these texts as legally unique, i.e., applicable only to these cases. There is no doubt that at a certain time in connection with the rabbinic story, theurgic elements were introduced to explain the nature of the Hebrew language, which is also interconnected with the very creation of the world.

How can one reconcile the theurgic value of the Hebrew with the rather free method which the rabbis used in dealing with the biblical text? One answer is to consider the crucial difference between the liturgical and non-liturgical uses of Hebrew. Only the liturgical use, which can be fulfilled solely under special conditions, has certain theurgic consequences; one need only recall the sacerdotal benediction of Yom Kippur. More than anything else, this pertains to the divine name. The discussion about a ‘permitted use’ of the Jewish name of God, the *tetragrammaton*, dates back to the rabbinic period. At that time, the halakhic importance of God’s name was emphasised in connection with written material to be concealed in the Genizah or to be saved from fire. We read in Midrash *Sifre Numeri* 16:

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51 The question of when this expression appears is this subject of lively discussion among modern scholars. Often, the two scattered records in Qumran and Jubilees are—in my eyes—overemphasised so that the term is considered to be of a very early date. As one protagonist of this position, I wish to refer to my friend and colleague Stefan Schorch, who dates the prologue to *Ben Sira* to the second century BCE. In my view, there are neologisms and particular expressions from the first century CE which contradict this theory. Moreover, the dating of the emergence of the term says nearly nothing about its conceptual use. The early rabbinic records of it indicate that first it was a more technical term which denoted the language of the Temple. See Stefan Schorch, “The Pre-eminence of the Hebrew Language and the Emerging Concept of the ‘Ideal Text’ in Late Temple Judaism,” in *Studies in the Book of Ben Sira: Papers of the Third International Conference on the Deuterocanonical Books, Pápa, Ungarn, 2006*, eds. Gèza G. Xeravits and József Zsengeller (Leiden: Brill, 2008): 43–54; Avigdor Shinan, “*Lishan bet qudsha*” [Hebrew], *Bet Miqra* 66 (1976): 472–474.

52 Deuteronomy 26:3–10; 25:7–9; 27:15–26; Numbers 24–26; Deuteronomy 17:14–20; 21:7 et seq.; 20:2–7.

Do we not find here the use (of the hermeneutic rule) of the *qal va-homer?*, regarding the reconciliation of a man and his wife, if God says: The book which was written in holiness is to be erased by water, *a maiori* the books of the Minim should be removed from the world because they cause hostility, hatred, jealousy and war.

R. Yishma'el (says): the books of the *minim*: What about them? The name of God has to be cut out and the rest must be burnt. R. 'Aqiva says: They are to be completely burnt because they have not been written in holiness.<sup>53</sup>

The status of the name was entirely altered because it was not written according to the biblical and rabbinic laws of purity. There is no doubt that the redactor of *Sifre* modernised the Halakhah from Numbers 5 by mentioning the similarity between the action of a priest writing curses on the parchment or book and the rabbinic laws about writing a Torah scroll which 'renders the hands impure.' This comparison would be incomprehensible if we did not bear in mind that writing on parchment was also considered the precondition for the theurgic value of a written text. Only *tefillin* or *mezuzot*, written according to the Halakhah, have the power to protect (Mishnah, *Megillah* 1:8). It is not the characters of the *tetragrammaton* and other divine names which have theurgic energy, but only those written according to the Halakhah of purity.

We could also note at this point a certain anti-theurgic tendency in rabbinic Judaism: the mere characters of the *tetragrammaton* have no intrinsic power *per se*. Only if produced in terms of rules for what is permitted can the text be considered theurgic in its effect. If compared to the theurgic conception of the hermeneutic tradition of Iamblichus, Clemens, and Origen, we can conclude that the rabbis did not like to let the text act beyond its original authority. Moreover, the power of the divine name cannot act without a rabbinic premise (or authority). A sacramental *ex opere operato* cannot exist if the circumstances in which this happens are not permitted by the Halakhah, as of course decided by rabbinic academies.

The conception of the sacral dimension of the entire Hebrew language emerged in the Amoraic era, above all in Babylonia, as in Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 21b:

Mar Zutra, or, as some say, Mar 'Ukba said: Originally the Torah was given to Israel in Hebrew characters and in the sacred language (עברי ולשון הקודש); later, in the times of Ezra, the Torah was given in *aššurit* script and Aramaic language (וזור וניתנה להם בימי). [Finally], they selected for Israel the *aššurit* script and Hebrew language (ביררו להן לישראל כתב אשורית ולשון הקודש), leaving the Hebrew characters and Aramaic language for the *hedyotot* (והניחו להדיוטות כתב עברית ולשון ארמי). Who are meant by the *hedyotot*?—R. Ḥisda answers: The Cutheans. And what is meant by 'Hebrew characters'?—R. Ḥisda said: The *libuna'ah* script.

