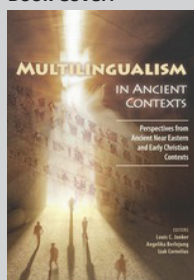


# The phenomenon of multilingualism between ancient perspectives and contemporary developments



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Multilingualism in ancient contexts: Perspectives from Ancient Near Eastern and Early Christian contexts

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The phenomenon of multilingualism between ancient perspectives and contemporary developments

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*Multilingualism in ancient contexts* is a peer-reviewed collective volume that draws on a colloquium held in Stellenbosch in September 2019 with the financial support of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (Bonn). This collection of chapters investigates the interaction between mono- and multilingualism in antiquity with a strong interdisciplinary approach, a tight dialogue between written and material sources, and a particular (but not exclusive) focus on religion and culture in the Near Eastern world. Multilingualism is vividly debated in contemporary society with implications in politics, education, cultural identification and religious expression. This debate is prominent in diverse and multicultural contexts like South Africa. The history of this linguistic phenomenon goes back to the dawn of times, as some of the ancient Mediterranean civilisations had been multilingual since the third millennium bce.

The editors L.C. Jonker (Stellenbosch), A. Berlejung (Leipzig/Stellenbosch/Bar-Ilan) and I. Cornelius (Stellenbosch) have arranged the chapters mainly according to geographical areas. The introductory section is divided into an introduction to the book and an opening chapter providing theoretical reflections about how multilingualism is witnessed in writings from the ancient Near East (A. Berlejung). Five chapters are devoted to case studies of the linguistic landscape in ancient Anatolia and the Levant (H. Niehr, I. Cornelius, F. Hagemeyer, G.R. Kotzé). The following two sections regard the Mesopotamian regions and the Achaemenid Persia respectively (R.M. van der Dijk-Coombes, K. Radner, L.C. Jonker). Three contributions address specific aspects of multilingualism in Roman and early Christian milieus (J. Punt, M. Frenschkowski, M.J. Nel). Then two chapters move beyond antiquity. The first approaches multilingualism research from the perspective of the philosophy and history of emotions (R. Barth). The second explores multilingual elements in liturgies of the early Christian church (A. Deeg). A final section opens further avenues for interdisciplinary engagement and sheds light on the importance of studying ancient multilingualism for contemporary debates, especially in educational contexts (M. Madiba).

The chapters in this book represent high quality, original and insightful scholarly works and are authored by significant voices from both German and South African academia (Stellenbosch and the North-West University). One of the strengths of the volume is to show to what extent an investigation into multilingualism in antiquity can contribute to understanding this phenomenon in (post)modern time. The ancient world was often characterised by marked linguistic diversity. The ancient Near Eastern empires provide a strong case for a comparison with the high level of linguistic diversity that the contemporary world is experiencing. A critical examination of how multilingualism functioned in the past, adds historical depth to the study of linguistic dynamics in contemporary societies. A complex linguistic environment was and still is the norm rather than the exception. Both in the ancient and the (post)modern world, factors like political power, religion and other spheres of social life have contributed to the development of mono- or multilingual scenarios and had a decisive impact on language choices and identity formation. Such a comparative analysis allows identifying potential universal patterns that span over centuries and geographical boundaries in a diachronic perspective.

A discourse on multilingualism is situated at the intersection of various academic fields. Therefore, the interdisciplinary interaction adopted in this book is particularly appropriate and useful to advance knowledge on the topic.

The overall merits of the book are predominant. It is well organised and edited, with only a few errors considering its length. The volume is concluded by an index of words and topics. An *index locorum* and a bibliography collecting the references cited in all the papers might have made it more complete.

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Although the focus is on the ancient Near East, some room for classicists would have been an enrichment. The *varietas* (or *diversitas*) *linguarum* ['diversity of languages'] was a common and unavoidable aspect of the Roman Empire. In particular, the case of Roman Egypt (with perhaps an emphasis on the Christian milieu) would have fit well into the section 'Roman and early Christian contexts'. Egypt is an excellent example of a multilingual environment in the African continent in antiquity. The linguistic interaction between an Egyptian substrate, a prevalently Greek-speaking population and a Latin-speaking element after the Roman conquest is abundantly documented by the evidence of the

papyri. As a testimony of the language used in the everyday life, documents on papyrus are a privileged source to reconstruct this picture.

Even if the subject requires a certain level of expertise, this volume is appealing not only to scholars, but also to a non-specialist audience with interests in disciplines such as (socio)linguistics, research in antiquity and material culture. Thanks to its interdisciplinary approach and stimulating contents, this book has the potential to mark a step towards a deeper understanding of multilingualism – both in the ancient and in the modern world.