

## Envoi

We close with the Biblical story about the diversity of human languages, the story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11, which we bring here in Robert Alter's brilliant translation:

1. And all the earth was one language, one set of words.
2. And it happened as they journeyed from the east that they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there.
3. And they said to each other: "Come, let us bake bricks, and burn them hard." And the brick served them as stone, and the bitumen served them as mortar.
4. And they said: "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower, with its top in the heavens, that we may make us a name, lest we be scattered over all the earth."
5. And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the human creatures had built.
6. And the LORD said: As one people with one language for all, if this is what they have begun to do, now nothing they plot to do will elude them.
7. Come, let us go down and baffle their language there so that they will not understand each another's language.
8. And the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth and they left off building the city.
9. Therefore it is called Babel, for there the LORD made the language of all the earth babble. And from there the LORD scattered them over all the earth.

This Biblical narrative is traditionally taken as a cautionary tale about human hubris. Blissfully monolingual humanity embarks on a project of self-aggrandizement, a collective effort to construct a tower that penetrates the heavens. God, recognizing this as a challenge and claim to human omnipotence, sabotages the plan by afflicting humanity with linguistic diversity. As a result, humans, still universally monolingual but now no longer sharing a language, can no longer coordinate their effort. They abort the project and, just as they feared, are then scattered across the earth. On this reading,

then, linguistic diversity is a punishment, and the story functions also as an explanation for the perpetual and debilitating social discord characterizing human history.

We would like to apply here a different interpretation of the story, one suggested by one of the more profound American theorists of Language, Toni Morrison, in her famous Nobel Prize speech. Morrison writes:

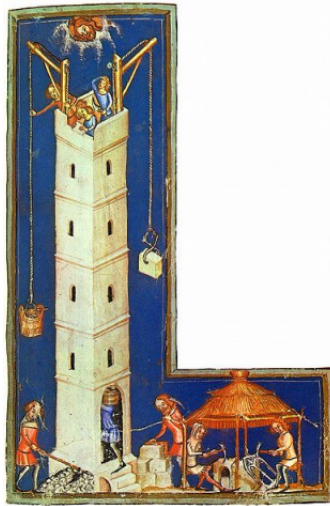
The conventional wisdom of the Tower of Babel story is that the collapse was a misfortune. That it was the distraction, or the weight of many languages that precipitated the tower's failed architecture. That one monolithic language would have expedited the building and heaven would have been reached. Whose heaven, she wonders? And what kind? Perhaps the achievement of Paradise was premature, a little hasty if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives period. Had they, the heaven they imagined might have been found at their feet. Complicated, demanding, yes, but a view of heaven as life; not heaven as post-life.

(Toni Morrison Nobel Lecture December 7, 1993)

Morrison's perspective on the Biblical narrative suggests a reading that can be used to highlight an important aspect of the agenda of this book, and, in our view, one of the most interesting stakes of linguistic theory at least since Humboldt, namely the idea that the fundamental universal linguistic reality, and the primary object of study for a science of language, is principled variation. We suggest to read the story of Babel, not as a story about an arrogant quest for power, but about a humble quest for self-knowledge.

Previously in Genesis, we learn that humanity is made in the image of God. Following Morrison, we suggest to read the project that the tower builders of Babel are engaged in as the project of discovering and understanding the divine likeness, taken (much like the ability to acquire language) to be the distinguishing characteristic of humanity. It is alluring to read such an interpretation of the people of Babel's project in the medieval depiction of the story in FIGURE 1, by the Master of the Munich Weltchronik. The builder's gaze is fixed on the Divinity, and the image he sees guides the construction work, in an act of *imitatio dei*.

Figure 1: Meister of Weltchronik, *The Tower of Babel*, 1370, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, München



Alas, imperfect as they are, the builders misperceive the divine image to be the monolithic, centralized edifice projected from their monolingual reality. God, merciful and at least as invested in this particular human pursuit as the builders are, sends the builders in the right direction by diversifying their languages, and spreading them across the globe. Far from a punishment for human hubris, linguistic diversity is a revelatory gift, an aide for humanity to better understand its own nature by overcoming the obstacle – an ideological rather than functional one – of a monolingual imagination.

While our proposed interpretation of the story is, of course, implausible from the perspective of Biblical exegesis,<sup>1</sup> it points to an aspect of human endeavor that is no less real, and certainly more uplifting, than the vanity bemoaned by the received interpretation. Humans *are*, in fact, engaged in seeking self-understanding, and part of this engagement is linguistic theory, which aims to understand the nature of a, presumably, distinctly human language faculty. Modern theoretical linguistics, from Saussure through Jakobson to the Principles and Parameters program in generative grammar, largely agrees with the God depicted in our interpretation that understanding the language faculty

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<sup>1</sup>See Robert Alter's illuminating discussion, where the argument of the text is tied to its linguistic composition as well as to Alter's choices in translation.

is understanding the systemic principles that generate patterns of variation within and across grammatical systems. Such a pattern of variation stands at the heart of this book. We think that transparency – the view we adopted in explaining it – is closer to this tradition and to the questions that animated it than the uniformity alternative, in that it seeks to find systematicity in variation. In the final analysis, our overarching goal is to make the case that, in semantics as elsewhere, the study of systematic variation yields more revealing grammatical generalizations than the search for positive universals found in every language.