The Multilingualism of Ancient Palestine and the Multilingual Jesus

Hughson T. Ong
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, ON, Canada

Which languages did Jesus speak? On what occasions were Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin spoken in that ancient community? Was Jesus multilingual? These questions have had biblical scholars searching for answers since the sixteenth century until today (see Ong 2015; Wise 2015; Gleaves 2015). Answers to these questions allow us to paint a portrait of the sociolinguistic situation of ancient Palestine and, consequently, influence our understanding and interpretation of the various elements and facets of early Christianity, the early church, and the text of the New Testament.

Which Languages Did Jesus Speak?

Mainly because he was Jewish, most scholars during the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century portrayed Jesus as an exclusively Aramaic speaker. However, nobody (or at the most, few) today will perhaps agree with this theory. The discovery of the mass of literary and non-literary artifacts in the middle of the twentieth century, particularly in Qumran and other Judean Desert sites, reveals the existence and use of at least four languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin—in the speech communities of ancient Palestine. Jesus lived in and traveled around those speech communities and would therefore have been familiar with these languages. But the lingering issue concerns which of these languages Jesus and his contemporaries spoke. Scholars have shared different opinions on this issue, and there has been an abundance of literature that survey and discuss it (in particular, see Ong 2015: 32-68; Poirier 2007; Porter 1991).

The Hebrew hypothesis states that the language did not become a dead language in the first century CE but was actually continually spoken as evidenced in the Mishnah (hence, Mishnaic Hebrew), even though the prevailing view of nineteenth-century scholarship is that Aramaic had replaced Hebrew since the Babylonian captivity in 586–536 BCE. Most scholars, however, simply recognize that Hebrew would have been used in liturgical and educational contexts, and they believe that Aramaic would have been the principal vernacular during Jesus' time. The Aramaic hypothesis banks on the notion that Jesus and his disciples' native tongue was Aramaic. Advocates of this theory also draw on Aramaic inscriptional and documentary evidences and the practice of translating Scripture into Aramaic (the Targums) to support the hypothesis. While the Aramaic hypothesis dominated most of the scholarly discussion, a growing number of scholars have argued for the case that Greek, instead of Aramaic, was the principal language of ancient Palestine, shortly before and at the turn of the twenty-first century. Proponents of the Greek hypothesis recognize the multilingual nature of the society of ancient Palestine and argue that Greek has replaced Aramaic as the *lingua franca* of the Eastern Mediterranean largely due to the conquest and Hellenization program of Alexander the Great and his generals. Archaeological discoveries also show that there are as much Greek inscriptional and documentary evidences as Aramaic, one of which is the thousands of Greek New Testament manuscripts that have survived and come to us today. Though highly disputed, Latin would also have been a language with which Jesus and his contemporaries would have been familiar. Scholars generally agree that the linguistic evidence for Latin indicates that the language was mostly used for official governmental functions. Most of the archaeological discoveries of Latin texts came from

Caesarea Maritima, and this fact tells us that Jews who lived near and along the coastal shores of Samaria and the western borders of Palestine would at least have been exposed to the language.

On What Occasions Were Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin Spoken?

While it is logical to assume that any person who lived in first-century Palestine would have been exposed to any or all of the four languages, and, as a result, would have come to learn and use them, the difficulty lies in demonstrating where these languages were spoken in the various localities of ancient Palestine, and when and how they were deployed in various speech situations or social contexts. To this end, a complex analysis of the linguistic evidence using a sociolinguistic theoretical framework is necessary. Specifically, one level of analysis needs to deal with mapping out the linguistic terrain of ancient Palestine from both historical and geographical standpoints.

From a historical perspective, we can see that Latin had eventually become the prestigious language of the Roman Empire during the fourth century CE. The linguistic situation of the empire at that time was multilingual and diglossic, and this scenario could largely be attributed to the spread of Christianity through emperor Constantine. Such a linguistic status achieved by Latin, however, did not happen overnight. Prior to this zenith of Christianity under the Roman rule, the inhabitants of ancient Palestine underwent a series of linguistic contacts and shifts due to the invasion and occupation by four imperial regimes—Babylonian (597–539 BCE), Persian (539–331 BCE), Greek (334/331–63 BCE), and Roman (63 BCE–476/480 CE). It seems clear from the course of its history under these successive military conquests from the sixth century BCE to the fourth century CE that the speech community in general acquired three additional languages, namely, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin, converting the nation from a monolingual speech community (i.e., Hebrew-speaking) during the united monarchy period to a multilingual speech community at the time of Jesus. The direction of the language shift goes from Hebrew to Aramaic and Greek, and then to Latin. This is why we find archaeological and literary evidence of the four languages in the centuries before and after the time of Jesus. It is important to note in this historical continuum that the first-century CE falls on a time period when the Greek language was at its peak, being used as the *lingua franca* of the Mediterranean world and as the language of administration throughout the Roman Empire.

