

Barbara Cassin

# More Than One Language

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## Why Learn and Speak a Different Language from One's Own?

I don't know what "one's own" means and I'd like to begin with a different question: What is a maternal language? I will then try to understand what happens when you speak more than one language, when you speak several different languages, and how these different languages ultimately draw out different worlds; not incompatible worlds, not radically different worlds, but worlds in resonance with one another and without ever being able to match up completely. This is why we will have to ask how we go from one language to another and think about what we call translation.

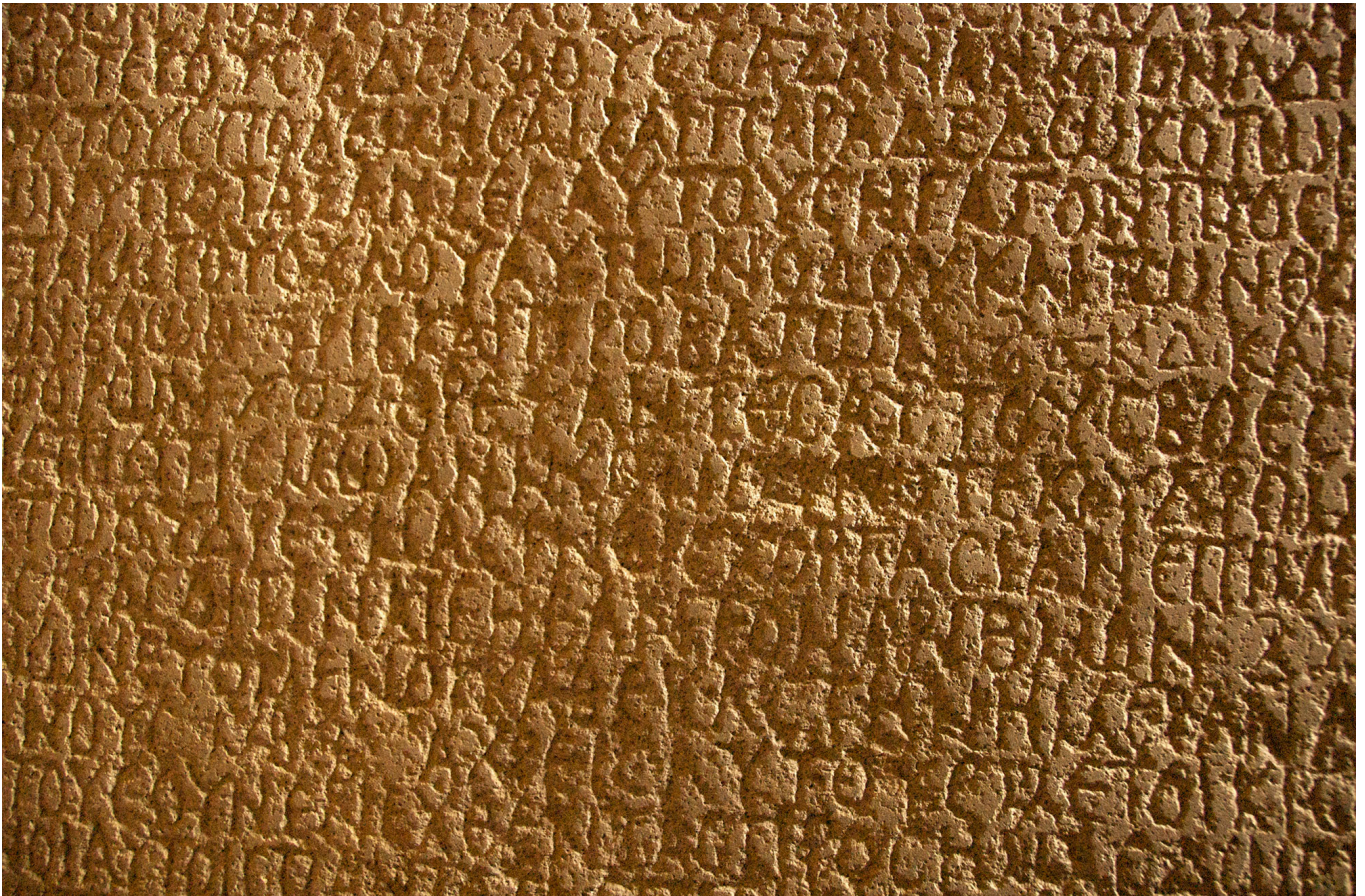
I will wonder about this on the basis of what I know, on the basis of the heart of my trade. I am a philosopher. The term "philosopher" comes directly from Ancient Greek and means someone who loves wisdom. This is what a few Greeks called themselves a long time ago, in the fifth century BC, twenty-six centuries ago. These Greeks declared that they were called philosophers, and in that they were being much less pretentious than you might think because they said they loved wisdom and not that they were wise. They were not "sophers" but "philosophers." The love of wisdom can bring about the birth of certain questions: Why speak another language? What is a language? And what is a maternal language?

