

Plurilingualism in Traditional Eurasian Scholarship

Thinking in Many Tongues

Edited by

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Language Arose from Spontaneous Feelings and Reactions to Nature

The Doctrine of Epicurus (4th Century BCE) and Lucretius (1st Century BCE)

Filippomaria Pontani

Some Greek authors, as will be seen below (Chapter 1.6), ascribed the invention of language to the gods; others, to mankind in the course of its development. A particular and influential variant of the latter view was espoused by philosophers belonging to the Epicurean school: the long philosophical inscription set up by the second-century Epicurean Diogenes on the walls of his hometown Oenoanda (Asia Minor) devotes several lines to arguing against the idea of a single creator/teacher of language, whether divine (one of the Epicurean dogmas is the apathy of the gods) or human—this polemic is typical of later Epicureanism and might be primarily addressed against the doctrine of Plato’s *Cratylus* (Chapter 2.3).¹

Epicurus himself (fourth century BCE) insists in his letter to Herodotus (75–76: the letter is preserved in full in Book 10 of Diogenes Laertius’s *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*) that words arose spontaneously and directly from the natural feelings and reactions of humans to nature, which gave rise to an instinctual, rudimentary, but also unequivocal (in terms of word-meaning) primeval language, later codified by human tribes through an appropriate act of naming, and enriched through the willful creation of some words that are not linked to any natural impulse. The variety of nature in different places of the earth (not, as more commonly stated by other thinkers, the intrinsic conventionality of every idiom) thus becomes the reason for the current plurality of languages, which grow from the natural impulse of single populations and only in a second stage rely on a common agreement between members of the same societies.

1 See Diogenes of Oenoanda, *Epicurean Inscription*, 373, fr. 12: “And with regard to vocal sounds—I mean the words and phrases (*onomata kai rhemata*) of which the earth-born human beings produced the first utterances—let us not introduce Hermes as teacher, as some claim he was (for this is palpable drivel), nor let us credit those philosophers who say that it was by deliberate invention and teaching that names were assigned to things, in order that humans might have [distinctive designations] for them to facilitate their communication with one another.”

A similar view is held by the Roman poet Lucretius (first century BCE) in his *De rerum natura* (*On Nature*), a sort of highly refined versified form of the Epicurean doctrine. For Lucretius, the theory about the origin of language is part of a wider survey on the progress of mankind, and it occurs just after the account of how early humans expanded their associations beyond kinship groups: starting from the inarticulate gestures and cries of infants, language moves towards the articulate names used to design objects by grown-up humans—and here again, “it is nature which compelled men to emit the various sounds of speech, and usefulness which fashioned the names of things” (5.1028–1029). No role is here assigned to convention, and the polemic against the Platonic idea of the “namesetter” or “law-giver” is as harsh as Diogenes of Oenoanda’s: on the other hand, the importance of spontaneous reaction to nature also in the process of forming and assigning names to things is highlighted as essential, and paralleled with the similar evolution of cries and noises by the animals, although an element of consciousness creeps into it.

The development of language was pivotal in the Epicurean theory of impiety and injustice (as is evident also from Philodemus’s book *On Piety*, lines 230–270 Obbink), for it was through the first and immediate perception of the *simulacra* of the gods, and of their names—without the false opinions on them that altered their true meaning after the application of reason—that the first humans gained a correct image of the heavens and the world, free of superstition; and language was a positive cohesive force for human society (friendship pacts etc.); on the other hand, it was also through language that fears and false beliefs were instilled and spread among mankind.

