

A note to Falaquera's “Definition of the terms” in *Opinions of the Philosophers*

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Where did language come from? Since its very beginnings in Ancient Greece,³ the question of the origin of the language is linked to the knowledge of what means to be human. One of the most decisive features of being human is language. Without language, how could we have religion or science, laws or ethical rules? The question is famously debated in Plato's *Cratylus*: two alternative positions are argued for, that language arises from nature or that it is meaningful by custom. The issue at stake is whether things require in and of themselves a given name, or if all names are arbitrary. The problem is not only semantic, but ontological, implying as it does the question of whether or not there is also a permanent nature of things. Socrates claims that the existence of a true-false speech contradicts the “conventionalist” theory of the origins of language (*Crat.* 385A-387D), and the fact that men can speak truly or falsely depends upon the fact that things have a “permanent essence” irrespective of our naming (*Crat.* 439B-440C). For Aristotle, on the contrary, natural language is conventional. In *De interpretatione* I (e.g. 6a26-29; 16a2-8) Aristotle claims that “names” (*onomata*) are conventional, as is shown by the fact that each human group has its own. On the contrary, the “intelligibles” corresponding to sense-perceptions are common to all of them. This short sentence left many questions open, such as how we get words and concepts for intelligibles or for immaterial realities that by definition are not directly accessible to sense-perception. The Neoplatonists were ready to see in the *Cratylus'* name-giver a theological figure, but Aristotle's treatment obliged the Neoplatonic commentators to decide whether they wanted to follow Plotinus in his refusal of Aristotle, or Porphyry in his conviction that Plato's and Aristotle's semantic theories were compatible (Van den Berg 2008: 61-92). This development cannot be discussed here, but still it forms the background of the Medieval semantics, in Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew.

³ A selection of studies on the ancient discussions of the origins of language includes Allen (1948), Graeser (1977), Schofield and Nussbaum (1982), Charles (2000).

It comes as no surprise that such a question re-emerges in the Middle Ages in other linguistic areas and religious landscapes. At the crossroad of several traditions (Goodman 1999), the philosophical semantics of the Greeks is interwoven with Muslim and Jewish religious and theological concepts. Muslim thinkers discussed at length the question of the origin of language, and medieval Jewish grammarians and philosophers owed much to the literary output and methods of their Muslim predecessors.⁴ The words in the Qur'an (2:31), unambiguously stating that "He [God] taught Adam the names, all of them", gave rise to different interpretations concerning, for example, if it was only the ability to speak or the whole of Arabic grammar that Adam received, and leading many Muslim thinkers to state that (Arabic) language was revealed.⁵ Jewish thinkers were inspired by their Muslim predecessors, who extolled the language of the Qur'an; they discussed the problem of this origin of the language, connecting it to that of the nature and origins of "the holy tongue" (Hebrew). Gen. 2:19 "He formed ... and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name" was interpreted as the claim that God revealed the original language to Adam. Far from being a human invention, according to many Jewish thinkers language as a whole was revealed.⁶ For them the Hebrew of the Torah represented a consistent linguistic system ("the entire Torah may only be recited in the holy tongue" Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 13b). All the subsequent "stages" of Hebrew were for them nothing other than an increasing loss of purity, an unfortunate slip.

However, this position was not unanimously held by Muslim and Jewish thinkers. Thus, at least three optional explanations about the origins of language coexisted (and of course multiple combinations of them): (i) language as divine revelation, (ii) as rooted in the nature of the things, and (iii) as conventionally established by human beings.⁷

⁴ Weiss (1974) distinguishes six main theories, that one can summarize in the three main conceptions, i.e. the 'naturalist', the 'conventionalist', and the 'revelationist' theories and three others combining these ones. A good account of the discussions of the origin of language according to the Muslim grammarians and Arab writers is to be found in Loucel (1963) and (1964), Arnaldez (1956): 37ff; Asin Palacios (1936-39).

⁵ Druart (2012); Hasnaoui (1988).

⁶ See, for instance, Zwiep (1996); Sáenz-Badillo (2004), Sáenz-Badillo (2006) with further references.

