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POLYGLOTS IN ROMAN ANTIQUITY. WRITING SOCIO-CULTURAL HISTORY BASED ON ANECDOTES

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Vix discit homo duas aut tres, aut per magistros, aut per regiones in quibus versatur aliqua consuetudine; ut multum tres aut quattuor linguas.

Augustinus, *Sermo* 162/A. 11

So solo che quando ascolto una parola in una lingua diversa, non la dimentico più.

Cardinal Giuseppe Mezzofanti (1774–1849)

1. Heinrich Schliemann: a latin testimony on polyglotism

No doubt, Heinrich Schliemann would have been honoured to figure in the title of the first part of this article. Indeed, the often contested archaeologist – "Hero or Fraud" as stated in a contribution on his discovery of the treasure of Troy[1] – boasted of his mastery of several languages. His biography by Ernst Meyer cites 22 languages studied by Schliemann throughout his life (a 'Mithradatic number' to which I will refer in the conclusion of this paper)[2]. Schliemann's prose in various modern languages has survived in letters and diaries. We even have letters in ancient Greek ad-dressed to scholars, Greeks, and Turkish officials[3].

In 1869, after he had made a fortune in the Californian goldrush (1850–1852), after stays in Russia (1852–1856) where he had made yet another quick fortune as a military contractor in the Crimean War, and after extensive travels in the Orient (1864), the succesful businessman and au-todidact submitted two works in order to obtain the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Rostock: a published French report of his oriental travels and a published French translation of his archae-ological research in Ithaca, the Peloponne-sus and Troy. Along with these two French books, Schliemann submitted Greek and Latin versions of the autobiography that introduced the Ithaca publication. Two classical scholars from Rostock, who were

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[1] Easton (1998).
[2] Meyer (1969) 443. Besides the languages men-tioned in the Latin Vita, Meyer cites German and Low German (native languages), Chinese, Slavonic, Danish, Hebrew, Persian, Turkish, Hindi-Urdu.

[3] The Schliemann letters are edited by Meyer (1953 and 1958).

appointed to judge the proposal, found the research interesting, independent and honest, and the candidate's mastery of French praiseworthy. While the Latin of the *Vita* was considered satisfactory, the ancient Greek was judged as appalling. This text was severely criticised: there was not a single sentence without an error, and it ought never to have been submitted[4]. Be this as it may be, on 27 April 1869, Heinrich Schliemann was granted the degree of *Philosophiae Doctor Artiumque Liberalium Magister* – Ph.D. and M.A. at once.

Schliemann's Latin *Vita* is both an example *par excellence* of self-representation and a remarkable story about the acquisition of multilingual skills, and is therefore worth quoting more fully.

The following table chronologically lists the various languages he studied, as well as the sometimes curious details Schliemann inserted about his motivation for learning a new language or the way he acquired his skills.

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[4] Details, edition and commentary on the Latin *Vita* are in Calder III (1974). See also Albert (1996) 501–502.

Year	Language	Quote	Remarks/ observations
1832	Latin	Quum Kalkhorsti (...) puer decem annorum, patri meo donum in Christi natalitia anno millesimo octingentesimo tricesimo secundo commentariolum, lingua latina male scriptum offerrem de rebus maxime memorabilibus bello Trojano gestis, et de Ulyssis et Agamemnonis variis, quibus jactati sunt, casibus (...)	Apparently Schliemann was taught Latin from an early age by his father who was a Protestant minister. The Christmas present is mentioned in the *Vita* as a *prodigium*; 36 years later the ten-year-old boy who wrote the tale was to see the place of the Trojan war and the fatherland of his cherished heroes.
1836	Ancient Greek (first acquaintance with)	Sorte sua non contentus adolescens ebriositati se dediderat, quod vere vitium non effecit ut Homeri oblivisceretur, recitabat enim nobis fere centum versus, observans numerum. Quamvis ne verbum quidem eorum intelligerem, tamen hac dulce sonanti lingua vehementer commovebar et amaras de misera mea sorte profundebam lacrimas.	At age fourteen, circumstances forced Schliemann to leave school and to become an apprentice at a grocery. His passion for Homer was born when he heard a drunkard reciting Homeric verses. He paid the fellow three bottles of brandy to hear him recite these verses three times.
1842	English (in six months)	Quae ratio in eo consistit, ut multum clara voce legamus, numquam conversiones faciamus, quoque die una schola utamur, ut semper de rebus quae nos delectant, commentemur, ut commentariola inspiciente magistro emendemus, ea ediscamus et ad verbum ea postero die recitemus quae priore emendavimus. Memoria mea minuta erat, quia a puero eam non exercueram, sed omne tempus in usum meum convertebam (...) numquam nisi legens ad cursorem publicum exspectans stabam.	Working as a messenger, as office attendant, and later, as a bookkeeper in Amsterdam, bare necessity (*necessitas*) was Schliemann's first and foremost motivation to learn English. The method he desribes is very much that of tireless efforts, memorising, daily repetition, imitation, and language baths. The presence of a teacher is required.

1842	French (in six months)	Tum rationem meam ad studium linguae Francogallicae, cujus difficultates sex mensibus pluribus superavi.	Since no further details are offered, the method was presumably the same as that he used learning English.
1842–1846	Dutch, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese (each in six months)	Quae effusa contentio anni spatio memoriam meam ita firmaverat ut studium linguae Batavae, Hispanicae, Italicae et Lusitanicae facillimum mihi esse videretur, neque opus erat ut plus temporis quam sex menses impenderem	Again, Schliemann's stress is on memorising. He does not mention observing linguistic similarities in structure or vocabulary between these Roman languages.
1846	Russian	Itaque solus ad studium huius linguae me accinxi et duce grammatica paucis diebus litteras Russicas earumque pronuntiationem didici. Incepi tum veterem meam sequi rationem, ex qua quas ipse composueram historiolas perscriberem et ediscerem. Quum nemo mihi adesset, qui pensa mea emendaret, foeda esse debebant (...) Conduxi igitur (...) pauperem Iudaeum, qui quaque vespera veniret auditurus duas per horas Russicas meas declamationes, quarum ne unam quidem syllabam comprehendebat.	Business (*negotia*) is given as his first motivation for learning Russian. For the first time, Schliemann mentions the problem of not finding a teacher. In Amsterdam, he was only able to find an old grammar book, a dictionary, and a bad translation of the adventures of Telemachus. Schliemann was well aware that this study without the example of a (native) speaker would turn out to be a failure. He proceeded with telling stories in Russian to himself. Hence the rather funny event with the Jew who surely was not the only person to be blamed for them not understanding each other.
1846	Russian (continued)	Quae vero molestiae ardorem meum adeo non minuerunt ut tribus hebdomadis peractis primam meam scriberem epistolam ad Russum quendam Londini versantem, et iam firmam assecutus eram facilitatem familiari sermone cum mercatoribus Russicis colloquendi, qui ad indicum vendendum Amstelodamum venerant.	Owing to his declamations, Schliemann had to move twice, since the noise disturbed the other inhabitants of the house in which he rented his room. Despite all these difficulties, the results of his study seem to have been even more successful than his former language efforts: a Russian letter after three weeks, and conversations with Russian merchants in Amsterdam.
From 1846 on	Literature of the languages acquired	Quum linguae Russicae studium absolvissem, serio operam dare incepi literarum monumentis earum quas didiceram linguarum.	Schliemann seems to have been very satisfied with his Russian progress (*absolvissem* really suggests finishing). To a businessman, the practical speaking and writing ability clearly comes before studying literature.