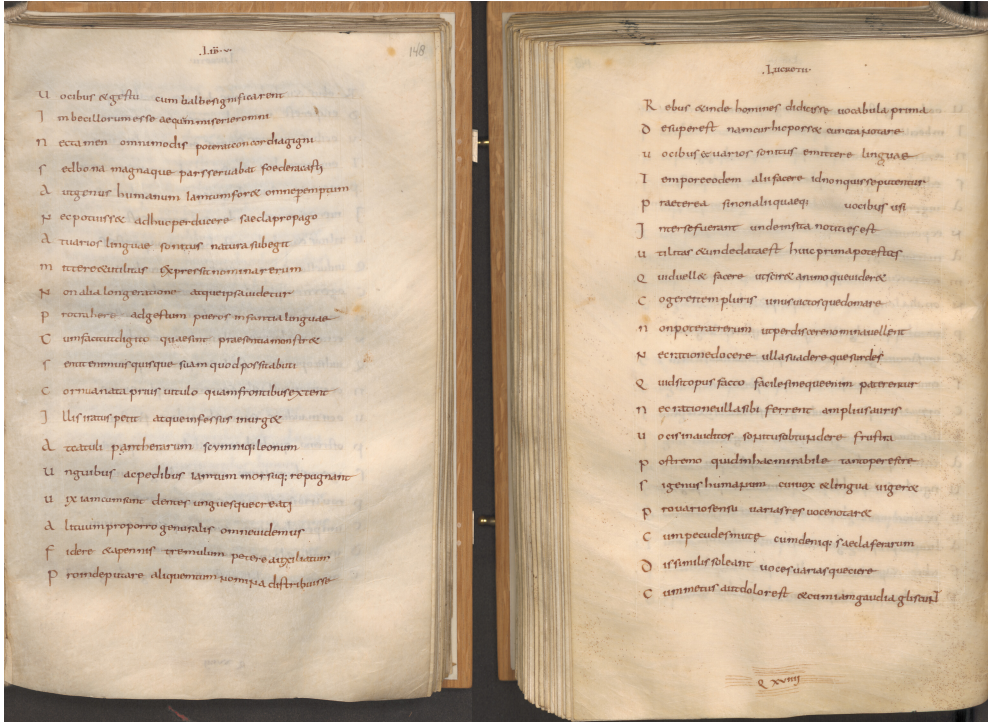


FIGURE. 1.4.1 VLF 30, fols. 148^r–148^v
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Greek Text

Excerpt 1: Epicurus, Letter to Herodotus 75–76

Excerpted from *Epistulae tres et Ratae Sententiae a Laertio Diogene servatae*, ed. Peter von der Mühl (1922; repr., Stuttgart: Teubner, 1996), brackets in the original.

Ἄλλὰ μὴν ὑποληπτέον καὶ τὴν φύσιν πολλὰ καὶ παντοῖα ὑπὸ αὐτῶν τῶν πραγμάτων διδαχθῆναι τε καὶ ἀναγκασθῆναι, τὸν δὲ λογισμὸν τὰ ὑπὸ ταύτης παρεγγυηθέντα ὕστερον ἐπακριβοῦν καὶ προσεξευρίσκειν ἐν μὲν τισὶ θάττον, ἐν δὲ τισὶ βραδύτερον καὶ ἐν μὲν τισὶ περιόδοις καὶ χρόνοις [ἀπὸ τῶν ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀπείρου] <κατὰ μείζους ἐπιδόσεις>, ἐν δὲ τισὶ κατ' ἐλάττους. Ὅθεν καὶ τὰ ὀνόματα ἐξ ἀρχῆς μὴ θέσει γενέσθαι, ἀλλ' αὐτὰς τὰς φύσεις τῶν ἀνθρώπων καθ' ἕκαστα ἔθνη ἴδια πασχούσας πάθη καὶ ἴδια λαμβανούσας φαντάσματα ἰδίως τὸν ἀέρα ἐκπέμπειν στελλόμενον ὕφ' ἐκάστων τῶν παθῶν καὶ τῶν φαντασμάτων, ὡς ἂν ποτε καὶ ἡ παρὰ τοὺς τόπους τῶν ἐθνῶν διαφορά ἦ· ὕστερον δὲ κοινῶς καθ' ἕκαστα ἔθνη τὰ ἴδια τεθῆναι πρὸς τὸ τὰς δηλώσεις ἦττον ἀμφιβόλους γενέσθαι ἀλλήλοις καὶ συντομωτέρας δηλουμένας· τινὰ δὲ καὶ οὐ συνορώμενα πράγματα εἰσφέροντας τοὺς συνειδόμενους παρεγγυῆσαι τινὰς φθόγγους τοὺς ἀναγκασθέντας ἀναφωνῆσαι, τοὺς δὲ τῷ λογισμῷ ἐλομένους κατὰ τὴν πλείστην αἰτίαν οὕτως ἐρμηνεύσαι.

2 Or “among some (tribes).”

3 In the frame of Epicurus's letter, the rise of language is a paradigmatic case of the complex interplay between nature and reason, both essential to the creation of a suitable, civilized environment for mankind.