## What Is a Maternal Language? Barbarity and Blah Blah Blah

Let's start with the first question. The maternal language is Mom's language, it can also be Dad's, and they are not necessarily the same one. It's the language we speak, in which our birth is bathed, the language that surrounds us at home, with our family. Already in our mother's belly, we hear sounds that start a long process of habituation made from the sequence of the songs we are sung to make us fall asleep when we are infants and the stories we are told later on. This is the singularity of the maternal language. A certain number among you perhaps have two maternal languages, not because you have two mothers but because the language of your mother or of your father is not the same one. Or else because the language your family speaks and in which you bathe is immediately linked to or in competition with (I'm not sure how to put it) the language of the country they find themselves in, the one spoken to you and that you perhaps already speak at home, with your brothers and sisters, and if not, after a short while, outside the house, at the nursery, at school.

Speaking two languages is never easy, but it is an opportunity. It allows you to avoid falling prey to an illusion that, in my opinion, is very

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A close-up of the Ezana Stone shows its chiseled words in bas relief. The Ezana Stone is an artifact from the ancient Kingdom of Aksum (corresponding to modern-day northern Ethiopia and Eritrea) and documents, in three different languages, the conversion of King Ezana to Christianity. Photo: A. Davey.

dangerous, one the Greeks cultivated. They imagined that only one language, their own, truly existed. They named it with a word: *logos*. Everybody else, anyone that didn't speak like them, were "barbarians," people who say "blah blah blah," something the Greeks could not understand. You know what onomatopoeias are, "crack," "splash," "boom." "Barbarian" is the noise of people designated by their noise-making – an incomprehensible noise for the Greeks, who did not understand it and did not seek to understand it. *Logos*, in contrast, signifies "language" in Greek, but also "reason." Aristotle, one of the first Greek philosophers, defines man as an animal endowed with *logos*, an animal that speaks-and-thinks. The Greeks therefore suppose that the language they speak is the same thing as reason, that Greek is the language of reason, of intelligence, the only possible language, and that anything else does not actually exist. The rest isn't even a language. The Greeks spoke the *logos*, in other words the language that makes up humanity, culture, rationality, so much so that the Greeks were not sure the barbarians were human. In any case, as barbarians, as blabbering, there was room for doubt. Imagining that only one language exists, the one you speak, sets a terrible divide into place. This means that the others perhaps do not really speak, may not be human, or at any rate are not human like you. This is why I say that being bilingual is an opportunity, because it provides a chance for understanding and feeling that there are several languages. The first thing to bear in mind when you want to think the maternal language is that it is one language, one language among other possible languages, one language among others, even if each one is magnificently singular.

### **"A Language is Not Something that Belongs"**

The maternal language is therefore the one, or the several, into which we are born, and it is not the only possible one. It's the one that will accompany us our whole life (or the ones that will accompany us if there are several), the one in which we dream. Have you ever wondered which language you dream in? This is a beautiful and important question. What language does one dream in? The maternal language is the one in which we are steeped, we bathe in its sonorities and we can play with it, make puns, hear significant echoes, invent: we are master of this language and yet it is the one that has a hold on us. It's an extraordinary relationship. We are master because we can say what we want in it, but it has a hold on us because it determines our manner of thinking, our manner of living, our manner of being.