1854	Swedish, Polish	(...) sed primis octo vel novem, quibus in Russia degebam annis negotiis ita obrutus eram, ut studium linguarum persequi non possem et demum anno 1854 nihil me impedivit quin linguam Suedicam et Poloniam discerem.	Apparently, business comes before language study.
1856	Modern Greek (six weeks)	Quantocunque Graecae linguae discendae tenebar desiderio, studium ejus non prius aggredi ausus sum, quam certam quandam fortunarum assecutus essem possessionem, timens, ne haec lingua nimis me delectaret atque a mercatura abalienaret. Tandem vero, quum discendi cupiditati resistere amplius non possem, mense Januario 1856 hoc studium fortiter aggressus sum, primum cum N. Pappadace, tum cum Th. Bimpo, Atheniensibus, veterem meam semper persequens rationem. Non plus quam sex impendi hebdomades ad superandas neograecae linguae difficultates.	Again, business-related causes are offered – this time to explain Schliemann's lateness in studying the language he loved so much. His method had remained the same, and for the first time his teachers are explicitly mentioned.
1856	Ancient Greek	Tum me ad veteris linguae studium applicui, quam tribus mensibus satis didici, ut nonnullos veterum scriptorum, imprimis Homerum intelligere possim, quem legi et relegi vivo animo permotus.	For Ancient Greek, only the ability to understand and read texts (of course, mainly Homer) is mentioned. The short span of learning is enough to put present-day classicists to shame – though the words *satis* and *nonnullos* leave some room for interpretation.
1856-1858	Ancient Greek literature	Tum per biennium omne fere studium posui in cognoscendis veterum graecarum literarum monumentis, et paene omnes veteres scriptores, aliquoties Iliadem et Odysseam perscrutavi.	Again, the envious classicist wonders what could be meant by reading «nearly all» Greek authors at this stage.
1858	Arabic (ca. one year)	Anno 1858 adii (...) Aegyptum (...). Usus sum oblata mihi opportunitate linguae Latinae discendae et tum desertum a Cairo usque ad Hierosolyma peragravi; visi Petram, perlustravi totam Syriam ut longiore fruerer linguae Arabicae usu, cujus accuratiorem mihi Petropoli paravi cognitionem.	As for skills in Arabic, its practical use is stressed. We do not really get to know whether Schliemann read or wrote Arabic letters.

2. What does it mean to be a polyglot?

In more than one way, Schliemann's report raises the questions a present-day reader spontaneously asks when discussing the subject of polyglotism in the past (and nowadays)[5]. How did polyglots acquire their language skills, in times when handbooks or native speakers were scarce? To Schliemann, both books and speakers / teachers were apparently necessary. But not all polyglots need them. In fact, literacy is not even a *condicio sine qua non*. In border areas, illiterate people manage to speak several languages which are hardly related (Albanese, Serbian, and Turkish in Balkan countries; Gypsies not seldom manage to get along in five languages without writing one – just to stick to European examples).

What does it mean to 'know' a language? In times of world tourism and massive migration, oral communication and getting along in every day conversation are often treated as the hallmark of 'knowing' a language. But how do we decide about those languages which are not used anymore? Surely, in former centuries, intellectuals might have valued the knowledge of grammar and access to literary sources and cultural wealth as a sterling achievement, while present-day language certificates carefully distinguish between active and receptive competences, between reading, writing, speaking and listening skills (each divided into different levels of competence[6]), the everyday perception of one's language skills might be more connected with impression management. A sense of assertivity, combined with a basic knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, surely helps in finding one's way in a foreign country. There is a huge difference between introducing oneself in a conversation and keeping the same dialogue going when the conversation partners do not respond in the way you expect them to do. Of course, the domain of the conversation also matters, as scholars know who are perfectly able to discuss their speciality, but find it very difficult to order their food in a restaurant.

Be that as it may, Schliemann used not only his doctoral title and his archaeological successes, but most certainly also his polyglotism as a tool to impress. Not only the academic community, but also his family and friends – and later on the whole world – would be amazed by the language skills he pretended to possess. For sure, Schliemann was succesful in this image building, as the myth about his submitting his whole Ph. D. in Ancient Greek persists... in the English Wikipedia page dedicated to him.

Schliemann was not the only famous polyglot in history. Historical surveys uncover a menagerie of polyglot scholars, politicians, kings, missionaries, explorers, and adventurers, mostly from the Modern Era on, when the vernacular languages in Europe were classified, valued and studied as intensively as Latin and Greek[7]. Yunus Bey, interpreter and dragoman to Suleiman the Magnificent (1494–1566), is said to

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[5] Erard (2012) is a highly readable and enjoyable book on the phenomenon of polyglottery.

[6] See, for instance, the European Language Qualifications distinguishing between understanding, speaking, and writing. See http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/en/resources/european-language-levels-cefr .

[7] Frijhoff (2010); Maas, Vollmer (2005); Van Hal, Isebaert, Swiggers (2013). Besides these very useful surveys, the volumes by Burke (1993 and 2004) are indispensable tools for social and cultural historians.

have mastered seventeen languages. With each visiting embassador from the West, he managed to speak in his own language. Emperor Charles V (1500–1558), who was said to know five or six languages himself, admired him as a prodigy[8]. During his lifetime, Cardinal Mezzofanti (quoted in the beginning of this article) was known as "the monster of languages" and "the universal interpreter" who ought to have existed at the time of the tower of Babel. He was visited by dozens of tourists and students from all over the world; he defeated the poet Lord Byron in a multilingual contest, and he managed to answer, each in their own language, a group of international students brought together to surprise him by Pope Gregory XV. Reports on his language knowledge roughly range from 38, between 40 and 50, even to 72 languages. The German diplomat, interpreter and sinologist Emil Krebs (1867–1930) was denied the extra salary the Foreign Office normally granted for each foreign language a member of its staff could speak, since his mastery of about 70 (or 32, or 60 – again the numbers differ) languages would have made him a millionaire and would have been way too expensive for the state. During his lifetime, he passed government tests in Chinese, Turkish, Japanese, and Finnish. Lists of famous hyperpolyglots, in the past or still alive, are available on the internet (while six languages are considered the minimum, amazing examples of over thirty or forty are mentioned); demonstrations (and failures!) are on YouTube and on specialised websites; neurologists even investigate the matter. European politicians like José Manuel Barroso (°1956) take pride in their mastering the major European languages. All this suggests that polyglotism and the knowledge of several languages is a thing to be proud of. But how would this have been for the ancient dossier?

3. In search of ancient polyglots

In a survey of knowledge of 'barbaric' languages in the ancient authors, Strobach confidently states that reports on language geniuses are quite frequent in ancient literature[9]. In fact, if one assumes a minimum of five languages known, only three persons qualify. The minimum of five accords with the remark by Saint Augustine, quoted in the beginning of this article, that three or four languages would already be plenty for a person to learn. In this paper, I enhance the number a little bit beyond three polyglots, but, to the best of my knowledge, this is as far as one gets.

Though derived from the Greek, the concept of polyglotism is not really an ancient one. The Greek word often refers to oft-repeated or loud-voiced cries or is applied to the many-tongued vocal oracle of Dodona. An interesting passage in the context of this article involves the god Hermes who claims to be not so πολύγλωττος as to be able to bring messages to Scyths, Persians, Thracians, and Celts[10]. Latin dictionaries do not mention the loanword

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8   Peeters (1935) 133 on Yunus Bey (the article by Peeters is remarkable, since it often links polyglotism with orientalism); Burke (2004) 45 and 113–115 (Charles V and other polyglots in the Modern Age); Erard (2012) passim on Mezzofanti; 170–183 (on Krebs).

9   Strobach (1997) 160–170 (die Kenntniss 'Barbarischer' Sprachen), with quote on p. 160.

10 Lucian, *Jup. Trag.* 13.

polyglota; the authors preferred the wording *multarum linguarum gnarus/peritus*[11].