English Translation

Excerpt 1: Epicurus, Letter to Herodotus 75–76

Adapted from Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans R.D. Hicks, Loeb Classical Library 185 (London: Harvard University Press, 1925), 2:605–607.

Again, we must suppose that nature too has been taught and forced to learn many various lessons by the facts themselves, that reason subsequently develops what it has thus received and makes fresh discoveries, in some cases² more quickly, in others more slowly, the progress thus made being at certain times and seasons greater, at others less.³

Hence even the names of things were not originally due to convention, but in the several tribes under the impulse of special feelings and special representations of sense, primitive man uttered special cries. The air thus emitted was molded by their individual feelings or sense-representations, and differently according to the difference of the regions which the tribes inhabited.⁴ Subsequently, whole tribes adopted their own special names, in order that their communications might be less ambiguous to each other and more briefly expressed.⁵ And as for things not visible, so far as those who were conscious of them tried to introduce any such notion, they put in circulation certain names for them, either sounds which they were instinctively compelled to utter or which they selected by reason on analogy according to the most general cause there can be for expressing oneself in such a way.⁶

4 This is the first stage: emission of sounds under the impulse of sensations or representations from the outside. This implies the idea that language arises naturally, without any form of human convention or decision (Proclus, in his *Commentary on Plato's Cratylus*, summarizes Epicurus's theory by saying that men "did not impose names knowledgeably, but as being moved naturally, like coughers, sneezers, bellowers, howlers and groaners" [17.13–16]). The proximity or distance of this theory *vis-à-vis* that of Aristotle is a topic that is hotly debated by modern critics. Another unsolved problem is by which channels the vocalizations of feelings and reactions can be controlled, shared, and communicated to all other members of the group.

5 This is the second step: men agree on the correspondence between some sounds and certain meanings, so as to be able to understand one another. It should be remarked that no attention is devoted to the process by which these nouns and names could then be articulated into a fully-fledged speech, i.e., to the rise of syntax.

6 This is the third stage of the development of language: the creation of words designing new (mostly invisible) realities, by mere decision of humans. This means that Epicurus conceived of language as a dynamic organism that could be enriched by new words and concepts.

Latin Text

Excerpt 11: Lucretius, De rerum natura 5.1028–1061

Excerpted from *De rerum natura libri sex*, ed. Joseph Martin (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1969).

At varios linguae sonitus natura subegit
mittere et utilitas expressit nomina rerum,
non alia longe ratione atque ipsa videtur
protrahere ad gestum pueros infantia linguae,
cum facit ut digito quae sint praesentia monstrent.
sentit enim vim quisque suam quod possit abuti.
cornua nata prius vitulo quam frontibus extent,
illis iratus petit atque infestus inurget.
at catuli pantherarum scymnique leonum
unguibus ac pedibus iam tum morsuque repugnant,
vix etiam cum sunt dentes unguesque creati.
alituum porro genus alis omne videmus
fidere et a pennis tremulum petere auxiliatum.
proinde putare aliquem tum nomina distribuisse
rebus et inde homines didicisse vocabula prima,
desiperest. nam cur hic posset cuncta notare
vocibus et varios sonitus emittere linguae,
tempore eodem alii facere id non quisse putentur?
praeterea si non alii quoque vocibus usi
inter se fuerant, unde insita notities est
utilitatis et unde data est huic prima potestas,
quid vellet facere ut sciret animoque videret?

English Translation

Excerpt 11: Lucretius, De rerum natura 5.1028–1061

Adapted from Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, ed. and trans. C. Bailey (Oxford: Clarendon, 1947), 1:487.

But it was nature that constrained men to utter the diverse sounds of the tongue, and utility shaped the names of things,⁷ in a manner not far other than the very speechlessness of their tongue is seen to lead children on to gesture, when it makes them point out with the finger the things that are before their eyes.⁸ For everyone feels to what purpose he can use his own powers.⁹ Before the horns of a calf appear and sprout from his forehead, he butts with them when angry, and pushes passionately. But the whelps of panthers and lion-cubs already fight with claws and paws and biting, when their teeth and claws are scarce yet formed. Further, we see all the tribe of winged fowls trusting to their wings, and seeking an unsteady aid from their feathers.