This very singular relationship constitutes us and, at the same time, one must know that the language that is ours, or the languages that are ours, our maternal languages, do not belong to us. Jacques Derrida, a philosopher, said a phrase I find very beautiful: "A language is not something that belongs."

One can understand this in two different senses.

First, the most obvious one: a language is not something that belongs to a nation or a country. Others learn or share the French language, for example, with us. "Francophonie" is not only made up of French people, luckily for the French and for the French language because it spreads, diversifies, and is enriched not only in Africa or Canada, but in lots of other places.

"Not something that belongs" also means that, when you speak a language, you are the one that belongs to it as much as it belongs to you. Within it, you can always invent but ultimately, through you, thanks to you, it is the one that is constantly inventing itself. You are not the one who possesses it because it is the one that obligates and makes you. It doesn't belong to you: you belong to it and it belongs to people other than you. That is what a maternal language is.

In our maternal language, we find easier access to sounds like "blah blah blah," *barbaros*, "barbarian" – sounds that refer to what is called the signifier, in other words the manner in which noises constitute words, the relation between a word, the noise it makes, and the sense it has. This is why the maternal language or languages are also the languages in which we dream, and in which we can read, and perhaps write poems. And when we dream in a foreign language (something that has happened to me), we honor it, we belong to it a bit, or we belong to someone who speaks it. Poetry, too, is constantly bringing sounds in and setting them to play. In the manuals for studying languages, there are hardly ever poems. We are taught to say, "Hello, how are you? I want to go to the movies. Can you give me a coffee?" But we rarely learn to listen to the language in its texts and poems. In a certain way, you will therefore never really have it in your ear, or in the body, and you are not truly going to have pleasure with it. You will not know how it draws out the world. In the maternal language, you know it and hear it immediately. It is very important to hear and read texts aloud. La Fontaine's fables are extraordinary in that we are obligated to read them with a tone. And tone is something that comes from sounds. For example, *The Cat, the Weasel and the Little Rabbit*:

La dame au nez pointu répondit que la terre





Woodcut illustration from the anonymous medical handbook *Zhengzhi tuzhu houke* (Diagnosis and Treatment of Throat Conditions, Illustrated), edition engraved in 1797. Photo: Wellcome Foundation.

était au premier occupant. C'était un beau sujet de guerre qu'un logis où lui-même il n'entraît qu'en rampant.

The madame with nose so sharp replied:  
"The earth is his by whom first occupied. A pretty cause for war is feign'd; A house himself by creeping only gained!"

Ta ta ta ta, hammered, articulated, and up high: preemptory and pointed, that's the weasel. And here's the cat:

C'était un chat vivant comme un dévot ermite. Un chat faisant la chattemite, un saint homme de chat, bien fourré, gros et gras, arbitre expert sur tous les cas.

He lived a pious hermit of a cat – A cat with meek inviting face. Swelled in his reverend ermine sleek and fat, A judge expert in every case.

In French, you can hear it, *gros* and *gras*, lots of o's and a's that the translator has also found in "pious" and "cat." You can navigate inside this as if it were a whole, and to know a language, it is indeed true that you have to feel it as a whole.

There are very great poems in every language. They fabricate the language and are fabricated by it. Homer's poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* founded the Greek language. If I tell you two phrases from these poems, you are not going to understand them but perhaps you will hear them. The scene represents a goddess, Thetis, and her son Achilles. He is mourning the death of his friend Patroclus, she knows that her son is going to die and is mourning as well and each one of them mourns with a particular noise. He is a great warrior whose speech heavily sighs, with long syllables, from the depths of his chest: *tôi de baru stenakhonti*. When she mourns, everything is tight with sadness and almost chirps, listen: *oxu de kôkusasa* (it's in the 18th song, lines 70–71). What one has for oneself in the maternal language, and what is perhaps the most difficult thing to master in another language, is the body of that language.

There are thus one or several languages that are more maternal than others, the ones we are immediately able to hear and with which we are one. But luckily, if a language is not something that belongs, this is also because it is something that is learned.

