9
The spread of common languages

The formation of common languages has long been seen as a by-product of empires. Take, for example, the spread of English as the British Empire expanded in the seventeenth to twentieth centuries CE across many parts of the planet (Black 2015: 244). In addition to conquests spreading language, the needs of diplomacy, commerce and day-to-day communication create a requirement between population groups to share a language of interaction. In the ancient Near East, it was only during the AoE that common languages became truly pervasive, in both spoken and written form, among populations, rather than being a limited language of a select group of scribes or officials, as Akkadian was in the pre-AoE. A widespread common language that was spoken and written helped populations to integrate the cultural, economic and political systems that developed in the AoE more closely. This development both facilitated and benefited from the population movement discussed previously and demonstrated below.

9.1 Pre-AoE common languages

Even during much of the early third millennium BCE, writing was limited to a few regions in the Near East. Outside of Southern Mesopotamia, a few cities in Northern Mesopotamia, Egypt and Elam, no area has shown substantial evidence of writing in that period. By the period of the Akkadian Empire the use of Akkadian had spread to other parts of the Near East, and this empire may have helped to establish the language as the dominant language of Southern Mesopotamia in regions where Sumerian had primacy (Hasselbach 2005). This picture changed substantially in the early and mid-second millennium BCE, as writing

spread to the West Semitic regions and into Anatolia, probably driven by the Near East's increasingly interconnected economies and links to other areas (Liverani 2014: 233). Letters and household business documents become more common in the early second millennium BCE, which suggests that more households had access to writing, in part because of commerce and because there were more scribes in society. With the spread of writing, Akkadian appeared to be one of the first languages one can call common, or at least one can say it appeared in regions where it was not the primary spoken language.

The apogee of the spread of Akkadian was in the Late Bronze Age, during the Amarna Age in the fourteenth century BCE, when the Eastern Mediterranean communicated with the Near East states (Van De Mieroop 1999; Bryce 2003: 224). At this time, Akkadian was probably used from Cyprus to Iran, and from Anatolia to the Persian Gulf in Bahrain (Potts 2006). What is telling, however, is that at the height of the language's use in the region, it is likely that few people could write or speak the language. This should be expected, given the complexities of the written form, which had numerous logo- and phonograms. Interestingly, by the mid- to late second millennium BCE, two simpler writing systems existed, the Proto-Canaanite and Ugaritic alphabets, but for centuries they did not spread or become the main writing system across the region (Healey 1990). In fact, the Ugaritic alphabet died out with the fall of Ugarit. The complexities of Akkadian, and cuneiform more broadly, may have been a hindrance to interregional integration at the economic and social levels, although a very active trade system and network existed in the Late Bronze Age that spanned the Mediterranean and the Near East.

This picture changed after the arrival of the Sea Peoples, or at least during the period associated with their disruptions. In the Early Iron Age, new populations had emerged in the Near East, including Canaanite-derived West Semitic populations and Phoenicians who used an alphabetic script and spread its use. Furthermore, the arrival of the Arameans introduced a new population and a West Semitic language to the Near East (Lipiński 2000). This proved to have significant consequences for the region and beyond in the centuries to come. Groups in the Levant and Syria, in particular, saw the alphabet as beneficial and adopted it, while Aramaic began to facilitate interregional communication. With the expansion of Assyria into Syria and the Levant in the ninth and eighth centuries BCE, the Assyrians increasingly encountered Aramaic and other languages whose writing systems are alphabet-based (Radner 2014a).

9.2 Common languages in the AoE

9.2.1 Aramaic

With the Assyrian conquests and the expansion of their empire in the Iron Age, particularly from the ninth century BCE, Aramaic became increasingly important to the Assyrian state as a language of administration (Radner 2014a: 84). The language, in various forms, continued to be either the most common in the Near East or used widely throughout the Near East for almost the entire AoE (Gzella 2015). Its alphabetical script had become convenient for written communication, including common correspondence, for many regions across the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

The use of Aramaic in the Assyrian court, along with population spread, whether through voluntary or forced migration, created and responded to a need not just for a common administrative language between rulers and subjects but also for a language for day-to-day communication and probably commerce. As populations began to intermix, including through Assyrian government policy, the need for a common language increased among populations whose languages often had common Semitic roots. This is evident in places such as Dur-Katlimmu, in the southern Khabur region of Syria, where legal and sale documents contain Aramaic annotations along with Akkadian cuneiform, showing that even areas that had a long-established and good knowledge of Akkadian began to use Aramaic more frequently (Radner 2002). This suggests that Aramaic speakers had spread into eastern areas of the Assyrian state. Aramaic was the first common language with an alphabet-based writing system, which made it more amenable to becoming widely used and employed in many areas beyond official and government-level communication. This is best demonstrated during the Achaemenid period, when Aramaic is used in regions between Libya and Afghanistan; evidence of the use of Aramaic emerges from Arabia and Anatolia as well. Thus, as the alphabet spread so too did Aramaic, throughout the Near East, North Africa and Central Asia (Driver 1957; Gzella 2015).