Again, to think that anyone then parceled out names to things, and that from him men learnt their first words, is mere folly. For why should he have been able to mark off all things by words, and to utter the diverse sounds of the tongue, and at the same time others be thought unable to do this? Moreover, if others too had not used words to one another, whence was implanted in him the concept of their use, whence was he given the first power to know and see in his

7 This is the only passage in Lucretius's theory where the role of *utilitas* (not only "usefulness," but also "awareness or consideration of expediency") is mentioned as a driving force behind the rise of language: for the rest, Epicurus's view (see above) is considerably simplified by focusing on the first stage only, namely that of spontaneous reaction to nature—the real meaning of *natura* in this passage, whether namely it indicates "human nature" or the exterior physical world, is hotly debated.

8 As in Diodorus Siculus and Vitruvius, gesture—as a natural reaction to the world—is the first form of indication: in the Epicurean doctrine it also becomes the origin of spoken language. A similar doctrine on the materiality of sounds can be found in Lucretius 4.549–552: "When therefore we press out these voices from the inmost parts of our body, and send them forth straight through the mouth, the quickly-moving tongue, cunning fashioner of words, joints and molds the sounds, and the shaping of the lips does its part in giving them form."

9 This may look like a "Stoic" view (particularly at home in the illustration of the animal kingdom, see the examples given here), according to which every living being "fulfils" its *telos* by exploiting its innate capacities: the second-century physician Galen (*On the use of parts* 1.3) writes that "each living creature has a perception of the capabilities of its inner nature and of the powers in its limbs." However, scholars are divided on this point, because Lucretius may refer not to a primary, inner knowledge, but to a notion of *utilitas* resulting from the human being's experience of using its abilities.

cogere item pluris unus victosque domare
non poterat, rerum ut perdiscere nomina vellent.
nec ratione docere ulla suadereque surdis,
quid sit opus facto, facilest; neque enim paterentur
nec ratione ulla sibi ferrent amplius auris
vocis inauditos sonitus obtundere frustra.
postremo quid in hac mirabile tantoperest re,
si genus humanum, cui vox et lingua vigeret,
pro vario sensu varia res voce notaret?
cum pecudes mutae, cum denique saecla ferarum
dissimilis soleant voces variasque ciere,
cum metus aut dolor est et cum iam gaudia gliscunt.

mind what he wanted to do?¹⁰ Likewise, one man could not avail to constrain many and vanquish them to his will, that they should be willing to learn all his names for things; nor indeed is it easy in any way to teach and persuade the deaf what it is needful to do; for they would not endure it, nor in any way suffer the sounds of words not comprehended to batter on their ears for long to no purpose.¹¹ Lastly, what is there so marvelous in this, if the human race, with strong voice and tongue, should mark off things with diverse sounds for diverse feelings? For the dumb cattle, yea, and the races of wild beasts are wont to give forth diverse unlike sounds, when they are in fear or pain, or again when their joys grow strong.¹²

10 This second argument against the theory of *nomothetai* or namesetters rests on the epistemological concept of *prolepsis* or “preconception.”

11 This argument is the same that will later be picked up by Diogenes of Oenoanda: “It is absurd, indeed more absurd than any absurdity, as well as quite impossible, that any one individual should have assembled such vast multitudes (at that time there were as yet no kings, and indeed, in the absence of any vocal sounds, no writing; and with regard to these multitudes [it would have been quite impossible, except by means] of a decree, for their assembly to have taken place), and, having assembled them, should [have taken hold of] a rod (?) and proceeded to teach them like an elementary schoolmaster, touching each object and saying ‘let this be called “stone,” this “wood,” this “human being” or “dog.”’” Diogenes of Oenoanda, *Epicurean Inscription*, 373, fr. 12.

12 Lucretius’s fourth argument (the different noises produced by animals give rise to different words and aspects of the language) is then backed by many lines (1062–1087) with examples from the realms of dogs, stallions, and birds. The conclusion (lines 1088–1090) is: “If, then, different sensations compel animals to produce different sounds, although they are dumb, how much more plausible is it that humans could at that time designate different things with one sound or another!” It should be stressed that this theory accounts for the dynamics of verbal vocalization, but stops short of explaining how humans got to use language for communication.

Abbreviations and Symbols

- fr. fragment
 < > editorial insertion

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