

Echolalias  
*On the Forgetting of Language*

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I hear some of our *Sea-Yahoos* find fault with my *Sea-language*, as not proper in many Parts, nor now in Use. I cannot help it. In my first Voyages, while I was young, I was instructed by the oldest Mariners, and learned to speak as they did. But I have since found that the *Sea-Yahoos* are apt, like the Land ones, to become new fangled in their Words; which latter change every Year; inso-much, as I remember upon each return to mine own Country, their old Dialect was so altered, that I could hardly understand the new. And I observe, when any *Yahoo* comes from *London* out of Curiosity to visit me at my own House, we neither of us are able to deliver our Conceptions in a Manner intelligible to the other.

Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Apex of Babble

As everyone knows, children at first do not speak. They make noises, which seem at once to anticipate the sounds of human languages and to be fundamentally unlike them. As infants approach the point at which they will begin to form their first recognizable words, they have at their disposal capacities for articulation that not even the most gifted of polyglot adults could hope to rival. It is no doubt for this reason that Roman Jakobson found himself drawn to the prattle of infants, in addition to such things as Russian futurism, comparative Slavic metrics, and structural phonology, the science of the sound shapes of language. In *Child Language, Aphasia, and Phonological Universals*, which he wrote in German between 1939 and 1941 while living in exile in Norway and Sweden, Jakobson observed that "a babbling child can accumulate articulations which are never found within a single language or even a group of languages: consonants with the most varied points of articulation, palatalized and rounded consonants, sibilants, affricates, clicks, complex vowels, diphthongs, and so forth."<sup>1</sup> Drawing on the research of linguistically trained child psychologists, Jakobson concluded that at what he termed the "apex of babble" (*die Blüte des Lallens*), no limits can be set on the phonic powers of the prattling child. As far as articulation is concerned, infants, he maintained, are

capable of everything. Without the slightest effort, they can produce any—and all—sounds contained in human languages.

One might think that with such capacities for speech, the acquisition of a particular language would be a quick and easy task for the child. But it is not. Between the prattle of the infant and the first words of the child there is not only no clear passage but evidence of a decisive interruption, something like a turning point at which the hitherto-limitless phonetic abilities of the infant seem to falter. "As all observers acknowledge with great astonishment," Jakobson related, "the child loses nearly all of his ability to produce sounds in passing from the pre-linguistic stage to the first acquisition of words, that is, to the first genuine stage of language."<sup>2</sup> A partial atrophy of the phonic abilities, to be sure, is not altogether surprising at this point; as the child begins to speak a single language, he obviously has no use for all the consonants and vowels he could once make, and it is only natural that, ceasing to employ the sounds not contained in the language he is learning, he soon forgets how to produce them. But when the infant begins to learn a language, he not only loses the capacity to produce sounds that exceed its particular phonetic system. Much more "striking" (*auffallend*), noted Jakobson, is that many of the sounds common to his babble and the adult language also now disappear from the stock of the infant's speech; only at this point can the acquisition of a single language be said truly to begin. Over several years, the child will gradually master the phonemes that define the sound shape of what will be his mother tongue, according to an order that Jakobson was the first to present in its structural and stratified form: starting, for example, with the emission of dentals (such as *t* and *d*), the infant will learn to pronounce palatals and velars (such as *k* and *g*); from stops and labials (such as *b*, *p*, and *m*), he will acquire the ability to form constrictives (such as *v*, *s*, and *f*); and so forth, until, at the end of the process of his language learn-



ing, the child comes to be a "native speaker," to use the expression with which we are all familiar but whose imprecision is manifest.

What happens in the meantime to the many sounds the infant once easily uttered, and what becomes of the ability he possessed, before he learned the sounds of a single language, to produce those contained in all of them? It is as if the acquisition of language were possible only through an act of oblivion, a kind of linguistic infantile amnesia (or phonic amnesia, since what the infant seems to forget is not language but an apparently infinite capacity for undifferentiated articulation). Could it be that the child is so captivated by the reality of one language that he abandons the boundless but ultimately sterile realm that contains the possibility of all others? Or should one instead look to the newly acquired language for explanations: is it the mother tongue that, taking hold of its new speaker, refuses to tolerate in him even the shadow of another? Everything is complicated by the fact that at the moment the infant falls silent, he cannot even say "I," and one hesitates to attribute to him the consciousness of a speaking being. It is difficult to imagine, in any case, that the sounds the child was once capable of producing with such ease have departed from his voice forever, leaving behind nothing but a trail of smoke (and even smoke is something). At the very least, two things are produced in the voice left empty by the retreat of the sounds the speaking child can no longer make, for a language and a speaking being now emerge from the disappearance of babble. It may well be inevitable. Perhaps the infant must forget the infinite series of sounds he once produced at the "apex of babble" to obtain mastery of the finite system of consonants and vowels that characterizes a single language. Perhaps the loss of a limitless phonetic arsenal is the price a child must pay for the papers that grant him citizenship in the community of a single tongue.