Although Aramaic was present in many parts of the Near East before the Achaemenids, the Achaemenids standardized the language, introducing one common dialect across their realm. This was not only important for official communication, but also it probably facilitated more common forms of communication such as business transactions and letters, as trained scribes would have been spread throughout the empire and were trained in the same dialect. Day-to-day use of Aramaic was evident in places such as Elephantine in Egypt, Mesopotamia and as far

as Bactria (Kuhrt 2014: 113; Gzella 2015). The populations that used Aramaic were also diverse within the regions where Aramaic is found; the Elephantine archive, for example, shows that non-native populations of Jews and Arameans spread into Egypt and brought their languages with them as they migrated (Porten 2011). Commerce and other social activities are seen to be important topics within the inscriptions and documents that have been found. The common language of Aramaic not only made communication far easier, it also allowed different ethnic communities to integrate and communicate with each other as they moved to new areas, including larger cities, and began to conduct business and other activities together.

Widespread communication across the vast Achaemenid Empire created new opportunities that promoted not just commerce but also the transfer of knowledge (Cowley 2005). Papyri such as those from Elephantine show that Aramaic was used to transfer stories (e.g., *Story of Ahikar*), sayings and other knowledge. Examples of the transfer of knowledge through Aramaic must have been more common than our present evidence suggests: many documents written in Aramaic have not survived, as this language was often written on parchment or other more perishable media.

Under Achaemenid rule, writing became more widely accessible as it no longer had to depend on the parochial knowledge of cuneiform script or other non-alphabetic systems. This new development, of a widespread common language, is a key feature that differentiates the AoE from the pre-AoE, as, even in its apogee in the Late Bronze Age, Akkadian never reached widespread or common use among ordinary individuals or even elites.

Aramaic continued to be understood and used, sometimes widely, in Egypt, the Near East, Iran and parts of Central Asia long after the fall of the Achaemenids, although it was generally not an official language of the court. In fact, after the fall of the Achaemenids, more localized dialects of Aramaic emerged, in key cities such as Palmyra and Hatra, among others, which gave rise to two important dialects. Two main branches of Aramaic formed, the eastern and western branches, and they developed more prominent differences over time. The dialects continued to have many similarities, but eventually it may have become harder for those who used the two major divisions to understand each other (Beyer 1986; Healey 2009; Gzella 2015). Nevertheless, in contrast to earlier periods, the differences in the languages of much of the Near East diminished substantially in the AoE, when common languages covered much larger territories and probably had more speakers than in the pre-AoE. Even if some communication problems arose as Aramaic differentiated, the

end product of long, successive empires that promoted Aramaic, or at least facilitated its use across large distances in the Near East, left a transformative mark on the region and beyond, where communities that had distinct differences could now communicate more easily, which allowed them to develop closer social links. At the very least, access to a common language that was much easier to master, in reading, writing, and perhaps even speaking, than Akkadian, provided many households with a way of participating in communication systems that had the potential to link ethnic communities spread over great distances.

9.2.2 Greek

Even before the arrival of Alexander, Greek colonies, mercenaries and trade meant that different parts of Egypt and the Near East were already familiar with the Greek language. Clearly, the spread of Greek increased substantially after 330 BCE; specifically, a standardized version, Koine Greek, took root and spread as Greek cultural influence expanded. This emerging standardized language developed from and was influenced by Attic and Ionic Greek. The development of Koine is comparable to the standardized Aramaic that spread in the Achaemenid period, as populations that were spread over long distances now had a language and a dialect that they could all use. Similarly to Aramaic, population movement of Greeks to the Near East, particularly along the Levant, Anatolia, Mesopotamia and Egypt by the Iron Age, and accelerating afterwards, increased the spread of Greek (Tsetskhladze 1999; Horrocks 2010). Earlier Greek populations would certainly have brought their own language, but presumably there may have been a variety of dialects from the various city-states of Greece. After the rise of a more common form of Greek, communication may have been even easier for Greek populations. While the spread of Greek made it another common language found in the Near East, it also spread from the Eastern Mediterranean to Central Asia and India, often coexisting with Aramaic (Strootman 2014). Although by the third century BCE Greek could be found in regions as distant as coastal parts of Spain, and India, at least as the language used by ruling governments and in official communications, it is likely that many populations in the Near East retained Aramaic as a more common secondary language. Greek was probably used more in some places in the Near East, particularly in the cities where more Greeks would have been found as they migrated and integrated into the region, while linguistic change may have been gradual or not as substantial in older Near Eastern cities (Vlassopoulos 2013: 3).