### Several Languages Several Worlds

What does it really mean to know several languages? Perhaps having more than one string

to one's bow. Several languages are several worlds, several ways to open oneself to the world.

It is not things first and then words, and it is complicated to figure out how this relationship forms. This is the source of a longstanding quarrel among philosophers. Did we first have a thing and then a word, or first a word and then a thing, or did both come at the same time? Probably both: philosophers are extremely prudent and today they often decide for both. But, in classical philosophy, we traditionally imagine that the thing exists first and that then we will start naming it. As a result, we don't often think about the way we name it in different languages: the identity of the thing to which the words refer is enough to ensure correct communication.

Yet I think that the word works the thing and in a certain way makes it be. Let's take *khaire*, the Greek word used as a salute. It does not at all signify *good morning* or *welcome*, nor *bonjour*. It literally means "enjoy, take pleasure." When we salute one another in this language, one does not say "have a good day" or "hope your day is fine," one says "enjoy," and that is not at all the same thing! There is a whole world that is sketched out here. When a Latin speaker meets or leaves another Latin speaker, he tells him: *vale*, "be well," "be in good health." That is yet another world. When you say "hello" in Hebrew or in Arabic, you say *shalom*, *salam*, "may peace be with you." The world opens up in an entirely different way according to the language used and whether you are told to "have a nice day," to "enjoy" or "be well," or for "peace to be with you." This is what I find so interesting in the difference between languages: how each one always sketches out something like a world or a vision of the world, and how these worlds enter into contact with one another.

I would like to take another example, a very concrete one. The word "table" comes from the Latin *tabula*, the banker's tablet. The banker would set up a little *tabula* where affairs of money could be settled, particularly loans or currency exchange. The Greeks for their part would say *trapeza*, "with four feet"; it was a Greek table that had four feet and was not a little tablet. When you say "table" in Spanish, you say *mesa*. In geography too, a *mesa* designates a plateau: the Castile plateau or the one in the Andes. You do not say exactly the same thing when you think of a changer tablet, a piece of furniture with four feet, or a plateau in Castile. All these haloes of sense around the words constitute languages and their differences. Speaking different languages thus comes down to having within one's reach several worlds that can be compared to one another. In the

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nineteenth century, the German Romantics proposed a very beautiful comparison by inventing or by reinventing linguistics, in other words the art of dealing with languages. They said that a language is like a net you throw into the world, and according to the mesh of the net, where and how it is thrown and pulled back in, different fish turn up. A language is what brings back certain kinds of fish, a certain kind of world.

### Untranslatables

I have spent a lot of time understanding what we might do with this perception. As a philosopher, I worked with a hundred and fifty other philosophers from all the countries of Europe – simply because I was not able to make my way out of Europe in order to undertake a truly external comparison – on what we call “untranslatables,” words that one cannot render in another language, that are characteristics of a language and signal it in its difference: in sum, symptoms of the difference of languages.

We wrote a *Dictionary of Untranslatables* in philosophy ... and it took us fifteen years! What was most improbable about this adventure was that it was such a success in bookstores! Fairly quickly we sold more than ten thousand copies, proof of the public’s interest. We were not interested in “table,” but in more abstract, more philosophical words such as *liberté*, for example, a harshly philosophical word. There are at least two ways to say *liberté* in Europe and they imply very different things. In English, for example, the French word *liberté* can be translated in two ways: “liberty” or “freedom.” These two words include two concepts of *liberté* that are not at all alike. “Liberty,” like *liberté*, comes from the Latin word *liberi*, “the children”: “liberty” belongs to children who are born in free people’s homes, non-slaves; in other words (and I am only repeating the analyses of a great linguist, Émile Benveniste), it is a matter of a liberty transmitted from parents to children, a vertical liberty. “Freedom,” for its part, is from the same family as “friend” and this kind of *liberté* is horizontal, the freedom of a class of age, of companions who are going to study or wage war together. “Freedom” exists in an immediately political way while “liberty” is “naturally” transmitted through the family. Of course, things immediately get more complicated because the question of nature and culture is difficult: a father is not “naturally” free because nature is only ever the name of a certain state of society, it’s just that this type of *liberté* is transmitted from generation to generation. In any case, you can see how “freedom” and “liberty” are different perceptions of *liberté* that are sketched out within the same language.