Do the languages of the adult retain anything of the infinitely

varied babble from which they emerged? If they did, then it would be only an echo, since where there are languages, the infant's prattle has long ago vanished, at least in the form it once had in the mouth of the child who could not yet speak. It would be only an echo, of another speech and of something other than speech: an echolalia, which guarded the memory of the indistinct and immemorial babble that, in being lost, allowed all languages to be.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Exclamations

In one sense, the sounds children forget how to make never leave them, for there is a field of speech in which they recur with striking regularity: those utterances traditionally termed, with more or less precision, "onomatopoeias." It has often been observed that when children in the process of learning a language seek to imitate the inhuman noises around them, they consistently use not the sounds that they are capable of making in their new mother tongue but those they seem otherwise unable to make, which they once produced without the slightest effort. Jakobson dwelled on the phenomenon at some length in *Child Language, Aphasia, and Phonological Universals*, arguing for its systematic and universal role in the acquisition of language. "Thus," he wrote, "in children who do not yet have any velar phonemes, one observes *gi* as an imitation of falling blinds, *kra-kra* of the raven's cawing, *gaga* as an indication of pleasure, *ch-ch* as a sound of joy, *kha* = 'pfui,' etc. Although fricatives are still replaced by stops in the 'objective denoting language' of the child, the former can still appear as sound imitations with onomatopoetic function. The noise of a trolley car is reproduced by *zin-zi*; the cat, by one child, and the fly, by another, is imitated by *ss*; and there are frequent attempts to imitate the sound of an airplane or to chase away chickens or dogs with *f*. The liquid *r* can

still be lacking in words which the child borrows from an adult, but the sound of a bird or of rattling can nonetheless be reproduced by it, and children who do not yet make use of any *i* imitate the barking of dogs with *didi* or the cry of the sparrow with *titi*, *bibibi*, and *pipi*.”<sup>1</sup>

Imitations of animal and mechanical noises seem to belong to a curious and complex dimension of the child's speech whose exact status in the evolution of language is far from clear. Do the sounds that the child uses in onomatopoeias represent the last remnants of an otherwise-forgotten babble or the first signs of a language still to come? The exclamations of the child, in any case, indicate that language evolves in a time that is neither unitary nor linear; they suggest that however resolutely one speech may develop, it continues to bear within it elements—traces or announcements—of another.

Children are in this sense not at all unlike the adults they will become. In the very same years that Jakobson wrote his path-breaking work on the acquisition and loss of language, his good friend Nikolai Sergeevich Trubetskoi, with whom he had founded the Prague Linguistic Circle years before, demonstrated that onomatopoeias belong to a specific type of utterance common to the speech of both children and adults. At the end of the fourth chapter of his unfinished and yet monumental *Principles of Phonology*, having defined every individual language as a finite “phonological system of distinctive phonetic oppositions,” determining its characteristic vowels, consonants, and prosody, Trubetskoi added a final section, which he presented as something of an appendix: a brief but far-reaching discussion of what he defined as the “distinctive anomalous phonological elements” of languages. “Beyond the normal phonological system,” he wrote, “many languages also present special phonological cases, which appear with altogether particular functions.”<sup>2</sup> To this category belong all the “foreign



sounds" made by speakers of one language when trying to imitate another: phonemes present in words borrowed from other languages that in the passage from one tongue to another inevitably change shape and often acquire a new and singular form, which is ultimately reducible neither to the tongue from which they came nor to the one in which they are invoked. Trubetskoi, who was living in Vienna when he wrote his book, cited the occasions when speakers of German use a French or Slavic word containing a sounded form of *ʃ* (that is, *ž*), or nasal vowels, all sounds normally absent from the phonological system of the German language. Wanting to indicate the foreign origin of the term "telephone," in distinction to the German word *Fernsprecher*, the Viennese, for example, would pronounce the final syllable of the word with a half-open, posterior nasal vowel: they would say "telef $\ddot{o}$ ," calling to mind a Gallic sound that is indeed foreign to German (the nasal  $\ddot{o}$ ) but that, as it happens, is also absent from the actual pronunciation of the French term for "telephone," *téléphone*. To this category of "distinctive anomalous phonological elements," wrote Trubetskoi, also belong all the sounds found in "interjections and onomatopoeias, as well as calls and orders aimed at domestic animals," made by both children and adults.<sup>3</sup>

