

Myths of the Origin of Language in World Mythologies

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The mystery of the “Origin of Language” has always been a matter of great curiosity to people of all generations and times. Different cultures and civilizations have their own mythical interpretations of the origin of language. The varied and fascinating stories associated with the origin of language best exemplify the basic urge of humanity to decode the mysterious and inexplicable fact of human existence. Different civilizations and people from varied parts of the world such as India, America, Mesoamerica, North America, Amazonas, Brazil, Europe, Africa, Southeast Asia and Oceania, Polynesia, Australia, Andaman Islands have their own myths of the origin of language. The present paper makes an attempt to set forth the varied myths pertaining to the origin of language and to substantiate how these myths decipher the mystification and perplexity involved in the inscrutable secret of the origin of language.

“The genesis of language is not to be sought in the prosaic, but in the poetic side of life; the source of speech is not gloomy seriousness, but merely play and youthful hilarity...In primitive speech I hear the laughing cries of exultation when lads and lassies vied with one another to attract the attention of the other sex, when everybody sang his merriest and danced his bravest to lure a pair of eyes to throw admiring glances in his direction. Language was born in the courting days of mankind” says O. Jespersen (See Yule, 1997).

The quotation explicitly states that the human language came into being while humans were making merriment. Language originated in human beings’ urge to express them, to articulate their feelings and emotions, to communicate their ideas and thoughts to other fellow beings. There is no definite and explicit substantiation of how language came into being. But there is a vast range of myths available in the world mythologies which unequivocally present the stories of the origin of language. R. Murfin and S. Ray (2003) define a myth to be

“a traditional anonymous story, originally religious in nature, told by a particular cultural group in order to explain a natural or cosmic phenomenon...Myths generally offer supernatural explanation for the creation of the world (whether seen as the planet alone or the universe generally) and humanity, as well as for death, judgment, and the afterlife (Pg. 284)”.

But A. Bernard says,

“Myths are never just stories. They always occur in the context of a mythological system, which is specific to a given society or culture.”

While talking about the postmodern implication of myth, L. Shaffer (2005) states that in the work of Roland Barthes,

“...myth is the result of ideology’s dehistoricizing of cultural phenomena, of lifting them out of their historical specificity, as in timelessness” (Pg.312).

There have been many stories in the world’s mythologies which elaborately explain how human languages originated. These stories present an imaginary depiction of the process of the development of language. But they definitely prove the fact that our primitive ancestors used language as a medium of communication and they also confirm the traces of human speech back in the history of human civilization.

The myths related to the origin of language have many resemblances and analogous themes. Floods and catastrophes are the parallel themes for the spreading of languages. There are two corresponding themes for the language dispersal. Firstly, it is said that due to flood the people on the Earth dispersed all over the world. As a result many languages came into being. Secondly, the God punished human beings for their erroneous and immoral deeds which consequently gave birth to different languages. Usually the myths related to the origin of language are part and parcel of the creation myths. Some stories claim the existence of human language right from the beginning of human civilization. But some tales maintain that human language developed after the creation of the world in later stage and the God gifted it to human beings or gave it as a curse.

B. Harrub, B. Thompson, D. Miller (2003) state that the origin of manifold languages is in the Tower of Babel incident recorded in Genesis 11:1-9. They quote the Scripture which confidently asserts:

‘Now the whole earth had one language and one speech’ (11:1).

They record the whole incident in an interesting manner. They state,

“When Noah and his family stepped off the ark, they spoke a single language that was passed on to their offspring. As the population increased, it apparently remained localized in a single geographical region. Consequently, little or no linguistic variation ensued. But when a generation defiantly rejected God’s instructions to scatter over the planet, God miraculously intervened and initiated the major language groupings of the human race. This action forced the population to proceed with God’s original intention to inhabit the Earth (cf. Isaiah 45:18) by clustering according to shared languages.”