The mere fact that there are two words in English (“freedom” and “liberty”) for what has only one word in French (*liberté*) and also has only one word in German (*Freiheit*, which has the same etymology as “freedom”), is very interesting. Like the Latin word, the French word implies *jus sanguinis*, a born writ that passes from father to son. As for the German term, it immediately designates the freedom of equal battle companions acting out of solidarity. This produces philosophical and political reflections that are not at all the same. It produces them or is produced by them, I am not sure how to state the direction of the causality, but let’s say we can feel the difference in languages vibrating here.

### Homonyms

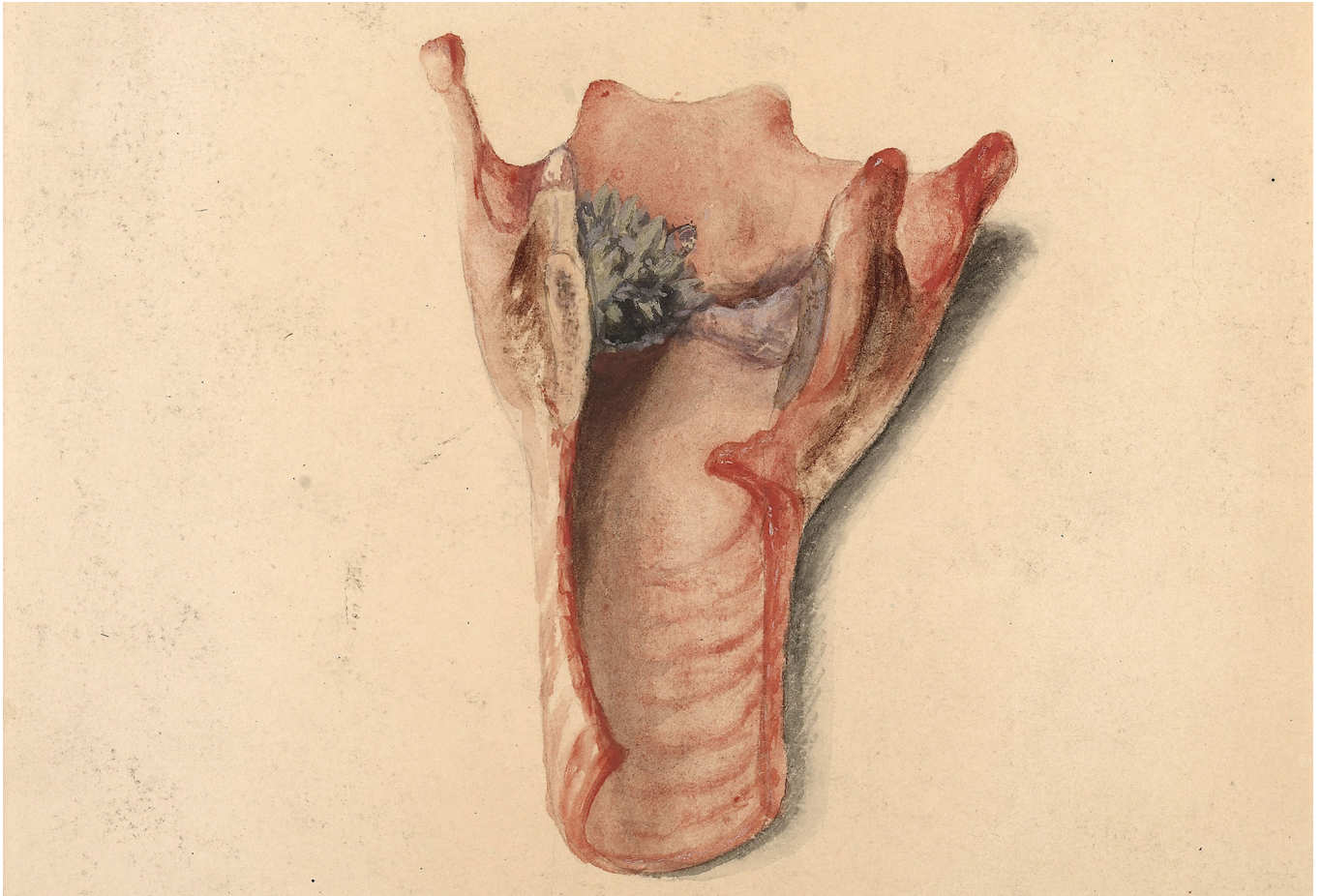
It is fascinating to improve our understanding of what makes for the singularity of each language. If I forget for a moment many important things, things related to syntax and grammar (the order of words, the gender of nouns, verb tense, etc.), what constitutes the singularity of each language is, in particular, words with several meanings. There are the terrible words we call “homonyms”: the same word means several things.