These exclamatory utterances, Trubetskoi argued, "have no representative function [*Darstellungsfunktion*], in the strict sense of the term." In the terms of the contemporary philosophy of language, one might say that they are "speech acts," which, without being utterly meaningless, do not assert or deny anything. Unlike classical propositions, they do not "state one thing concerning another thing"; their sole function consists of the very force of their utterance. In itself, this was, of course, not a new claim. That an exclamation is not a statement was a thesis familiar to the theory of language at least since the time of Aristotle, who, for this reason, excluded all exclamations, such as prayers and cries,

from the field of logic at the start of the decisive treatise on the proposition known to the philosophical tradition as *De interpretatione*.<sup>4</sup> Trubetskoi's true insight pertained to the field of linguistics that he in large part defined, phonology, for he showed that to the logico-formal singularity of exclamations there corresponds an altogether exceptional phonetic structure. Trubetskoi demonstrated that the sounds a human being uses in interjections, imitations of inhuman noises, and commandments to animals are rarely found in regular expressions within the speaker's tongue. They typically lie well beyond the limits that define the sound shape of a particular language. As usual, the linguist had no trouble providing examples: for the European languages alone, he cited "the interjection transcribed as *hm*; the clacking and clicking sounds made to spur on horses; the labial *r* made to stop horses; the interjection 'brrr!' used to express a shudder."<sup>5</sup> It would not be difficult to extend the list, restricting oneself to the exorbitant and excessive sounds regularly found in exclamations made by the speakers of a single tongue. In English, for example, consider the common exclamation of disgust "ukh," which involves a constrictive consonant *kh* (reminiscent of the sounds transcribed by the Castilian letter *jota* or the Arabic letter *ح*), and which appears in some languages in distinctive opposition to a velar *k* or a more fully guttural *h*, but which has no proper place in the sound system of English; or take the "apico-alveolar" or "rolled" *r* that Anglophone children once used in imitating the sound of a ringing telephone; or the "dorso-velar" or "trilled" *r* often produced to mimic the purring of a cat, which strikingly recalls the liquid consonants in modern French and German; or, finally, the sound that intervenes at the center of the contemporary English expression of dismay "Uh-oh," which closely resembles the glottal stop that plays an important role in languages such as Arabic and Danish but is not generally thought to have a distinctive function in the phonology

of standard English. In each case, interjections open one sound system to phonemes that normally lie outside it; and they carry, in this way, a language to a point at which, as Trubetskoï wrote, "the usual phonological system no longer holds."<sup>6</sup> Passing beyond the borders that normally define it, a single tongue now moves into an indistinct region of sound that belongs to no one language—and that often seems, in truth, not to belong to any human idiom at all.

It is not easy to define the precise position that such exclamatory sounds occupy in a single language, and Trubetskoï's decision to restrict his discussion of "distinctive anomalous phonological elements" to the final section of his chapter on phonological systems seems to belie a certain reluctance to confront the question directly. What relation, after all, do exclamations, both infantile and adult, bear to the languages in which they are uttered? On the one hand, interjections seem to represent a dimension common to every language as such, for it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine a form of speech in which such sounds could not be made. And yet on the other hand, exclamations necessarily mark an excess in the phonology of an individual tongue, since they are made of specific sounds that by definition are not otherwise contained in the language. "Distinctive anomalous phonological elements," in short, are at once included in a language and excluded from it; they seem, more exactly, included in a language to the very extent that they are excluded from it. Phonetic equivalents of the paradoxical entities that set logic banished from its discipline at its foundation, the noises of exclamations constitute the "elements" within every language that do, and do not, belong to the set of its sounds. They are the unwelcome yet inalienable members of every phonological system that no language can do without and that none shall recognize as its own.

That such phonetic elements are less "anomalous" than they

might seem is suggested by no less a thinker and maker of language than Dante, who claimed in his unfinished treatise on language, *De vulgari eloquentia*, that ever since the Fall, human speech has always begun with an exclamation of despair: "Heu!"<sup>7</sup> (Hence—it is worth noting—with an utterance whose written form, at least, contains one letter representing a sound that must have been absent from the medieval Latin Dante knew: the pure aspirate consonant *h*). The poet's suggestion is worth considering seriously. What would it mean for the primary form of human speech to be not a statement, a question, or a naming but an exclamation? Dante's remark is perhaps misinterpreted if taken too literally, for it defines less the empirical conditions of speech than the structural conditions that allow for the definition of language as such. These conditions, Dante suggests, are those of the interjection: as soon as there can be an exclamation, the poet-philosopher implies, there can be a language, but not until then; a language in which one could not cry out would not truly be a human language at all. Perhaps this is because the intensity of language is nowhere as great as in the interjection, the onomatopoeia, and the human imitation of what is not human. Nowhere is a language more "itself" than at the moment it seems to leave the terrain of its sound and sense, assuming the sound shape of what does not—or cannot—have a language of its own: animal sounds, natural or mechanical noises. It is here that one language, gesturing beyond itself in a speech that is none, opens itself to the nonlanguage that precedes it and that follows it. It is here, in the utterance of the strange sounds that the speakers of a tongue thought themselves incapable of making, that a language shows itself as an "exclamation" in the literal sense of the term: a "calling out" (*ex-clamare*, *Aus-ruf*), beyond or before itself, in the sounds of the inhuman speech it can neither completely recall nor fully forget.