

INTRODUCTION.

DEFINITION OF LANGUAGE.

Language or Speech is the utterance of articulate sounds or voices, rendered significant by usage, for the expression and communication of thoughts.

According to this definition, language belongs exclusively to intellectual and intelligent beings, and among terrestrial beings, to man only; for no animal on earth, except man, can pronounce words. The word *language* is sometimes used in a more comprehensive sense, and applied to the sounds by which irrational animals express their feelings or affections; as to the neighing of the horse, the lowing of the ox, the barking of the dog, and to the cackling and chirping of fowls; for the sounds uttered by these animals are perfectly understood by the respective species. So also language is figuratively applied to the signs by which deaf and dumb persons manifest their ideas; for these are instruments of communicating thoughts.

But language, in its proper sense, as the medium of intercourse between men, or rational beings, endowed with the faculty of uttering articulate sounds, is the subject now to be considered.

Written language is the representation of significant sounds by letters, or characters, single or combined in words, arranged in due order, according to usage.

ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE.

We read, in the Scriptures, that God, when he had created man, "Blessed them and said to them, Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, &c." God afterwards planted a garden, and placed in it the man he had made, with a command to keep it, and to dress it; and he gave him a rule of moral conduct, in permitting him to eat the fruit of every tree in the garden, except one, the eating of which was prohibited. We further read, that God brought to Adam the fowls and beasts he had made, and that Adam gave them names; and that when his female companion was made, he gave her a name. After the eating of the forbidden fruit, it is stated that God addressed Adam and Eve, reproving them for their disobedience, and pronouncing the penalties, which they had incurred. In the account of these transactions, it is further related that Adam and Eve both replied to their Maker, and excused their disobedience.

If we admit what is the literal and obvious interpretation of this narrative, that vocal sounds or words were used in these communications between God and the progenitors of the human race, it results that Adam was not only endowed with intellect for understanding his Maker, or the signification of words, but was furnished both with the faculty of speech, and with speech itself, or the knowledge and use of words, as signs of ideas, and thus before the formation of the woman. Hence we may infer that language was bestowed on Adam, in the same manner as all his other faculties and knowledge, by supernatural power; or in other words, was of divine origin; for supposing Adam to have had all the intellectual powers of any adult individual of the species, who has since lived, we cannot admit as probable, or even possible, that he should have invented and constructed even a barren language, as soon as he was created, without supernatural aid. It may even be doubted, whether without such aid, men would ever have learnt the use of the organs of speech, so far as to form a language. At any rate, the invention of words, and the construction of a language must have been by a slow process, and must have required a much longer time, than that which passed between the creation of Adam and of Eve. It is therefore probable that language as well as the faculty of speech, was the *immediate gift of God*. We are not however to suppose the language of our first parents in paradise to have been copious, like most modern languages; or the identical language they used, to be now in existence. Many of the primitive radical words may and probably do exist in various languages; but observation teaches that languages must improve and undergo great changes as know-

edge increases, and be subject to continual alterations, from other causes incident to men in society.

A brief account of the origin and progress of the principal languages, ancient and modern, that have been spoken by nations between the Ganges and the Atlantic ocean.

We learn from the Scriptures that Noah, who, with his family, was preserved from destruction by the deluge, for the purpose of re-peopling the earth, had three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth. This fact, a little obscured by tradition, was retained by our rude German ancestors, to the age of Tacitus.

Japheth was the eldest son; but Shem, the ancestor of the Israelites, and of the writers of the Scriptures, is named first in order.

The descendants of Shem and Ham peopled all the great plain, situated north and west of the Persian Gulf, between that Gulf and the Indian ocean on the east and the Arabic Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea on the west, with the northern coast of Africa; comprehending Assyria, Babylonia or Chaldea, Syria, Palestine, Arabia, Egypt, and Lybia. The principal languages or dialects used by these descendants, are known to us under the names of Chaldee, or Chaldaic, which is called also Aramean, Syriac, Hebrew, Arabic, Ethiopic, Samaritan and Coptic. Of these, the Chaldee, and Hebrew are no longer living languages, but they have come down to us in books; the Samaritan is probably extinct or lost in the modern languages of the country, but the language survives in a copy of the Pentateuch; the Coptic is nearly or quite extinct, and little of it remains; the Syriac, Arabic and Ethiopic are yet living languages, but they have suffered and are continually suffering alterations, from which no living language is exempt.

These languages, except the Coptic, being used by the descendants of Shem, I call *Semitic*, or *Assyrian*, in distinction from the *Japhetic*. As the descendants of Japheth peopled Asia Minor, the northern parts of Asia, about the Euxine and Caspian, and all Europe, their languages, have, in the long period that has elapsed since their dispersion, become very numerous.

All languages having sprung from one source, the original words from which they have been formed, must have been of equal antiquity. That the Celtic and Teutonic languages in Europe are, in this sense, as old as the Chaldee and Hebrew, is a fact not only warranted by history and the common origin of Japheth and Shem, but susceptible of proof from the identity of many words yet existing, in both stocks. But there is a marked difference between the Semitic and Japhetic languages; for even when the radical words are unquestionably the same, the modifications, or inflections and combinations which form the compounds are, for the most part, different.

As it has been made a question which of the Semitic languages is the most ancient, and much has been written to prove it to be the Hebrew, I will state briefly my opinion on what appears to me to be one of the plainest questions in the history of nations. We have for our certain guides, in determining this question—1st. The historical narrative of facts in the book of Genesis, and 2d. The known and uniform progress of languages, within the period of authentic profane history.

1. The Scripture informs us that, before the dispersion, the whole earth was of one language and of one or the same speech; and that the descendants of Noah journeyed from the east, and settled on the plain of Shinar, or in Chabla. The language used at that time, by the inhabitants of that

* Celebrant, carminibus antiquis, Tuistonem deum terræ editum, et filium Mannum, originem gentis conditoresque. Manno tres filios assignant.—*De Mor. Germ.* 2.

In ancient songs they celebrate Tuisto, a god sprung from the earth, and his son Mannus [Man], the origin and founders of their nation. To Mannus they assign three sons.

Noah is here called *Mann*.