By the first century CE, Greek was spoken and written by sizeable numbers of people in regions between Britain, Western Europe, North Africa, Egypt and the Near East, although how much it was spoken in areas of the Near East outside of western Anatolia is unclear, since Aramaic would also have covered many regions in the Near East (Swain 2003). Certainly it is possible that both languages served as second languages for populations in the Near East. Greek also thrived alongside Latin, the language spread by the Romans. Latin spread throughout Europe and parts of the Near East controlled by the Romans, although it was limited to Roman outposts and official and military institutions. In other words, it is likely that fewer people used Latin than Greek or Aramaic dialects in the Roman-period Near East. Latin also faded from the Near East after the Roman period (Millar 1994: xiv; Leonhardt 2013).

Greek probably became less commonly used by the Sasanian period in Mesopotamia and regions to the east, but it was the official language of the Byzantine Empire in the Near East in the seventh century CE (Horrocks 2010). What is evident is that in periods of greater Greek influence, Greek often coexisted with Aramaic rather than replacing it. In fact, Greek began to influence Aramaic, and Syriac, an Aramaic language still spoken by Christians in the Near East and used also as a liturgical language, includes many Greek loan words. Similarly to the syncretism of Hellenic and Near East themes seen in artistic and cultural styles, Aramaic integrated and reflected Greek linguistic influences. Syriac arose as a later version of Aramaic that reflected the strong cultural intermixing of Greek and Near Eastern cultures as populations began to interact, and subsequently lived together for many centuries (Joosten 1996: 107; Brock 2015: 821). Syriac, at its peak in the seventh century CE, spread as far as India and China, to where, by that point, missionary zeal had spread the language farther than AoE empires ever did (Ji 2007: 41).

Reflecting the cultural and linguistic influence of Greek, Coptic emerged as another syncretized language, combining Demotic Egyptian with Greek (Brankaer 2010: 3). Similarly to Syriac, Coptic emerged during the Christian era as a liturgical language. Already in pre-Christian Greco-Roman Egypt, Old Coptic seems to have developed as Greek became ever more present (Bagnall 2011: 76). Pre-Old Coptic even suggests increased interaction between Egyptian and Greek communities that attempted to accommodate the non-alphabetical Egyptian script even as Demotic and Greek coexisted (Quaegebeur 1991). This early stage of Coptic represented a gradual transition to closer entanglement of Egyptian and Greek that ultimately led to the full development of Coptic.

9.3 Conclusion

The widespread use of Aramaic, and later Greek, created new opportunities for having common languages across the Near East and beyond. For the first time, populations from the Mediterranean region could communicate with those as far away as Central Asia; it was also the first time that many people could access writing, via this easier alphabetic communication. As people moved, language moved with them, and the borrowing of words demonstrates how language contact evolved as populations intermixed. In the Achaemenid period, populations that would have had at least some knowledge of Aramaic could be found between Libya and Afghanistan/Central Asia and from Arabia to the Caucasus, an area that covered nearly 6.1 million km^2 (Gzella 2015). By the end of the third century BCE, Greek could be found in a territory covering something of the order of 8.7 million km^2, over which government-level communications, at least, used this language, but portions of the population that migrated did too (Siegel 1985: 358; Horrocks 2010). In the late Roman period, one could have used only two languages to communicate from Britain to Central Asia or even into India, namely Greek and Aramaic. The rise of widespread common languages would have opened up unprecedented opportunities for commerce and social interaction, facilitating integration across the Near East at economic, political and cultural levels. People who had social and linguistic differences may have spoken and written to each other far more easily than in earlier periods. In the pre-AoE, Akkadian, even at its peak, used a difficult script, which helped to make it less pervasive than the AoE common languages. Figure 9.1 shows regions where Akkadian, Aramaic and Greek would have been known or used by at least portions of populations in different periods. The clear differences not only reflect how far the AoE languages had spread but also demonstrate the opportunities that would have been created for some level of social and political integration in the AoE empires.