From a geographical perspective, there are at least eight major geographical regions—Nabatea, Idumea, Judea, Samaria, Galilee, the Decapolis, Perea, and Phoenicia—that more or less constitute the geographical land called Palestine during the time of Jesus. Using the concepts of dialect geography, language boundary, and isogloss enables us to examine these geographical regions on a geographical map with reference to the concentration and composition of their population and inhabitants and to correlate this data with the geographical distribution of Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin. Nabatea is situated between Judea to the north and Egypt to the southwest. Its inhabitants originated from an Arab ethnic identity, and although it is hard to estimate the Nabatean population during that time, its capital city, Petra, had a population of about 20,000. The Nabateans would have been bilingual speakers of Nabatean Arabic (or a form of early or Old Arabic) and Aramaic (the *lingua franca* of the Near East) during the first century BCE to the first century CE. Further northwest of Nabatea is Idumea. The linguistic situation of Idumea is not far off from that of Nabatea, especially in the central and southern parts of the land, with its bilingual residents speaking Old Arabic and Aramaic, but the latter perhaps as their primary language. Idumeans who lived in the northern part would have added Greek to their linguistic repertoire, as they neighbored southern Judea. The land of Judea (not to be confused

with the larger Judean region comprised of Idumea, Samaria, and Galilee) is surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea to the west, the Dead Sea to the east, Idumea to the south, and Samaria to the north. Its population during the first century CE would have reached a number between 200,000 and 300,000, excluding the number of Diaspora pilgrims and visitors that traveled to Jerusalem during the annual Passover festival. Judea was a busy place (especially Jerusalem), and this implies a seasonal influx of people and considerable ethnic mixing in this region. Consequently, residents and visitors would have used Greek as their linguistic medium, with Aramaic being spoken in more restricted, private social contexts. Samaria lies between Judea and Galilee along the longitudinal hemisphere, and the Plain of Sharon, the Carmel Ridge, the Mediterranean coastline, and the Jordan Rift Valley along the latitudinal hemisphere. Since the time of the Assyrian invasion in 722 BCE until the time of Jesus, Samaria has been a hodgepodge of many ethnic groups and cultures. Thus, it is very likely that its more or less 500,000 residents would have been fluent speakers of Greek, with a good number even being productive (or at least passive) speakers of Latin. No geographical region of ancient Palestine has received much attention as Galilee, a place where Jesus spent most of his private life and public ministry. Like Samaria, Galilee was a prominent, multicultural center of ancient Palestine, not least because the region seems to be a strategic and prime location for foreign visits and international trade and commerce (see Horsley 1996: esp. 67-76). The population of Galilee during Jesus' time is estimated to be about 630,000, and its linguistic situation would have been similar to Samaria, except for the likelihood of Latin being spoken as much by the residents. Neighboring Galilee is a region known as the Decapolis. Scholars say that Alexander, or one of his generals, established the Decapolis cities (Parker 1997: 128). The population of the Decapolis is about 190,000, and there appears to have had more Gentile than Jewish residents as archaeological finds indicate. Greek would naturally have been the primary language and *lingua franca* of the speech community. Perea is a region situated opposite of Judea across the Jordan River and southeast of Galilee adjoined by the Decapolis. During the Maccabean period, Perea was a Gentile territory. However, Josephus (*Ant*. 20.2; *J.W*. 4.419-439) notes that, after the First Jewish Revolt, it became Jewish territory. For this reason, Perea was probably a less Hellenized region, and both Greek and Aramaic would probably have been the languages spoken by its residents. Finally, turning now to the region southwest of Galilee, we find the coastal district of Phoenicia. It was in this region, Tyre to be specific, where Jesus met and healed a Syro-Phoenician (Greek) woman's daughter (Matt 15:21; Mark 7:26). Phoenicia was a highly Hellenized city as evidenced by its long, rich history regarding the role it played as a Greco-Roman society in the Near East.

A second level of analysis aims at studying the sociolinguistic environment of the speech community of ancient Palestine, in order to determine the functions and uses of the languages in various social contexts. In sociolinguistic terms, these social contexts are termed as "social domains," and they indicate the types of speech situations where Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin would have been used. In any real speech community, there are six social domains that are typically and readily recognizable—family, friendship (or neighborhood), government, transaction (or commerce and trade and industry), religion, and education. Within these domains, a particular language is typically deployed for use, although language choice in a particular speech event or social context within a specific social domain is also affected by such social factors as participants, setting, and topic of conversation. From a linguistic perspective, the functional distribution of or the division of labor between the languages in a speech community's repertoire is determined by the concept of diglossia. With reference to ancient Palestine, the native language of the speakers would naturally have been used in the family and friendship

domains, where conversations are more intimate and private, except of course when participants involved in the friendship domain had different native tongues. In such cases, Greek would likely have been the language choice by virtue of it being the *lingua franca* of the community. The *lingua franca* would also have been the natural language choice in the government and transaction domains. In the religion domain, determining the language choice can be tricky. In the Jerusalem temple proper and most synagogues, it is possible that Hebrew (and not Aramaic) was the language choice, at least for formal functions and ceremonies. In the homes and more private settings, however, people would pray to their gods in their native languages. The default language in the education domain would largely have depended upon the topic of study. Even in private homes, the formality of the domain would have required the use of the appropriate language for the subject in study.