The Pontian King Mithradates the Great (134–63 BCE) still figures in the lists of famous polyglots in history[12]. The classic account of his multilingual skills appears in Pliny the Elder:

> Mithridates, duarum et viginti gentium rex, totidem linguis iura dixit, pro contione singulas sine interprete adfatus.
>
> (Plinius Maior, *Nat. Hist.* 7.88)

Tellingly, Mithradates is mentioned in a chapter dedicated to the marvels of human memory[13]: the Persian king Cyrus could remember the names of all his soldiers, Cineas managed to memorise the names of all Roman senators and knights one day after his arrival in Rome, Lucius Scipio even knew the names of all Roman citizens, while a certain Charmadas was able to recite each single book volume which was brought to him from the library.

In another passage (book 25 on Medicine), Pliny mentions Mithradates as the greatest king of his time. He praises him especially for his knowledge of poison, antidotes, and medicine – notices on this science were found by Pompey in Mithradates' private library after his final defeat. Mastery of languages is mentioned here as one of the skills which enabled the king just to trust in himself, and to prevent cunning schemes from his enemies:

> illum solum mortalium certum est XXII linguis locutum, nec e subiectis gentibus ullum hominem per interpretem appellatum ab eo annis LVI, quibus regnavit.
>
> (Plinius Maior, *Nat. Hist.* 25.6–7)

Gellius is even more explicit on Mithradates' linguistic talent, stressing the fact that his mastery was on the native speakers' level (*gentilis* referring to being a compatriot):

> Mithridates autem, Ponti atque Bithyniae rex inclutus, qui a Cn. Pompeio bello superatus est, duarum et viginti gentium[14], quas sub dicione habuit, linguas percalluit earumque omnium gentium viris haut umquam per interpretem conlocutus est, sed ut quemque ab eo appellari usus fuit, proinde lingua et oratione ipsius non minus scite, quam si gentilis eius esset, locutus est.
>
> (Gellius, *NA* 17.17.2)[15]

As time goes by, the legend and the exaggeration increase, so as to reach the number of fifty languages mentioned in the late antique *De viris illustribus*.

> Mithridates rex Ponti oriundus a septem Persis, magna vi animi et corporis, ut sexiuges equos regeret quinquaginta gentium ore loqueretur.
>
> (ps. Aurelius Victor, *De vir. illust.* 76.1)

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[11] The word does not appear in any Latin dictionary, neither for Antiquity nor for the Middle Ages. The only Neo-Latin lexicon which is prepared to accept *polyglota* as a neologism is J. Mir, C. Calvano, *Nuovo vocabolario della lingua latina* (Milan, 1986).

[12] Rochette (1993) 223–224.

[13] As does Quintilian, *Inst. Or.* 11.2.50 (also mentioning the number of 22 languages).

[14] This is the reading from the *codices deteriores*, taken over by most modern editors, on the basis of the accounts in Pliny and Quintilian. However, most Gellius codices read *viginti quinque*.

[15] See also Valerius Maximus, *Fact. et dict. mem.* 8.7.ext.16: *Cuius utriusque industriae laudem duo reges partiti sunt, Cyrus omnium militum suorum nomina, Mitridates duarum et xx gentium, quae sub regno eius erant, linguas ediscendo, ille, ut sine monitore exercitum salutaret, hic, ut eos, quibus imperabat, sine interprete adloqui posset;* – the chapter is on all sorts of virtuous *industria* of famous men.

Uncertainty and a sort of deliberate vagueness about the exact numbers of languages known is a constant feature of studies on polyglots throughout the ages. As such, we do not need to bother whether Mithradates knew 22, 25 or 50 languages. Trying to list these languages does not make sense, as the ancient authors themselves never bothered to do so[16]. It may be noteworthy, however, that to ancient authors the region of Pontus was almost proverbially multilingual[17].

Immediately next after Mithradates and just before Cyrus (knowing the names of all his soldiers), Quintilian mentions the triumvir Licinius Crassus as a wonder of human memory:

> vel Crassus ille dives, qui cum Asiae praeesset quinque Graeci sermonis differentias sic tenuit ut qua quisque apud eum lingua postulasset eadem ius sibi redditum ferret.

(Quintilianus, *Inst. Or*. 11.2.50)

Valerius Maximus, again in his chapter on virtuous *industria*, also mentions Crassus' versatility in Greek dialects, pointing to the popularity he gained with it.

> Iam P. Crassus, cum in Asiam ad Aristonicum regem debellandum consul uenisset, tanta cura Graecae linguae notitiam animo conprehendit, ut eam in quinque diuisam genera per omnes partes ac numeros penitus cognosceret. Quae res maximum ei sociorum amorem conciliauit, qua quis eorum lingua apud tribunal illius postulauerat, eadem decreta reddenti.

(Valerius Maximus, *Fact. et dict. mem* 8.7.6)

While present-day readers might object that versatility in Greek dialects is not quite the same as multilinguism, things are not as clear-cut as they appear at first sight. Both the Latin *sermo* and the Greek διάλεκτος can have the meaning of 'language' or 'dialect'. Ionic, Attic, Doric, Aeolic and Koinè are most probably meant by the five forms of Greek. The authors acknowledged differences, while mostly they agreed with the idea that all were part of one Greek language[18].

The same fluid use of the notions of dialect and language appears in the only account of the third polyglot, the Egyptian queen Cleopatra (69–30 BCE):

> ἡδονὴ δὲ καὶ φθεγγομένης ἐπῆν τῷ ἤχῳ· καὶ τὴν γλῶτταν ὥσπερ ὄργανόν τι πολύχορδον εὐπετῶς τρέπουσα καθ' ἣν βούλοιτο διάλεκτον, ὀλίγοις παντάπασι δι' ἑρμηνέως ἐνετύγχανε βαρβάροις, τοῖς δὲ πλείστοις αὐτὴ δι' αὑτῆς ἀπεδίδου τὰς ἀποκρίσεις, οἷον Αἰθίοψι Τρωγλοδύταις Ἑβραίοις

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[16] Quite remarkably, Mayor (2010) 254 tries to do so. Note that the elaborate ancient accounts on Mithradates – as Appianus, *Bell. Mithr*. 112 or Strabo, *Geogr*. 10.4.10 – do not even mention his polyglotism.

[17] Plinius Maior, *NH* 6.15: *quondam adeo clara, ut Timosthenes in eam CCC nationes dissimilibus linguis descendere prodiderit; et postea a nostris CXXX interpretibus negotia gesta ibi* (on the Pontian region of Colchis). Strabo 11.2.16 mentions seventy languages for the region. Also Albania was considered a multilingual area, 26 dialects according to Strabo in the same passage. See Rochette (1996) 77 and 80.

[18] Davies (1987); Gera (2004) 45; 53; 180 and 201. Quintilianus, *Inst. or*. 8.3.59 refers to the *mixta ex uaria ratione linguarum oratio* when mentioning the mixing of various Greek dialects; *Inst. or*. 12.10.34 states that the Greek authors possess a greater wealth in language: *illis non verborum modo sed linguarum etiam inter se differentium copia est*. Quite remarkably, the Aeolic dialect of Lesbos was sometimes viewed as a 'barbaric language', see Werner (1991). Other ancient theories even linked Latin with Aeolian, thereby stating that Romans did not speak a real barbaric language, as there was a connection with Greek. See Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. Rom*. 1.90.1 and Van Hal (2009) 153 for further references.

Ἄραψι Σύροις Μήδοις Παρθυαίοις. πολλῶν δὲ λέγεται καὶ ἄλλων ἐκμαθεῖν γλώττας, τῶν πρὸ αὐτῆς βασιλέων οὐδὲ τὴν Αἰγυπτίαν ἀνασχομένων παραλαβεῖν διάλεκτον, ἐνίων δὲ καὶ τὸ μακεδονίζειν ἐκλιπόντων.