This text is very important because it indicates a period of time during which the text of the Torah was transmitted only in square Hebrew characters (*aššurit*). The Aramaic

<sup>53</sup> [Chaim] Saul Horovitz, *Siphre d'be Rab* (Leipzig: Fock, 1917), 21. On this Halakhah and its parallels, see Johann Maier, *Jüdische Auseinandersetzung mit dem Christentum in der Antike* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1982), 26–33 and *passim*.

language and Hebrew script are attributed to the tradition of the Samaritans. The text supports the opinion that the language of the rabbinic tradition is Hebrew and not Aramaic. Another important conclusion is that *lešon ha-qodeš* is the characterisation of the whole Torah as sacred work as is stated in Babylonian Talmud, *Eruvin* 13a:

Did not Rab Judah in fact state in the name of Samuel who had it from R. Meir: When I was studying under R. Akiba I used to put vitriol into my ink and he told me nothing [against it], but when I subsequently came to R. Ishmael the latter said to me, 'My son, what is your occupation?' I told him, 'I am a scribe', and he said to me, 'Be meticulous in your work, for your occupation is a sacred one; should you perchance omit or add one single letter, you would thereby destroy all the universe.'

Comparing this text with other rabbinic discussions, we can observe that the process of sacralisation of Hebrew probably came to its apex in Babylonia, as we read in, for example, Tosefta, *Megillah* 4:41:

Rabbi Yehudah says: Whoever translates a biblical verse as it reads, is a liar. Whoever adds something, is a blasphemer. It is not allowed to the translator (*meturgeman*) who is before his Sage to subtract or add or change something except if he is his father or Rav.

Changes in the (oral) transmission/translation of the Torah are allowed only in the case that the Rabbis permitted them. There is no problem of translation, but only of understanding which is dependent on the rabbinic school. The Babylonian text does not leave any space for doubt that the Torah *per se* is holy and therefore unchangeable, while the meaning of the text does not primarily depend on the wording but on the rabbi who is explaining it.

## The Untranslatability of Words: *isologia* and *isodynamis*

The concept of the untranslatability of languages would lead to a dogmatic view among Jewish-Hellenistic and earlier rabbinic thinkers that does not do justice to their discussion on linguistics. All of them deal only and primarily with words, not with languages as a whole. In other words, the sentence 'the holy language cannot be translated as such, or as a whole' would be a dogmatic view because it would be claiming something *a priori* or axiomatically. The grandson of Ben Sira argues that some words do not have the same force in the original and translated terms. He does not tell us which words are affected by this reduction of meaning or force and by no means what is the reason for this.

Also, for Philo of Alexandria, a translation into Greek poses some difficulty because of the lack of perceived synonymy between words. Only the seventy-two translators of the Torah could make a perfect copy of the original; it was only something extraordinary which went beyond human perception and practises of linguistic comparison. Rabbinic Judaism does not explain why it refuses a written translation of the

Torah, and I suspect the liturgical (and magical) use of the written Torah as a plausible reason. Yet, for rabbinic Judaism, translation is not impossible *per se*, but only in the case where it is written, which can arrogate the substitution of the original, as I have tried to explain elsewhere.<sup>54</sup> In this case, the written word demands a place of uniqueness which cannot be substituted.

However, the question of why the words of a language cannot be perfectly translated remains. I have tried to exemplify this with two points of view: the linguistic scepticism of Sextus and the magical theory of the untranslatability of precise words.

Sextus Empiricus negates the translatability of 'Barbarian' into 'Greek' and vice versa, because words are not significant by nature but by convention. A perfect translation implies the perfect *isologia* between words, which, he argues, is negated by the experience:

If nouns exist 'by nature' and are not significant in each instance by reason of convention, then all men ought to understand the speech of all, Greeks that of barbarians and barbarians that of Greeks and barbarians that of (other) barbarians. But this is not the case; therefore, nouns are not 'naturally' significant.<sup>55</sup>

The 'convention', which is mostly acerbic criticism against dogmatism, does not necessarily mean that people cannot understand each other, only that this understanding is not ruled by nature and therefore cannot be a perfect synonymy—I would argue—because it may change according to time, space, and the people involved.

A second explanation held by Neoplatonist writers negates the translatability of language, but only of certain 'magical' names, as Origen claims in the above-quoted text: 'These names, accordingly, when pronounced with that attendant train of circumstances which is appropriate to their nature, are possessed of great power.'<sup>56</sup>

The most curious thing about both explanations of ancient theories of untranslatability is the usage of 'by nature'. Sextus negates the equal meaning or force of names because it is produced by convention, not by nature. In contrast, the Neoplatonists negate the equal force because the names are created by nature. Both of them contradict the possibility of perfect communication between individuals. This is indeed a real sceptical point of view.

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<sup>54</sup> See Veltri, *Alienated Wisdom*, chapter 1.

<sup>55</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Against Professors*, I:VII, §§ 144–145 (Loeb 1949, 86–87).

<sup>56</sup> *Contra Celsum* 1:24; *Origène contre Celse*, vol. 1: 136–138.



