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Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Echolalias: On the Forgetting of Language* (New York: Zone, 2005).

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."¹ 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."² 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