(Plutarchus, *Ant*. 27.4)

Apart from the seven enumerated 'barbaric' languages[19], she is said to have known 'many' others, while it is understood as self-evident that, unlike the former Ptolemaic kings, she also mastered Egyptian and had not forgotten the Macedonian pronunciation of the Greek language. Here, the word διάλεκτον is used for the Egyptian language, while μακεδονίζειν refers to the Macedonian way of pronouncing Greek.

Language skills of the Palmyrene queen Zenobia (240–275) are treated in detail by her biographers in the *Historia Augusta*. While she spoke and corresponded in her Syriac mother-tongue, she urged her sons to learn to speak Latin which she knew herself, though surely not to a grade of perfection. Her knowledge of Greek and Egyptian was said to be excellent[20].

Finally, Cassiodorus' extensive *laudatio* of the Ostrogothic queen Amalasuintha (c. 494–534/5) somehow ressembles the praise of Cleopatra, although one sus-

pects that it was her eloquence and literacy which made her apt to converse with nearly every ambassador without needing an interpreter. At least, her knowledge of classical Greek, Latin, and Gothic is explicitly praised as excellent:

Hanc enim dignissime omnia regna venerantur, quam videre reverentia est, loquentem audire miraculum. Qua enim lingua non probatur esse doctissima? Atticae facundiae claritate diserta est: Romani eloquii pompa resplendet: nativi sermonis ubertate gloriatur: excellit cunctos in propriis, cum sit aequaliter ubique mirabilis. Nam si vernaculam linguam bene nosse prudentis est, quid de tali sapientia poterit aestimari, quae tot genera eloquii inoffensa exercitatione custodit? Hinc venit diversis nationibus necessarium magnumque praesidium, quod apud aures prudentissimae dominae nullus eget interprete. Non enim aut legatus moram aut interpellans aliquam sustinet de mediatoris tarditate iacturam, quando uterque et genuinis verbis auditur et patriotica responsione componitur.

(Cassiodorus, *Var*. 11.1.6–7)

The descriptions of these five ancient polyglots show some remarkably similar patterns. All mention communication skills (speaking and understanding) at a high degree of perfection. Since all deal with statesmen and women, the political advantages (esteem and popularity) of polyglottery are emphasised (most explicitly in the case of Mithradates). For those interested in the practical side of the matter, it may be worth pointing out that a political conversation is not exactly the same as an everyday chat, as it can be well prepared by the person who is addressed and perhaps not that freely responded to by the

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[19] An interpreter for the Troglodyte language is indeed known from a papyrus (*UPZ* II 227). See Rochette (1996) 80.

[20] SHA, *Trig. Tyr*. 30.20: *Filios Latine loqui iusserat, ita ut Graece vel difficile vel raro loquerentur. Ipsa Latini sermonis non usque quoque gnara, sed ut loqueretur pudore cohibita; loquebatur et Aegyptiace ad perfectum modum. Historiae Alexandrinae atque orientalis ita perita, ut eam epitomasse dicatur; Latinam autem Graece legerat*; SHA, *Aurel*. 27.6: *Hanc epistulam Nicomachus se transtulisse in Graecum ex lingua Syrorum dicit ab ipsa Zenobia dictatam. Nam illa superior Aureliani Graeca missa est.*

party doing the request. Tellingly, four of the five cases are about non-Romans, three even deal with renowend enemies of the Roman Empire. And even more significantly, three examples deal with women, while the 'opposite sex' is often not mentioned by ancient authors in their discourse on erudition and schooling.

Other examples come to the mind. Plutarch mentions a mythic person near the Persian Gulf, who was able to speak "many languages", but used Doric Greek in a poetic way when conversing with the Spartan Cleombrotes[21]. When he fled to the Persian king, the Athenian statesman Themistocles was forced to learn Persian in one year's time: he did so to great perfection, as he was able to have a private conversation with the Persian king[22]. As will be explained in the next paragraph, knowledge of three languages cannot have been that exceptional at all. The explicit mention of the "three hearts" of the Roman poet Ennius might therefore be connected with the fact that, next to conversational fluency, he practised poetry in Latin, Greek, and Oscan – the expression of love for 'his' Oscan language is exceptional[23]. During his exile, Ovid claims to have learned to speak both the Getic and the Sarmatian languages; nothing survives of the poetry he asserts to have written in Getic[24]. If we are to believe Marcus Aurelius' educator Fronto, his pupil was perfectly able to understand Parthian and Celtiberian –which, together with Latin and Greek, would make him proficient in four languages[25]. The often unreliable *Historia Augusta* mentions an inscription for Emperor Gordian III in five languages, so that "everyone" would get the message[26]. Late antique *itineraria* occasionally mention people with versatility in many languages[27]. According to the testimony of Jerome, the Christian Greek author Epiphanius of Salamis had mastered five languages: Greek, Syriac, Hebrew, Coptic, and to some extent Latin[28].

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maticeque loqui); *Trist.* 3.14.47–50 (*Threicio Scythicoque fere circumsonor ore, et uideor Geticis scribere posse modis. Crede mihi, timeo ne sint inmixta Latinis/ inque meis scriptis Pontica uerba legas*); *Pont.* 4.13.19–20 (*A! pudet et Getico scripsi sermone libellum/ structaque sunt nostris barbara uerba modis*). Regardless of the fact whether one is prepared to accept the truth of Ovid's exile, the *Tristia* contain a goldmine of information on language acquisition. See *Trist.* 3.11.9–10 (no communication possible with *gens fera*); *Trist.* 3.12.37–40 (contact with Greek or Latin speaking seamen and merchants is rare); *Trist.* 4.1.89–94 (nobody over there is capable of understanding Ovid's Latin poetry); *Trist.* 5.2.67–68 (some Greek sounds in Getic, no Latin ones); *Trist.* 5.7.51–64 (no knowledge of Latin, some traces of Greek in Getic); *Trist.* 5.10.33–38 (Ovid is a *barbarus* and resorts to gestures to make himself understood); *Trist.* 5.12.55–56 (a place full of barbarous sounds and hostility). See Rochette X and Van Hal X for extensive literature on this subject.

[25] Fronto, *Ad M. Antoninum Imp. Epist* 4.2.3 (1248 van den Hout): *Namque tu Parthos etiam et Hiberos sua lingua patrem tuum laudantis pro summis oratoribus audias.*

[26] SHA, *Gord.* 34.2: *Gordiano sepulchrum milites apud Circesium castrum fecerunt in finibus Persidis, titulum huius modi addentes et Graecis et Latinis et Persicis et Iudaicis et Aegyptiacis litteris, ut ab omnibus legerentur*

[27] *Itin. Anton. Plac.* 37: *monasterium (...) in quo sunt tres abbates, scientes linguas, hoc est Latinas et Graecas, Syriacas et Aegyptiacas et Bessas, vel multi interpretes singularum linguarum.* With *Bessas* Persian is meant.

[28] Hieronymus, *Adv. Ruf.* 2.22. In *Adv. Ruf.* 3.6

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[21] Plutarchus, *De def. orac.* 421b: γλώσσαις δὲ πολλαῖς ἤσκητο χρῆσθαι, πρὸς δ' ἐμὲ τὸ πλεῖστον ἐδώριζεν οὐ πόρρω μελῶν.

[22] Plutarchus, *Them.* 28–29; Diodorus Siculus 11.57.5; Cornelius Nepos, *Them.* 10.