As previously seen, communication was not just becoming easier between populations but also becoming more rapid because of the presence of long-distance roads. With the rise of common languages, communications went farther, faster, and were read and written by far more people. This, along with government policies of more inclusiveness for disparate populations, probably paved the way for people, despite their ethnic affiliations, to participate in the state and a commercial system in a way that gave them a stake, and an opportunity to thrive and to move more easily across different regions. Movement to distant regions may have become easier as common languages developed, allowing

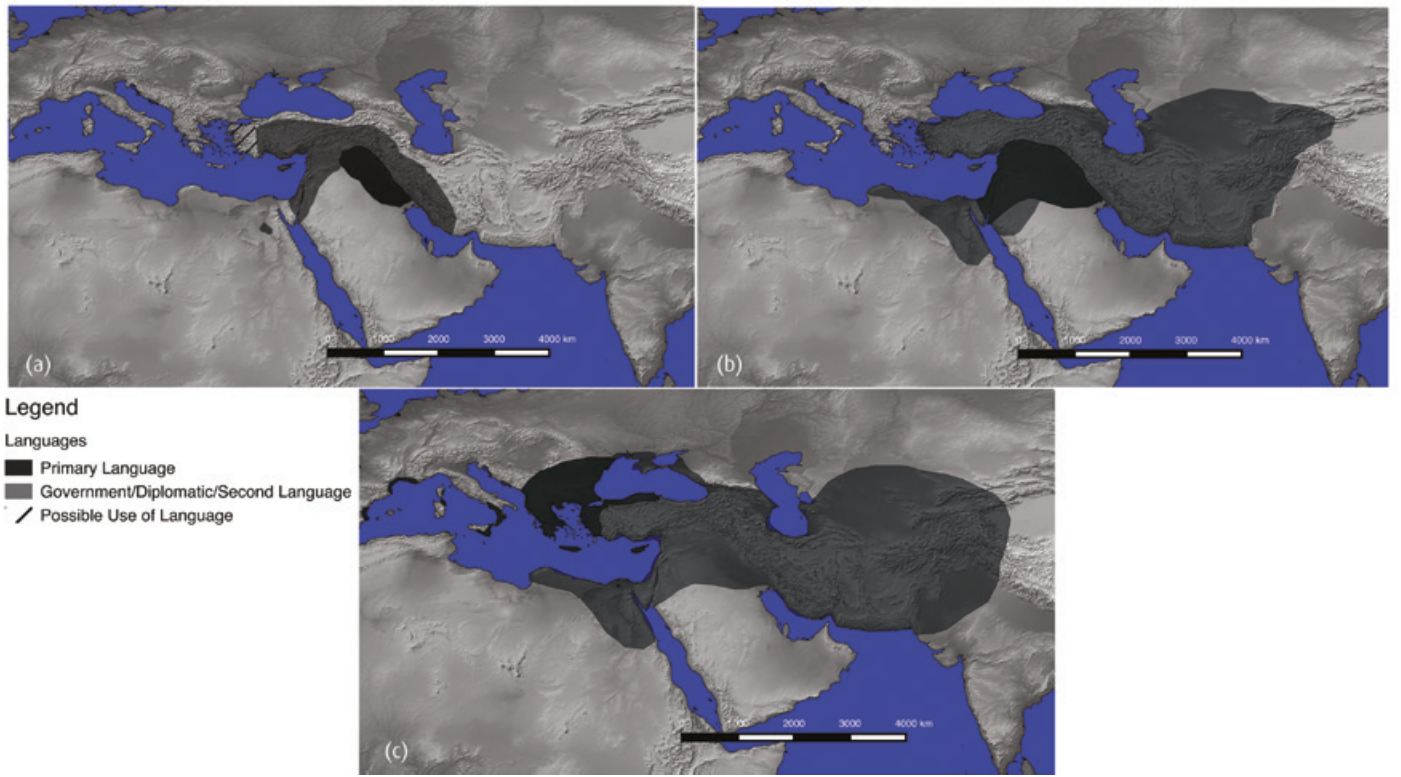

Figure 9.1 Approximate extent of (a) Akkadian, (b) Aramaic and (c) Greek, in the Late Bronze Age, Achaemenid and Seleucid/Ptolemaic periods respectively, where at least some speakers or scribes who knew these languages would have been found. The darker colour indicates where the language was primary, while lighter colours indicate government or official use or use as a secondary language (Van De Mieroop 1999; Bryce 2003; Potts 2006; Horrocks 2010; Gzella 2015)

some cities to become attractors as language helped to facilitate social integration. Because the same common languages were found in distant regions and within different ethnic communities, moving to distant cities would not have been as difficult for population groups as in earlier periods. Although languages, such as Akkadian, Egyptian and other indigenous languages, continued for a time, bilingualism increasingly became a feature of the wider Near East and Mediterranean world. Aramaic, perhaps the first true lingua franca for the masses, covering widespread regions, thrived for well over a thousand years, and is still spoken by some Christian communities in the Near East and the wider diaspora today. Modern Greek is still similar to its ancient roots, demonstrating the resilience of that language. Remarkably, these first true common languages have never completely disappeared after their initial expansion, despite their replacement in many places. The modern durability of these languages might be a testament to their AoE success and pervasiveness.