⁷ Another much disputed issue was the origin of the multiplicity of languages or idioms. The opinion, shared by many Muslim thinkers, that originally all human beings all spoke one and the same language finds its roots in the Qur'an (e.g. 10:19 "What was humankind but one single nation, that later came to differ?"). See, for instance, Orwin (2017) with references to previous studies. Many medieval Jewish exegetes shared in the opinion that the first language was the holy tongue (Hebrew) of Gen. 11:1 ("Now the whole earth had the same language and the same words"). Hebrew was used

In his commentary on the aforementioned passage of Aristotle's *De interpretatione*,⁸ Abu Nasr al-Farabi (Latinized as "Alpharabius"), a towering figure of Arabic-Islamic philosophy, interpreted the same passage in the light of the Muslim linguistic and theological views of his times. Farabi maintains that language is conventional providing at the same time the following exegesis of Aristotle's position:

The relation of the intelligibles within the soul to the beings outside the soul is by nature. By contrast, the relation of the intelligibles to the utterances, i.e., the relation which the utterances signify, is by convention, by imposition, and by plain legislation. ... Now spoken sounds are symbols of affections in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs of – affections of the soul – are the same for all; and what these affections are likenesses of – actual things – are also the same (Engl. trans. Druart 2018).⁹

The Farabian background of the idea that there is a natural basis for the origin and development of language, though language begins and evolves through human conventions, is apparent in Shem Tov ibn Falaquera's explanation of the origin of language in his *Opinions of the Philosophers*.

Falquera maintains that language is conventional ("an agreement among men"), even if its origin is natural. The question of the name-giver is not directly addressed in the passage quoted above, but a hint to this question is provided in another work of his, the *Beginning of Wisdom* (*Reshit Chokhmah*), which also sounds familiar to a modern audience.¹⁰ Falaquera describes how language originated among the "first people": human beings began to express their feelings pointing to the things by signs ("*renizot*"); then they started to produce sounds with their voice (from inarticulate screams to different mono-syllabic vocal sounds) in order to indicate concrete things, using a different vocal sound for each thing. The tongue brought the air towards the diverse organs of phonation, and these produced words, each of them related to a concrete or an intelligible reality. Actually, Falaquera provides a "natural" explanation of linguistic pluralism as a consequence of the different natural characteristics of men living in different places:

by all men until the division of the nations occurred after the destruction of the Babel tower. See Sáenz-Badillo (2004): 298-303.

⁸ The issue has been recently highlighted by Druart (2018).

⁹ Alfarabi's *Commentary on Aristotle's De interpretatione*: 27.18-20; 27.25-28.2 quoted and translated in Druart (2018).

¹⁰ See ed. David (1902): 25-27. This treatise contains a modified paraphrastical translation of part of Farabi's *Enumeration of Sciences* and Avicenna's *Division of the Sciences*. See Efros (1934-35); Strauss (1936). A detailed description of the contents in Jospe (1988): 37-42.

It happened that in the case of men that resided in the countries, being their members in their form and constitution different from the members of the others, their words became different from the language of the others, since the voices that they used as signs to indicate each other what they thought were diverse, and this was the first cause of the change of languages among the peoples.¹¹

Among the Muslim cultivated elites as well as among the Jewish thinkers, the adoption of the idea of the conventional character of the language – rooted in the Greek philosophical texts and chiefly in Aristotle's *De interpretatione* – went hand in hand with that of the universal value of philosophy. Philosophy is common to all nations, but each nation expresses itself in its own language. That such an idea was not easily accepted by theologians and grammarians is hardly surprising.¹² Thus, monotheistic beliefs made the discussion of the origins of language stem from its very end. Is the truth universal? And if all nations have access to it, should one accept the truth from any source? Does the Holy Book (be it the Torah or the Qur'an) transcend reason? This implies the necessity to discuss the distinction (if any) between the truth of the philosophers and that revealed by God in a given historical language.

If one considers Hebrew language (like all other languages) a convention rooted in the very nature of human beings (and mankind as a whole created by God), one is ready to accept truth from any source, “just as one takes honey from a bee”. As a disciple of Maimonides, who said “Listen to the truth from whoever says it”, Falaquera claims:

It is impossible for a person to know by himself everything that he needs of these things, as the ancients said on this. It does not matter if these ancients are of our faith or not. *When the speculation is true and immune of any deficiency*, we do not take notice if they are of our faith or not.

If we accept in philosophy whatever has been demonstrated by reason (“*When the speculation is true and immune of any deficiency*”, says Falaquera), this will necessarily agree with the Torah. As for the opinions of the philosophers that contradict reason, they contradict truth, hence they contradict the Torah and are to be rejected. It is in this way that, according to Falaquera, one

¹¹ See ed. David (1902): 22. The passage is translated in Sáenz-Badillo (2004): 303. See also Zwiep (1997): 193-195.

¹² The most noteworthy public display of this tension is the well-known debate in Baghdad (ca. 938) between the philosopher Abu Bishr Matta, who argued that logic is universal, and the grammarian al-Sirāfi, who contended that grammar prevails over logic as an instrument for deciding between truth and falsehood. al-Sirāfi's assertion was that logic is of no use to Arabic speakers, being nothing but Greek grammar. See Endress (1986).

should understand the statement that “Rabbi Me‘ir found a pomegranate; he ate its content and discarded its peel” (Chagigah 15b).

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