[23] Gellius 17.17.1: *Quintus Ennius tria corda habere se dicebat, quod loqui Graece et Osce et Latine sciret.*

[24] Ovidius, *Trist.* 5.7.55–56 (*Ille ego Romanus uates (ignoscite, Musae)/ Sarmatico cogor plurima more loqui. En pudet et fateor, iam desuetudine longa/ uix subeunt ipsi uerba Latina mihi*); *Trist.* 5.12.57–58 (*Ipse mihi uideor iam dedidicisse Latine:/ nam didici Getice Sar-*

4. The multilingual context of the Roman Empire

It would take at least a volume to elaborate upon the variety of languages spoken in the Roman Empire[29]. To put it in MacMullen's words: "Greco-Latin indicates a mixed culture in which, to the very end, a majority of the population must have spoken neither Latin nor Greek in their homes, whatever they spoke of necessity in the courts and market-places"[30]. Celtic was used in Spain, Galatia, Gallia, and Northern Italy[31]; like Thracian, Phrygian, Dacian or Lydian it left spare traces in the epigraphic record. At least four languages are known to have gained importance in late Antiquity with the rise of 'local' churches: Syriac, Coptic, Punic and Celtic. To this, one may add Armenian and Persian, which were of considerable importance as international languages in the late ancient period. Other local tongues must have existed, to emerge only in the Middle Ages: Basque, Welsh or Berber. Bilingualism and trilingualism must have thrived. Hence the observation by Saint Augustine on people acquiring three or four languages thanks to the presence of a teacher or by merely living with native speakers[32]. The educated class of Rome often knew Latin and Greek (while in the East, the knowledge of Latin was more restricted, though necessary for officials)[33]. Already in Plautus' *Poenulus*, the cunning use of various tongues by a Poenian is used for humoristic aims[34]. The use of Greek and Egyptian (and Latin to a lesser extent) is very well attested in the papyrological records in the province of Egypt[35]. Next to Aramaic and

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Epiphanius is called πεννάγλωσσος. Rufinus had ridiculised Epiphanius' multilingual skills. See Denecker, Partoens, Swiggers,Van Hal (2012) 433–434 for the details of this controversy.

[29] The works cited in the bibliography, not the least the series of articles by Rochette, will offer their readers a real treasury of works on languages and language diversity in the Roman Empire. A very rich volume is Neumann, Untermann (1980), while the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the World's Ancient Languages* (Woodard 2004) offers overviews on the linguistic details for each of the languages known. Refreshing new approaches with due attention to Late Antiquity appear in Mullen, James (2012).

[30] MacMullen (1990) 32. This volume contains reeditions of papers by MacMullen which are to be counted as classics for the present subject (*Provincial Languages in the Roman Empire* originally published in 1966; *Notes on Romanization* in 1984).

[31] Hieronymus, *In Galat*. 2.3 acknowledged the similarity between Galatian and the language of Treves; Plinius Maior, *Nat. Hist*. 3.13 observes ta linguistic connection between the Celts of Baetica and Lusitania.

[32] Cf. Augustine quoted in the beginning of this paper. See also *Schol. Hor. serm*. 1.10.30: *Dicit autem bilinguem, quia et Graeci et Latini apud Canusium habitant et utuntur utroque sermone* (referring to Greek and Latin); Isidorus, *Orig*. 15.1.63: *Hos Varro trilingues esse ait, quod et Graece loquantur et Latine et Gallice* (on the *Phocaeenses* who founded the colony of Massilia).

[33] The statement by second-century physician Galen, claiming that a person who knew two languages was considered a miracle, should most likely be interpreted as ironic. Surely, Galen wants to praise the Greek tongue. See Galen, *De differentia pulsuum* 2.5 (8.586 Kühn): ἐγὼ γὰρ οὕτω πολλὰς ἐκμανθάνειν οὐ δύναμαι διαλέκτους, ἵν' ἀνδράσιν εἰς τοσοῦτον πολυγλώττοις ἕπωμαι. δίγλωττος γάρ τις ἐλέγετο πάλαι, καὶ θαῦμα τοῦτο ἦν, ἄνθρωπος εἷς ἀκριβῶν διαλέκτους δύο· σὺ δὲ ἡμᾶς ἀξιοῖς πολλὰς ἐκμαθεῖν, δέον αὐτὸν ἐκμανθάνειν μίαν, οὕτω μὲν ἰδίαν, οὕτω δὲ κοινὴν ἅπασιν, οὕτω δ' εὔγλωττον, οὕτω δ' ἀνθρωπικήν. ἐγὼ γὰρ οὕτω πολλὰς ἐκμανθάνειν οὐ δύναμαι διαλέκτους, ἵν' ἀνδράσιν εἰς τοσοῦτον πολυγλώττοις ἕπωμαι. δίγλωττος γάρ τις ἐλέγετο πάλαι, καὶ θαῦμα τοῦτο ἦν, ἄνθρωπος εἷς ἀκριβῶν διαλέκτους δύο· σὺ δὲ ἡμᾶς ἀξιοῖς πολλὰς ἐκμαθεῖν, δέον αὐτὸν ἐκμανθάνειν μίαν, οὕτω μὲν ἰδίαν, οὕτω δὲ κοινὴν ἅπασιν, οὕτω δ' εὔγλωττον, οὕτω δ' ἀνθρωπικήν. In what follows, the speech of barbarians is compared to... sounds of animals. See Van Hal (2009) 147.

[34] Plautus, *Poen*. 995–1028 (esp. v. 112–113: *Et is omnis linguas scit, sed dissimulat sciens se scire: Poenus plane est*). See Rochette (1993) 544–545.

[35] Rochette (1994); Papaconstantinou (2010).

Hebrew (at that time a language of Scripture and liturgy) most Jews in the City of Rome probably knew Greek and Latin to which they resorted for their grave inscriptions. Numerous famous authors of Greek or Latin must have been acquainted with at least one local language: Apuleius and Augustine (Punic and Berber), Lucian, Ammianus Marcellinus, Libanius, John Chrysostom, Theodoret (Syriac, the latter surely reared in this language), Seneca the Elder (Celtiberian), to name but a few.

As to literacy, the discussion about the exact numbers of speakers of local languages or about those who were acquainted with Greek and / or Latin is a matter for mere guess-work. Here, a comparative research and a sound sense of empathy might bring ancient historians a little bit further.

Anthropologists have studied so-called multilingual areas in India, tribes in Black Africa, and to a lesser extent in the Balkan regions. Here people 'pick up' an amazing range of languages (five or more is not an exception). Language acquisition happens entirely informally, just by human contacts. Mostly, the use of a language is restricted to a particular domain of life (e.g., talking to women from another village when taking water at a common well). Pidgin languages facilitate the interaction. For these reasons, anthropologists distinguish between the multilingualism of such regions and the study of languages as performed by polyglots. In 1860, about 3 % of the population were able to properly use and understand Tuscan Italian, the language of the new state. Reports by eighteenth-century parish priests in France over and over again lament difficulties in

communication: it was as if each village, sometimes even individual families, spoke their own tongue[36].

Ancient historians widely agree that about 80 % of the population of the Empire lived in the countryside, although this does not exclude interaction with the cities. The City of Rome sent out and received quite a number of emigrants, but over the Empire, most rural people hardly ever left their villages. Calling upon "the aid of the mind's eye", MacMullen has pictured a one-room dwelling somewhere in the ancient Mediterranean countryside. In this house, with only one table, a Roman soldier is billeted for the winter. The owners, a man and his wife, pay their tribute to the authorities, but do not feel the faintest attraction towards the soldier's language, costume or culture. They do not communicate, and when problems arise, the couple turn to a man of their own people. The husband and wife probably were just lucky if the soldier left in spring, leaving their home (and young daughter) in peace[37]. We might in fact imagine quite a large part of the population living this sort of 'passive' or 'negative' resistance. How many there were is just impossible to say (there were, of course, degrees of assimilation, acculturation, and resistance). But there might have been many more than the literary sources pretend there were. The role played by language in this process is even more difficult to calculate or estimate. In Italy, Gaul, and Spain, up to the year 800, common people seem to have been capable of understanding at least a simple form

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[36] Erard (2012) 21 (Africa); 188–189; 191–205; 207–209 (India); Burke (1993) 78 (Italian); Robb (2007) 68–87 (language diversity in France).