Different homonyms exist in every language. It is in fact on the basis of another language that we can identify the homonyms in the language we speak, in our maternal language.

Let’s take the example of “truth” in English, something that conforms to reality. When I say that this table is yellow, it’s true: you see it and it is indeed yellow. But in Russian there are two words for saying “truth.” One of these words, *pravda*, was the name of the Communist Party’s newspaper that was always supposed to tell the truth. But this same word also means “justice”; we know this because it was used to translate the Greek word *dikaionê*, which signifies “justice” in the Bible without any possible ambiguity, into Russian (or into Slavonic, an ancestor of Russian). The other Russian word, *istina*, also means “truth” but in the sense of exactness: this table is brown, yellow, this statement is exact and therefore the word *istina* is used. So you can see that for Russians, when we say “truth,” we confuse two things: justice and exactness. From our point of view, on the other hand, when they say *pravda*, Russian speakers confuse two things: justice and truth.

Every language has its share of confusion, but these forms of confusion can be observed on the basis of another language. They even only exist as a function of this other point of view. It is always from the outside that you can see how things work at home. It is only outside your own territory that you notice it. It is very important to speak two languages, at least two, because it allows you to understand that yours is not the





Thomas Godart, *Watercolor Drawing Showing a Papilloma Springing from the Neighbourhood of the Left Vocal Cord* [detail], 1862–75. Photo: Wellcome Foundation.

only possible one, as well as the kinds of conflagrations or fusions of meaning your language produces. When I say *sens* in French, it means the “sense” or “meaning” of a word in English, the “sensation” one feels, and also the “direction.” This is incredible and I don’t think it exists in any other modern language! What defines a language is the sum of its ambiguities, especially when they are not a product of chance but are grounded, as is the case here, in the long history of that language, for example through the translations that are carried out from one language to another. Thus the “sense” of a word and “sensation” were already related in the Latin *sensus* from which the French language inherits; and the Latin itself translated the Greek *nous*, which means something like “intuition,” something you apprehend all of a sudden, whether instantaneously (like a sniffing dog) or immediately (like a thinking god).

### Translating

And so to conclude, we have yet to understand how we can go from one language to another: by translating, “trans-lation,” “bringing across,” how eloquent.

One must first underline just how difficult translation is. To go from one language to another, we have to go from one world to another and we have to somehow make our way across a ditch. Luckily there is a world common to all these worlds: we all live, I was going to say “globally,” in the same world; we do indeed have something like “the world” that we share, but, considering all the many languages and the cultures they implicate, it is passionately composite, heteroclit, jointed, and disjointed.

Here are two translations of the same text, describing the scene of Babel. It makes the plurality of language out to be a form of divine punishment and not a human richness, so much so that I am not at all sure I agree. This passage from the Bible tells how men wanted to erect a tower so high that it defied God. God punished them by preventing them from entirely gathering together, in other words by giving them the diversity of languages. Men started speaking several languages even though up until then they had only spoken one. They therefore dispersed, because the difference of languages was successful in preventing them from uniting. The first translation is from the *Bishop’s Bible*:

