One would think that after sixty years of studying the scrolls, scholars would have reached a consensus concerning the nature of the language of these texts. But such is not the case—the picture is no different for Qumran Hebrew (QH) than it is for identifying the sect of the Qumran community, for understanding the origins of the scroll depository in the caves, or for the classification of the archaeological remains at Qumran. At first glance, this is a bit difficult to comprehend, since in theory, at least, linguistic research should be the most objective form of scholarly inquiry, and the facts should speak for themselves—in contrast to, let’s say, the interpretation of texts, where subjectivity may be considered necessary at all times. But as we shall see, even though the data themselves are derived from purely empirical observation, the interpretation of the linguistic picture that emerges from the study of Qumran Hebrew has no less a range of options than the other subjects canvassed during this symposium.

Before entering into such discussion, however, let us begin with the presentation of some basic facts. Of the 930 assorted documents from Qumran, 790, or about 85% of them are written in Hebrew (120 or about 13% are written in Aramaic, and 20 or about 2% are written in Greek). Of these 930, about 230 are biblical manuscripts, which

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* It was my pleasure to present this paper on three occasions during calendar year 2008: first and most importantly at the symposium entitled “The Dead Sea Scrolls at 60: The Scholarly Contributions of NYU Faculty and Alumni” (March 6), next at the “Semitic Philology Workshop” of Harvard University (November 20), and finally at the panel on “New Directions in Dead Sea Scrolls Scholarship” at the annual meeting of the Association of Jewish Studies held in Washington, D.C. (December 23). My thanks to the organizers of all three events, respectively, Lawrence Schiffman, John Huehnergard, and Alex Jassen, and to the participants at each who provided valuable feedback. To a large extent I have retained the oral nature of my three presentations in this written version of the paper. Note the following abbreviations: EBH = Early Biblical Hebrew; SBH = Standard Biblical Hebrew; LBH = Late Biblical Hebrew; SH = Samaritan Hebrew; QH = Qumran Hebrew; GQH = General Qumran Hebrew; MH = Mishnaic Hebrew; DSS = Dead Sea Scrolls; MMT = Miqsat Ma'ase ha-Torah (4Q394–399); MT = Masoretic Text.
naturally are in Hebrew,\(^1\) so in actuality the percentage of Hebrew
texts is 80%. On the other hand, our Hebrew texts are the longest ones,
such as the *Temple Scroll*, the *Community Rule*, the *War Scroll*, and
the *Hodayot*—with only the *Genesis Apocryphon* as a lengthy Aramaic
scroll. This might, of course, be the accident of preservation—that is
to say, the Aramaic documents are much more fragmentary than the
Hebrew ones—but in general we may state that the language of choice
for the Qumran community was Hebrew and that the percentage of
Hebrew material among the Dead Sea Scrolls is actually higher than
the aforementioned 80%, perhaps even approaching 90%.\(^2\)

An immediate question that arises is to what extent does this distri-
bution reflect the actual daily use of the three languages at Qumran. By
even asking such a question, of course, I adhere to the majority view
that the scrolls discovered in the caves were produced by the commu-
nity that lived at the archaeological site of Qumran—a point which I
now consider proven, based on the work of Hanan Eshel, Jodi Mag-
ness, et al.\(^3\)—as opposed to alternative reconstructions, which suggest,
for example, that the scrolls were brought to these caves from Jerusa-
lem or elsewhere. Accordingly, I return to the question: to what extent
does the fact that 80% of our documents are composed in Hebrew
reflect the linguistic reality of the Qumran community? Or to put it in
simpler terms: did they speak Hebrew?—as opposed to Aramaic, for
example, or to Greek. There seems to be no other approach possible
than to say: yes, the individuals at Qumran spoke Hebrew. Of course,
it is possible for certain speech communities to write in one language
and to speak another—an example from the ancient Near East is the
site of Nuzi, whose texts are in Akkadian but almost undoubtedly the
residents of the city spoke Hurrian on a daily basis—but in such cases

\(^1\) Or at least the vast majority thereof, since we have a few Aramaic texts from
*Ezra* and *Daniel* included among the biblical manuscripts. See conveniently David
Studies 2; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 81, 136–38.

\(^2\) I am well aware, of course, that I have levelled all the data for “the Qumran com-
munity,” since I include in my calculations both sectarian and non-sectarian composi-
tions.

\(^3\) See, for example, Hanan Eshel, “A History of Discoveries at Qumran,” in *A Day
at Qumran: The Dead Sea Sect and Its Scrolls* (ed. Adolfo Roitman; Jerusalem: Israel
Museum, 1997), 11–17 (along with the other essays in this volume); idem, “Qumran
Studies in Light of Archaeological Excavations Between 1967 and 1997,” *Journal of
and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).