[37] MacMullen (1990) 65.

of Latin[38]. Sermons presuppose a glimpse of this Romanitas, though this evidence does not tell us anything about everyday communication or the ability of interacting with people from regions outside one's own village.

5. Ancient authors on multilingual encounters

In the mental universum of the Greek and Latin authors (at best representing a small percentage of the total population[39]), all communication seems to have happened in one of the two classical languages. As such, encounters with people ignorant of Latin or Greek (the first meaning of the word *barbaros* is well known) are documented quite rarely[40].

Tacitus reports on a local peasant from Termes (now Lerma, in Spain). He was tortured after having killed Lucius Piso, the praetor of the province, but cried out in his mother tongue (*sermone patrio*) that he was being interrogated in vain as he would never reveal his accomplices[41]. In the Greek setting of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, we read about an unpleasant encounter between a soldier and a peasant ignorant of Latin. When the soldier, after having attacked the poor gardener, turns to Greek (and the peasant indicates his ignorance of that language), we can easily imagine this conversation to have been on a very basic

level[42]. The nearly exclusive knowledge of Punic and the subsequent communication problems as well as rhetorical proficiency in this language are mentioned more than once[43]. The same is true for Armenian[44] and Syriac[45]. As a young man (*adulescens*), the later emperor Maximinus Thrax asked Emperor Septimius Severus in his own Thracian language (*patria lingua*) whether he would be allowed to partici-

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[38] The main thesis of the very recommendable book by Banniard (1992).

[39] See the excellent and though provoking book by Knapp (2011), suggesting that perhaps 99 % of the population are hardly mentioned in the sources.

[40] For those willing to struggle with the Latin, much is to be found in Snellman (1914–1919).

[41] Tacitus, *Ann*. 4.45.

[42] The anecdote is worth to be quoted in full: Apuleius, *Met*. 9.39: *Nam quidam procerus et, ut indicabat habitus atque habitudo, miles e legione, factus nobis obvius, superbo atque adroganti sermone percontatur, quorsum vacuum duceret asinum? At meus, adhuc maerore permixtus et alias Latini sermonis ignarus, tacitus praeteribat. Nec miles ille familiarem cohibere quivit insolentiam, sed indignatus silentio eius ut convicio, viti quam tenebat obtundens eum dorso meo proturbat. Tunc hortulanus subplicue respondit sermonis ignorantia se quid ille disceret scire non posse. Ergo igitur Graece subiciens miles: "Vbi" inquit "ducis asinum istum?". Respondit hortulanus petere se civitatem proximam.*

[43] Polybius 1.80.5 (most of the army understand Punic); Apuleius, *Apol*. 98: *loquitur numquam nise Punice et si adhuc a matre graecissat; enim Latine loqui neque vult neque potest*. Augustinus, *Serm*. 167.4 (translating a Punic proverb, because not everyone in the audience knows Punic); Ps.-Aurelius Victor, *Epit*. 20.7 (Septimius Severus is said to have been *Punica eloquentia promptior*, though his knowledge of Greek was excellent).

[44] Procopius, *Bell*. 7.26: ἦν δέ τις ξὺν τῷ Ἰωάννῃ Γιλάκιος ὄνομα, Ἀρμένιος γένος, ὀλίγων τινῶν Ἀρμενίων ἄρχων. οὗτος ὁ Γιλάκιος οὔτε ἑλληνίζειν ἠπίστατο οὔτε Λατίνην ἢ Γοτθικὴν ἢ ἄλλην τινὰ ἢ Ἀρμενίαν μόνην ἀφεῖναι φωνήν. τούτῳ δὴ Γότθοι ἐντυχόντες τινὲς ἐπυνθάνοντο ὅστις ποτὲ εἴη. Again, it could only have been by very basic conversations that the Goths found out who he was.

[45] Jerome, *Epist*. 7.1.2: *nunc cum uestris litteris fabulor, illas amplexor, illae mecum loquuntur, illae hic tantum Latine sciunt. Hic enim aut barbarus semisermo discendus est aut tacendum est*. Living in the Syrian desert of Calchis in 376, Jerome was not able to converse with locals, despite his knowledge of Aramaic (and Hebrew). Marcus Diaconus, *Vita Porphyr*. 66-68 (mother and child in Gaza, only speaking Syriac); *S. Silviae peregrinatio* 47 (CSEL 39.13) villagers in 385 near Jerusalem speak Syriac and a little bit of Greek, but the bishop insists on Greek in liturgy.

pate in a soldiers' wrestling contest[46]. Merchants dealing with foreign people must have acquired some language skills too. On his way to Arabia, the freedman Annius Plocamus was driven off by a storm, and after fifteen days he arrived at the port of Hippuros in Sri Lanka. He learned the language in six months and was able to report to the king about the Roman emperor Claudius and the empire[47]. In what I consider one of the most beautiful fragments on language encounters, the fifth-century author Priscus of Panion reports his encounter with a man whom he supposed, by the way he was dressed, to be a Scythian. To his amazement, the man spoke in Greek (we get to know that Scythians were more likely to learn Hunnic, Gothic or Latin). But the man turned out to be a Greek merchant: he had gone to Viminacium (nowadays Kostolac in Serbia), married a wealthy woman and adopted a Scythian appearance[48]. In the late ancient itineraries and pilgrimages, a basic knowledge of Latin as a *lingua franca* was most helpful to pilgrims from the West adventuring into the Holy Land[49].

Roman jurists, by the bye, acknowledge the multilingual context. Ulpian states that *fideicommissa* might be devised in any tongue (as long as there is mutual understanding, for instance thanks to an interpreter): not only in Latin or Greek, but also in Punic or Celtic or Syriac[50].

6. Why did polyglots not matter?

While the Roman empire undoubtedly was a multilingual environment where quite a few inhabitants were versatile in several languages out of bare necessity, we are left with the impression that those whom we call polyglots are largely absent in the sources. There are no reports on persons learning languages for the sheer joy of studying and knowing other cultures; no emperors, kings, aristocrats, politicians, diplomats, gentlemen or *hommes savants* who take pride in their lore of languages

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[46] Iordanes, *Get.* 83. He is described as a *semibarbarus adulescens*.

[47] Plinius Maior, *Nat. Hist.* 6.84: *XV die Hippuros portum eius invectus, hospitali regis clementia sex mensum tempore inbutus adloquio percunctanti postea narravit Romanos et Caesarem.*

[48] Priscus, fr. 8: Διατρίβοντι δέ μοι καὶ περιπάτους ποιουμένῳ πρὸ τοῦ περιβόλου τῶν οἰκημάτων προσελθών τις, ὃν βάρβαρον ἐκ τῆς Σκυθικῆς ᾠήθην εἶναι στολῆς, Ἑλληνικῇ ἀσπάζεταί με φωνῇ, χαῖρε προσειπών, ὥστε με θαυμάζειν ὅτι γε δὴ ἑλληνίζει Σκύθης ἀνήρ. ξύγκλυδες γὰρ ὄντες πρὸς τῇ σφετέρᾳ βαρβάρῳ γλώσσῃ ζηλοῦσιν ἢ τὴν Οὔννων ἢ τὴν Γότθων ἢ καὶ τὴν Αὐσονίων, ὅσοις αὐτῶν πρὸς Ῥωμαίους ἐπιμιξία· καὶ οὐ ῥαδίως τις σφῶν ἑλληνίζει τῇ φωνῇ, πλὴν ὧν ἀπήγαγον αἰχμαλώτων ἀπὸ τῆς Θρᾳκίας καὶ Ἰλλυρίδος παράλου (...) ἀντασπασάμενος δὲ ἀνηρώτων τίς ὢν καὶ πόθεν ἐς τὴν βάρβαρον παρῆλθε γῆν καὶ βίον αἱρεῖται Σκυθικόν. ὁ δὲ ἀπεκρίνατο ὅ τι βουλόμενος ταῦτα γνῶναι ἐσπούδακα. ἐγὼ δὲ ἔφην αἰτίαν πολυπραγμοσύνης εἶναί μοι τὴν Ἑλλήνων φωνήν. τότε δὴ γελάσας ἔλεγε Γραικὸς μὲν εἶναι τὸ γένος, κατ᾽ ἐμπορίαν δὲ ἐς τὸ Βιμινάκιον ἐληλυθέναι τὴν πρὸς τῷ Ἴστρῳ ποταμῷ Μυσῶν πόλιν. πλεῖστον δὲ ἐν αὐτῇ διατρῖψαι χρόνον καὶ γυναῖκα γήμασθαι ζάπλουτον.