And all the whole earth was of one language and lyke speech And when they went forth from the east, they found a playne in the land of Sinner, and there they abode And one said to another: Come let vs prepare brycke, and burn them in the fire. And they had brycke for stones, and

schlime had they in steade of mortar And they said: Go to, let vs build vs a citie and a toure, whose toppe may reach into heaven and vs make vs a name, least per aventure we be scattered abroad into the upper face of the whole earth But the Lord came donne to see the citie and toure which the children of men building And the Lord said: Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language, and this they begin to do: neither is there any let to them from all those things which they have imagined to do Come on, let vs go donne, and there confound their language, that eur eye one perceive not his neighbours speech And so the Lord scattered them from that place into the upper face of all the earth, and they left of to build that citie And ter four is the name of it called Babel because the Lord did confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.

Here you are being told the story of Babel. All of a sudden nobody understands anyone else any more, people only hear “blah blah blah.” But you have no problem understanding. It’s a text that functions as if it were written in a strangely familiar English though it dates from the sixteenth century.

If I read the second translation, what you will hear is a very different English language, it’s another language in our own that comes from further back in time: the *King James Bible*.

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there.

And they said to one another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them roughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top *may reach* unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.

And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.

And the LORD said, Behold, the people *is* one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will

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be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.

Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.

Here then are the two translations of the Bible most often read in English today. One translation leaves the reader as undisturbed as possible because she finds herself as if she was in her contemporary language, even if she does not understand all the words of the text. The other translation, however, disturbs the reader because it comes from further back in time: she doesn't use several of the expressions ("came to pass," "go to," or the inversions of subject and verb such as "had they"), but thanks to this she understands that the translation comes from the past and that something from that past is being heard and working its way through her language.

It's very interesting that there are different manners of translating, and several ways to have a language heard in another one. This implies that a language is not simply a means of communication: it is also a culture, a world of phrases and rhythms that differ.

Today, when one writes a phrase in Google and asks Google Translate to translate it, one often obtains very strange results. For example, this phrase from the Bible: "And God created man in his image." I asked Google to translate it from French, for clarity's sake, into German, and then I asked it to retranslate the German phrase into French, and at the end of the operation, once the result has stabilized: "And man created God in his image!" For the moment, translation is labor that is not done automatically, and for many good reasons. When Google, for example, takes it up, it works its way through English, which serves as a pivot language, in other words as a common denominator like the one you use for fractions. Google therefore translates the French into English, then the English into German, the German into English, and finally the English into the French. Of course all these passages produce some very strange things, like this utterly contradictory reversal ...

Starting from the moment one considers that one language is not only a means of communication but that it draws out a world, you become very careful and attentive. A maternal language is not like any other thing, even if it does not belong, and even if more than one, thank goodness, exists. Thanks to the fact that more than one language exists, the world is more interesting, more varied, more complicated. This complication forbids us from believing that we are the only ones who possess the truth.

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*Translated from the French by William T. Bishop, with the generous support of LABEX Empirical Foundations of Language (ANR-10-LABX-0083). Originally published in Barbara Cassin, Plus d'une langue (Montrouge: Bayard Culture, 2012). Excerpt courtesy of the publisher and the author. The second part of this text will be published on e-flux conversations in March 2017.*

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**Barbara Cassin** is director of research at the CNRS, the director of the Léon Robin Center for Research on Ancient Thought, and President of the Collège International de Philosophie. Trained as a philosopher and philologist specializing in Ancient Greece, her research focuses on the relationship between philosophy and what is posited as not being philosophy: sophism, rhetoric, literature. Her engagement with the question of what words can do is manifest in a host of publications, many of which have been translated. The most recent volumes to appear are *Jacques le Sophiste: Lacan, logos et psychanalyse* (2012), *Plus d'une langue: Petites conférences* (Bayard, 2012) and *La Nostalgie: Quand donc est-on chez soi? Ulysse, Enée, Arendt* (2013). Her editorial work includes the seminal *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (2004, Engl. transl. Princeton UP, 2014). A translator herself (notably of Hannah Arendt and Peter Szondi), she is also the editor of several book series, notably *L'Ordre philosophique*. In 2012, the Académie Française honored her work with the *Grand prix de philosophie*.

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