1. INTRODUCTION

Historical research on speech impediments in Roman Antiquity is emblematic of the scholarly approach to impairment in general. In fact, the history of people with speech impairments is at a greater disadvantage, since few visible traces remain in artifacts. Aside from a few passing references, there is not a single scholarly study of the ancient Roman world that views people with speech defects from the socio-cultural point of view: the medical point of view has taken precedence. In any case, there is no systematic collection of source material, from any of the ancient Roman historical periods, that references stammers or other speech impairments. In order to compile a list of source material that refers to impairments of speech and to make contextually relevant statements about the speech impediments, one must make use of sources from a very wide temporal scope. The present chapter includes material from the third century BCE of the Roman Republic to late antiquity (sixth century CE). One must also take into account earlier Greek literature: classical Greek literature was part and parcel of the cultural heritage of the Roman elite. Testimonies from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures are also important. The Greek orator Demosthenes, for example, was very much the

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model for the Roman elite regarding difficulties in speech, and Moses’s difficulty of speech appears in Roman writing. The lack of source material obliges the historian to acknowledge every scrap of evidence, no matter how temporally and geographically disparate, to assemble a broad picture. In addition, this collage is composed of material of very different genres, ranging from entertainment literature to miracle accounts to documentary evidence found in the inscriptions and papyri.

Using the model of the ‘house of the history of mentalities’ as developed by the French historian M. Vovelle, this chapter serves as a possible paradigm for approaching ancient disabilities tout court. On the level of the ground floor, I collect the evidence on persons with speech impediments. On the first floor, a systematic analysis of the Greek and Latin vocabulary to denote speech disfluency will be carried out. Several passages include ways of denoting the impairment that inform us about popular attitudes and ways of thinking about people who talked with broken speech. As the Vovellian upper floor is concerned with the intellectual discourse of theologians, philosophers, scientists, doctors and jurists, these items will be grouped under two separate headings: the legal dossier and the ancient medical theory. Throughout the chapter, the bodily reality of handicaps and disabilities is important. The question of what factors might cause which forms of speech disfluency in Antiquity is thus the first I will pose, for it is the foundation for building our ‘house of mentalities’.

2. Causes of Speech Impairment: Then and Now

One can safely assume that similar speech disorders affected people in the ancient world as in the present day, with much the same causes being responsible. I do not include muteness caused by congenital hearing incapacity; the dossier of deaf-muteness in Antiquity has been dealt with in another recent publication.²

Stuttering has a biological basis that is likely to be neurological. It does not seem to be related to culture or language. In the twenty-first century, more than 687 million people worldwide or about one percent of the world population stutter, and there is no reason why this would have been significantly different in ancient society.³ However, studies on the ethnology

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² Laes (201b).
³ Rose (2003) 51. For most recent figures, see the Stuttering Foundation of America website [http://www.stutteringhelp.org/].