[49] *Itin. Silv.* 47.3–4. Services were said in Greek, but translated into Syriac at the very moment. But there was consolation for those who only understood Latin: *Sane quicumque hic Latini sunt, id est qui nec Siriste nec Graece noverunt, ne contristentur, et ipsis exponitur eis, quia sunt alii fratres et sorores Graecolatini, qui Latine exponunt eis.*

[50] *Dig.* 32.11 pr.: *Fideicommissa quocumque sermone relinqui possunt, non solum Latina vel Graeca, sed etiam Punica vel Gallicana vel alterius cuiuscumque* gentis; *Dig.* 45.1.1.6: *Eadem an alia lingua respondeatur, nihil interest. Proinde si quis Latine interrogaverit, respondeatur ei Graece, dummodo congruenter respondeatur, obligatio constituta est: idem per contrarium. sed utrum hoc usque ad Graecum sermonem tantum protrahimus an vero et ad alium, poenum forte vel Assyrium vel cuius alterius linguae, dubitari potest. Et scriptura Sabini, sed et verum patitur, ut omnis sermo contineat verborum obligationem, ita tamen, ut uterque alterius linguam intellegat sive per se sive per verum interpretem.*

as they appear from the fifteenth century on in Renaissance and Early Modern Europe[51]. At least from the times of Hellenism on (though Greek colonisation started already as early as the ninth century BCE), travels and conquests led to frequent contacts with heteroglot populations as far away as India. However, these multicultural encounters never had the same impact on language consciousness as the discovery of hundreds of Indian tongues in the New World had from the fifteenth century on. Tellingly, Alexander the Great favoured the idea of instructing the Greek language to 30,000 children from all conquered regions. Once they had grown up, they could take leading positions in a new unified Greek empire[52]. Just like in ancient Egypt, Ugarit or the Chinese empire, monolingualism seems to have been a characteristic of the literary elites of Ancient Greece[53]. Roman elites (like the Persian Achaemenids) were bilingual. The very few polyglots that are mentioned are mainly non-Romans (even enemies of the Roman order), women and outsiders. Their skills are sometimes connected to a prodigious capacity for memorisation or, in the case of Mithradates, with the secret lore of producing antidotes. At the very best, their oral proficiency in dealing with submitted people is praised.

This mere observation cries out for an explanation. True, the question of multilingualism might well be a modern one,

considerably gaining in importance with the emergence of the national states in the nineteenth-century Europe. There are language censuses and the legislation that may follow them that have become political issues, which do not always have clear-cut solutions; some may also be complicated by the hard-to-define difference between a language and a dialect (cf. the facetious definition of a language as a dialect with an army and a navy and subsequent legislation). While the ancients never brought a system into the variety of human speech that existed around them – as witnessed by their rather indistinct use of words for "language" and "dialect", at least in the Greek language – they of course distinguished among languages. But, unlike in the Modern Age where divisions among languages are admittedly not always that clear-cut, this knowledge was never really valued[54].

One could claim that most of the languages in the Empire did not have a written tradition, as is true for the about forty languages which are estimated to have existed in Italy during the times of the Roman Republic. When these tongues appear as such, it is in rare epigraphic documents which probably only reveal a very stan-

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[51] See Burke (2004) 111–140, a beatiful chapter on the 'mixing of languages'.

[52] Plutarchus, *Alex*. 47.6. Needless to say, the 'truth' of this anecdote matters less than the message behind it. See Rochette (1996) 78.

[53] Of course, also these cultures resorted to interpreters when necessary. See Rochette (1996) 76 for further references.

[54] A former speaker of Serbo-Croatian might now easily count himself as a true polyglot, claiming knowledge of Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian and even Montenegrin – all of which are mutually intelligible. Cf. the question of minority languages and dialects: *Ethnologue. Languages of the World* and *UNESCO World Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* will count as many as 38 languages for Italy, or nine for Belgium (Emiliano-Romagnolo Lombardian, Picardian, Walloon to name just a few examples for both countries). See Burke (1993) 66–88 on language and identity (with p. 85 on dialect with army, navy and airforce); Burke (2004) 15–42 and 61–88 for insightful comments on the discovery of languages and vernaculars in competition in Early Modern Europe.

dardised or schematised use of a language. Since things belonging to the oral tradition are seldom mentioned in the literary sources, it is normal that knowledge of such languages does not appear in the records. Again, this begs the question why these languages went underground in the literary record, only to revive in the late ancient period, at least in cases like Syriac and Coptic.

Others have pointed to the ethnocentric and imperialistic attitude of Greeks and Romans, the pejorative interpretation of the concept of *barbaros*, the linking of ethnicity with language, and the metaphysical presumption that foreign languages are mere collections of names. In this context, learning a new language was mainly viewed as counting foreign words[55].

Comparative history helps to sharpen our view on the matter. As Peter Burke convincingly demonstrated, the rise of standardised Tuscan Italian was not a result of the Risorgimento movement. As early as the sixteenth century, courtesans all over Italy used Tuscan next to their regional language. According to Burke, it is this rise of transregional consciousness in the higher classes, which needs to be explained, not the question why Tuscan outranked, for instance, Neapolitan. Apparently, these aristocrats cherished common ideals – found in literature, art, architecture and the way of life – which enabled them to distinguish themselves from 'others', 'us Italians' against the rest. At least

from the second century BCE on, Roman elites found their distinctive element in the Hellenistic culture which they highly admired. By then, the considerable military power which had given them control over the whole Mediterranean, gave way to yet another sense of 'us Romans' against the others. In the beginning of the first century BCE, Latin became a language of oratory, historiography, and philosophy. At least in the West, the conquered elites embraced the new way of life, which included comfortable housing and architecture, roadwork infrastructure, new economic opportunities, a stable legal system, a promise of safety and security. Presenting themselves as Romans surely implied the use of Latin. It was a price most of them were willing to pay, and it is highly questionable whether they would have considered it as giving up their 'identity'. Local traditions and languages persisted to some extent. But aristocrats did not need to take pride in multilingual skills. Latin and Greek suited their purpose perfectly. Syagrius, the 'Solon' of the Burgundian court who knew the Burgundian language that well that the 'barbarians' feared to use their own tongue in his presence, is considered a rather funny exception[56]. Arbogastes, a Frankish leader residing in Treves, practiced "real Latin as from the Tiber". No doubt, his example was to be followed[57].

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[55] Literature on these three subjects is extensive. Campos Daroca (1992) and Munson (2005) are books which nuance Herodotus' ethnocentric approach towards the *barbaroi* and their languages. Cf. also the discussion on (proto)racism in Antiquity by Isaac (2004). Van Hal (2009) 148–151 offers an excellent overview as well as biographical guidance.