The above six social domains only represent the "typical" and broad domains that can be found in virtually all speech communities. These domains are identified by a familiar, standard set of sociolinguistic configuration (e.g. participants, setting, and topic of conversation) that marks and distinguishes each of them. In actual speech situations, however, many social factors can disrupt this set of configuration that identifies a particular social domain. As such, it is better to think of the concept of "variable social domains" (Ong 2015: 258-59; and Ong 51-56). Variable domains are speech situations or subsumed speech situations in which their speech components deviate from the standard set of configuration that characterizes the typical social domains. On the basis of this concept and a Hymesian ethnographic framework for generating the various possible combinations of sociolinguistic configurations, the language selection for a particular speech situation or event in ancient Palestine can be analyzed and determined via selection from eighteen sociolinguistic rules that would characterize that speech situation or event (see Ong 2015: 277-79). For instance, the Sermon on the Mount episode (Matt 5:1—7:29) is classified under Rule A1 (Participants' relationship is status-oriented; the setting is in a public and/or informal religion domain; and the evaluation of its genre, topic, and key is that of having low affective content), or possibly also under Rule D3 (Participants' relationship is status-oriented; the setting is in a public and/or formal higher education domain; and the evaluation of its genre, topic, and end is that of having high information content [language dependent on the subject matter of learning]).

Was Jesus Multilingual?

The identification of these social domains and their concomitant default languages raises the question of whether Jesus was involved in any of these domains. If he were, then it is possible that he would have been a multilingual individual. The evidence from the four canonical Gospels indicates that Jesus interacted most frequently with the religion and friendship domains and less frequently with the family, government, education, and transaction domains. This social network of Jesus and the frequency of his social interactions (primarily with three groups of people—his disciples, which included the women he encountered during his ministry; the crowds from various geographical places; and the religious leaders) within this network suggest that the Jesus stories and materials contained in the Gospels focus on Jesus' public ministry. Within this public ministry, Jesus seems to have used Aramaic most often in more private settings with his disciples, and Greek almost always in more public settings, especially when there are crowds present. This information tells us that the Gospels only give us a glimpse of who the real historical Jesus was, for Jesus would certainly have often interacted with the other domains as a resident of that community.

However, that Jesus was able to interact with these groups of people during his lifetime does not spontaneously signify his multilingual proficiency. Using individual multilingualism theories, we need to identify the type of multilingual that Jesus was by looking at types of bilingual families and childhood bilingualism and the categories of measuring bilingual proficiency. The classic or layperson's definition of a bilingual is an individual who holds a native-like control of two or more languages (balanced bilingualism). However, balanced bilingualism is a rare phenomenon, for it would entail that a bilingual has no accent, no non-target vocabulary and expression selection, no age of second language acquisition, equal quality of linguistic instruction received, and equal amount of language usage in all the known language of the bilingual. Therefore, it is best to speak of individual multilingualism as the ability of bilinguals to speak multiple languages along a bilingual cline. Assessment of individual bilingualism proficiency necessitates identification of the individual's family or childhood bilingualism. Sociolinguists have identified six or seven broad categories (see Harding and Riley 1986: esp. 47-48), and these categories are determined based on a set of configuration of three factors—the native language of the parents, the language of the community at large, and the parents' language strategy in speaking to the child. After identifying an individual's category of family bilingualism, the next step is to assess the language skills and abilities of the individual by intersecting the eight dimensions of measuring language proficiency (Baker and Jones 1998: 90-94). The vertical dimensions contain the listening and speaking (oracy) and reading and writing (literacy) components, whereas the horizontal dimensions include the listening and reading (receptive or passive) and speaking and writing (productive or active) components. These eight components tell us about the four basic language abilities of a bilingual individual, and at the same time, allow us to measure their oracy versus literacy abilities as well as their receptive versus productive skills.

As regards Jesus, because Mary and Joseph were bilinguals in Greek and Aramaic, it is possible that the family practiced code-switching at home, which means that they alternated between Greek and Aramaic, or that they tried to mix Greek and Aramaic in their conversations. But given the fact that they were a Jewish family, Jesus' parents would more likely have spoken to Jesus in Aramaic at home. Nevertheless, Jesus would have spoken Greek with other people in the larger community outside of home as can be observed from the density and plexity of his social network via the Gospel accounts. It is therefore very likely that Jesus was an early, consecutive bilingual, who was born to a Jewish family that taught him to speak his native language Aramaic, and who attained at least a primary-level education and was exposed to other people in the community that have taught him to speak Greek. Because Jesus often taught in the temple and synagogues, he might have been able to read and understand Hebrew (see Luke 4:14-20), but it is doubtful whether he would have been able to write and speak it. Jesus, however, might have been able to understand and say a few Latin words here and there as evidenced in his pithy response, Σὺ λέγεις (you have said so), to Pilate (Matt 27:11; Mark 15:2; and Luke 23:3; see Ong 2015: 252-56).

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