An identical story to the Tower of Babel is told by a group of people of Hao Island in Polynesia. The angry God trailed the people erecting a building, drove them away, broke the building and altered their languages. As a result they started speaking different languages. (See Wikipedia)

T.A. Aarons in her scholarly and interesting article “Global Myths Surrounding the Origin of Speech” presents an exhaustive review of the myths related to the origin of languages in the world mythologies. The story from The Hebrew Bible states that the human language originated when God asked Adam to name the creatures that God had created. While talking about the Hindu myth of the origin of language, Aaron says that the creator-god Brahma punished a proud tree and then differences in language, diversity in culture and customs came into being. There was the magnificent ‘world tree,’ or ‘knowledge tree.’ in the centre of the earth. It was very tall and it reached nearly to heaven. The proud tree thought that it shall hold its head in heaven and spread its branches over all the earth, and gather all men together under its shadow, and protect them, and prevent them from separating. Lord Brahma punished the proud tree by cutting off its branches and casting them down on the earth. They sprang up as wata trees, i.e. banyan trees, and diffused men by making variations of belief, speech and customs.

The ancient Greek myth tells that men lived without law for centuries. They were under the rule of Zeus and spoke one language. The language was bequeathed to them by the god and goddess of ingenuity, Philarios and Philarion. It was God Hermes who brought variety in speech and then men were separated into nations and the result was dissonance. Later on Zeus left his position giving away the place to the first king of men, Phoroneus.

Norse mythology states that the third son of Borr gifted the faculty of speech, hearing and sight to mankind. While treading on the sea shore, the sons of Borr came across three trees. They took up the trees and formed men of them. The first conferred them spirit and life; the second, wit and feeling and the third, form, speech, hearing, and sight.

There is a wonderful story told by the Wa-Sania, a Bantu people of East African origin about the origin of language. The story tells that all the people of the earth knew only one language in the beginning. But then a severe famine came and madness hit the people. This insanity made them to drift in all directions. They started chattering weird words which resulted in the birth of different languages. In African mythology the Yoruba tribe believes that Eshu, the messenger of gods, speaks in all languages. Orunmila, the god of divination, is another god who also speaks all the languages of the world.

The people of Encounter Bay of Australia share an appalling story of cannibalism about the origin of language. The tale is about an old woman named Wurruri who lived in the east and walked with a large stick in her hand. She used to scatter the fires around which the people used to sleep. When Wurruri died, people were very much happy. They sent messengers in all directions to tell people the news of her death. Men, women and children were very glad and they expressed their joy when they came. Firstly, the Raminjerar attacked the corpse and ate her flesh. In a moment they started to speak comprehensibly. Then the tribes from the east ate the contents of the intestines. Instantaneously they began to speak intelligibly. The language they spoke was somewhat different. Lastly, the northern tribes arrived and consumed devoured the intestines and all that stayed behind. At once they spoke an altogether diverse language which was totally different from the language of the Raminjerar. There is still one more fascinating story of the Gunwinggu, a group of Australian aboriginals which says that a goddess bestowed all her children their own languages. They sport with the language.

There are a number of stories shared by the North American tribes related with the language dispersal as a result of the deluge. According to the Aztecs' story of Mesoamerica, after the flood only a man, Coxcox, and a woman, Xochiquetzal, survived and floated on a piece of bark to a new land. They gave birth to many children who were incapable of speaking when they were born. But they were bequeathed with language upon the appearance of a dove. They were unable to understand one another as they all were bestowed with a different language. In the Iroquois story the god Taryenyawagon (*Holder of the Heavens*) directed his people on a journey and asked them to inhabit in different places due to which their languages altered. The Kaska people of North America tell a story that before the flood there was only one country and people lived together. There was only one language shared by all people. But after the flood the people spread all over the world which led to numerous new settlements, several new tribes and many new languages.

As per the Salishan myth the language dispersal took place due to an argument between two people. The argument was whether the high-pitched humming noise that accompanies ducks in flight was from air passing through the beak or from the flapping of wings. The argument was not settled by the chief, who then called a council of all the leading people from nearby villages. The council failed to come to a unanimous conclusion and then because of the dispute the people went far away from each other. Slowly and gradually they started speaking differently and new languages came into being. In California, the mythology of the Yuki believes that Coyote along with the God created different languages as he created various tribes in different places. He laid sticks and they transformed into people upon daybreak. He also gave them their

customs, mode of life and languages. According to the Ticuna people of the Upper Amazon there was only one single tribe and all the people spoke only one language. But once somebody ate two eggs of hummingbird and then the tribe broke into groups. The people went far away from each other and formed different groups and languages.