[56] Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epist.* 5.5.3: *Aestimari minime potest, quanto mihi ceterisque sit risui, quotiens audio, quod te praesente formidet linguae suae facere barbarus barbarismum. adstupet tibi epistulas interpretanti curva Germanorum senectus et negotiis mutuis arbitrum te disceptatoremque desumit (...) Et quamquam aeque corporibus ac sensu rigidi sint indolatilesque, amplectuntur in te pariter et discunt sermonem patrium, cor Latinum.*

[57] Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epist.* 4.17.1: *Tertia urbanitas, qua te ineptire facetissime allegas et Quirinalis*

7. Christianity and Change?

The issue of Early Christianity and languages inevitably brings us to the vexed question ' what changes did Christianity bring?' Indeed, the new Christian religion had its origin in an Aramaic language context. Christianity was embedded in the Jewish tradition. While Jesus spoke in Aramaic and surely knew Hebrew, His message was mainly spread in Greek, the *lingua franca* of the East of the Empire. As Christian communities existed in Rome from the first century on, Latin became the other important language for disseminating the new religion. In late Antiquity, Coptic and Syriac became the languages of local churches with their own liturgical, theological and cultural traditions, while outside the Empire Armenian and Ethiopic also gained the same status.

In the Jewish tradition about the tower of Babel, language diversity was linked to divine punishment[58]. But on the feast of Pentecost, the apostles experienced *polyglossia*[59] – a positive language experience of speaking in 'all' tongues, on which the patristic writers commented again and again (like Augustine's *Sermo* 162/A quoted in the beginning of this paper). Language diversity is sometimes interpreted as a means created by God to secure humankind against pride and con-

ceitedness. Greeks should not boast about having invented their language thanks to their own brilliant minds[60]. God will hear and understand prayers in any language[61]. However, to Saint Augustine, the diversity of languages is an issue that causes men to prefer the company of their dogs rather than to be with fellow humans with whom no communication whatsoever is possible[62]. All this also begs the question of an 'ideal' language which would ensure universal communication[63].

The ninth book of the *Origines* by Isidore of Sevilla is entirely devoted to language-related issues and therefore entitled *De linguis gentium*. To him, there can be no doubt that Hebrew was the primeval language, before the fall of the Babel tower[64]. About two hundred years before, Jerome

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impletus fonte facundiae potor Mosellae Tiberim ructas, sic barbarorum familiaris, quod tamen nescius barbarismorum, par ducibus antiquis lingua manuque, sed quorum dextera solebat non stilum minus tractare quam gladium.

[58] Gen. 11.1–9. See Borst (1957–1963) for an important study.

[59] Act. 2.1–13. In the twentieth century, hearing confession in all languages and even responding in each person's language is one of the miracles attributed to Padre Pio. See Godefroy (2013) 38.

[60] Cyrillus, *Contra Jul.* 4.135–136; *Glaphyra in Pent. Gen.* 2.44; *Contra Jul.* 7.234. See Van Rooy (2013).

[61] Origenes, *Contra Cels.* 8.27–31; 37.

[62] Augustinus, *Civ.* 19.7: *In quo primum linguarum diuersitas hominem alienat ab homine. Nam si duo sibimet inuicem fiant obuiam neque praeterire, sed simul esse aliqua necessitate cogantur, quorum neuter linguam nouit alterius: facilius sibi muta animalia, etiam diuersi generis, quam illi, cum sint homines ambo, sociantur. Quando enim quae sentiunt inter se communicare non possunt, propter solam diuersitatem linguae nihil prodest ad consociandos homines tanta similitudo naturae, ita ut libentius homo sit cum cane suo quam cum homine alieno.* In what follows, Augustine offers an interesting analysis on the argument that at least the Roman Empire made an end to this diversity by imposing its language (and making interpreters almost superfluous). This was only done by much bloodshed.

[63] Eco (1993) is a classic on the search for the perfect universal language. On the tradition of gestures, *omnium hominum communis sermo* according to Quintilianus, *Inst. or.* 11.3.87, see Rochette (1995) 11. Lucian, *Salt.* 64 is telling an anecdote on the universality of body language by a dancer at the court of Nero.

[64] Isidorus of Sevilla, *Orig.* 9.1.1: *Nam priusquam superbia turris illius in diversos signorum sonos humanam diuideret societatem, una omnium nationum lingua fuit quae Hebrea vocatur.*

had explicitly highlighted his multilingual competence which gave him authority as a translator of the Scriptures and in exegetical interpretation: "Will you, a bilingual yourself, mock me, a trilingual?"[65]. Surely, this was an intellectual climate which could favour multilingualism or polyglottery – the study of early Christian writers on the origin, diversity and classification of languages is a project which is in its first phase[66].

8. Conclusions

This paper was started as a search for polyglots in Antiquity. A recent book on extraordinary language learners states that polyglots do things with language that the people who speak them natively would never do. They have an ability to rapidly analyse a language, a prodigious memory, an apparent ability to mimic speech sounds which are not native to them, and an ability to switch from one language to another without letting them interfere with one another. These abilities, which can be enhanced by the sacrifice of spending much time, are often considered unique. Therefore, polyglots become part of cabinets of curiosities. In a way, they are treated as freaks[67].

Quite unsurprisingly, I was able to find some 'remarkable' instances of polyglottery in the ancient sources. Obviously, some similarities can be observed. But for more than one reason, ancient polyglots, or

rather ancient views on polyglots, strike us as different. The rarity of the phenomenon in a society in which multilingualism was a current feature forces us to think about vital issues such as the valuation of language and communication, ethnocentricity and imperialism, as well as the link between character and language. Comparative cultural history opens windows to monolingualism in other ancient empires, while studying the rise of Tuscan Italian in the Renaissance period informs us about the intrinsic link between class consciousness and the valuation of language.

This paper on anecdotical evidence has turned out to bea study on social and cultural history. When Schliemann proudly advertised his knowledge of 22 languages, he was presumably thinking about Mithradates who up to now stands as an icon of polygottery. Yet it is not only the languages studied that make the difference between Schliemann and Mithradates. Scholarly esteem and admiration was the last thing Mithradates could have expected by displaying his skills. Although by their language skills both he and Schliemann managed to gain the aura of a legend, they lived in different and separate worlds, two worlds very much apart.

Acknowledgements

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[65] Hieronymus, *Adv. Rufin*. 2.22: *me trilinguem bilinguis ipse ridebis*. See Rebenich (1993) on Jerome; Denecker, Partoens, Swiggers, Van Hal (2012) 433–434, also for the translation of the fragment.

[66] See the most promising project by Denecker, Partoens, Swiggers,Van Hal (2012).

[67] Erard (2012) 62–63.

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In order to keep the polyglot experience, I have refrained from offering translations of the Greek and Latin fragments. The bibliography offers guidance for further reading – I hope to have done justice to the diverse research traditions, in different languages, of course.

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POLIGLOTAI SENOVĖS ROMOJE: SOCIOKULTŪRINĖS ISTORIJOS REKONSTRUKCIJA REMIANTIS ANEKDOTAIS

Christian Laes

S a n t r a u k a

Straipsnio autorius, remdamasis kruopščia antikinių šaltinių analize, tiria daugiakalbystės reiškinį Antikoje. Poliglotams būdinga neįprasta kalbos vartosena, besiskirianti nuo gimtakalbių vartosenos (gebėjimas greitai analizuoti kalbą, pamėgdžioti svetimos kalbos garsus, greitai persiorientuoti nuo vienos kalbos prie kitos, itin gera atmintis) traukia žmonių dėmesį. Nors šie gebėjimai gali būti išugdomi, dažnai jie laikyti unikaliais, todėl poliglotai neretai vertinami kaip keistuoliai. Liudijimų apie poliglotus yra išlikę ir antikiniuose šaltiniuose. Galima pastebėti nemažai panašumų tarp poliglotų vertinimo Antikoje ir šiais laikais, bet yra ir principinių skirtumų: palyginti mažas šio reiškinio paplitimas visuomenėje, kurioje daugiakalbystė buvo įprastas dalykas, kelia tokius klausimus, kaip antai kalbos ir jos komunikacinės funkcijos vertinimas, etnocentrizmo ir imperializmo santykis, asmenybės ir kalbos sąsajos.

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