The aboriginals of Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal believe that the god Puluga granted the bojig-yâb language to the first man and woman after the flood. This language is still spoken by the tribal people living in the south and south-eastern portion of middle Andaman. There is a strong belief that bojig-yâb is the first language and all other varieties of language originated from it. There is another belief that after the death of the first man, his children increased in number. The number went on so high that their home was not sufficient for them and hence they spread all over the country. When Puluga departed them, he provided them with necessary weapons, implements, fire and offered them different languages. (Refer to Wikipedia)

It is also interesting to know how the Indian language Sanskrit came into being. Swami Savitânanda (2007) presents a fascinating account of the origin of the Sanskrit language in his contemplative book *Stotra Mantranche Vidnyân*. Swami Savitânanda says that there are six chakras in the human body, namely, the Mulâdhâr, the Swâdhishtân, the Manipur, the Anahat, the Vishuddha, and the Adnya Chakra. Dr. S. Kale defines the Chakrâs as the Energy Centres of the human body. He says, "Our living soul, originated from the luminous divine God, has come to earth by assuming all the energies of God. All that exists in the cosmos is said to be inside our body. God's energy lies in human body in dormant state. It awakens with the blessing of Spiritual Guides and moves upwards. During this journey, the energy meets the stop points of intensity and these are seen in lotus shaped clusters in the energy sheath." He further elucidates that every stop point or chakra has petals. The Mulâdhâr Chakra, the root chakra is located at the perineum, midway between the anus and genitals. This lotus of four petals is yellow in color and is connected to the earth. The Second Chakra is the Swâdhishtân, the Sacrum Chakra, which is located above the root chakra and six fingers below the naval center. This chakra has six petals and is connected to water. This is the abode of mother Saraswati and Bramhadeva. The Third Chakra Manipur Chakra or Solar Plexus Chakra is located in the naval center itself. It has ten petals and is related to fire and radiance. Lord Vishnu resides here along with Goddess Mahâlakshmi. This is also the abode of ten great manifestations and Shiva's original Râma Shakti.

The Fourth Chakra, the Anahat Chakra is the Heart Chakra, placed near the heart. This lotus is of twelve petals and is related to air. God Shankara resides here accompanied by mother Parvati. The Fifth Chakra Vishuddha Chakra is the Throat Chakra which located in throat and is related to ether. This lotus has sixteen petals.

This is the abode of Durgâ and Saraswati. The Sixth Chakra, the Adnyâ Chakra or the Third Eye Chakra is located between two eyebrows and has two petals. This lotus has a confluence of Ida, Pingalâ and Sushumna nâdi (channels for flow of consciousness). The goddesses Mahâkâli, Mahalakshmi and Mahâsaraswati reside here. Also, Mâruti, the gatekeeper of Stree-rajya and God Dattatreya reside here.

Swami Savitânanda further points out that there are total 50 petals in the six Chakras, that is, 4 petals in the Muladhar Chakra, 6 petals in the Swâdhishtân Chakra, 10 petals in the Manipur Chakra, 12 petals in the Anahat Chakra, 16 petals in the Vishuddha Chakra and 2 petals in the Adnya Chakra. The Sanskrit language has 50 letters in the alphabet. The great sages saw these Chakras during their meditation. They saw the diagrams on each of the petal of the Chakras and also listened to the varied sounds they represented. After coming out of the meditation they drew the diagrams on the ground. Later on by pronouncing different sounds and by observing which petal was vibrated by which sound, they finalized the different letters of the alphabet. This is how the Sanskrit language came into being.

Thus there are innumerable myths which explicitly depict the stories of the origin of language. They not only narrate the mesmerizing stories but also point out the human urge to unravel the secret of the origin of language. In this paper an attempt is made to study some of the representative myths pertaining to the origin of language. The varied and wide-ranging myths present the mysterious origin of human speech. It is the complex structure of human language which makes us speculate on the very nature of the origin of language. The intricacy and complexity involved in the design of all human languages bring in the element of divinity in their evolution and development. No doubt, the human quest of getting the ultimate answer of the origin of language will go on till the edge of the doom.

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