The following is from Studies on the Weekly Parashah Based on the Lessons of Nehama Leibowitz by Moshe Sokolow

PART THREE: HOW "HARD" WAS MOSHE'S SPEECH?

Twice in this week's *sidrah* Moshe refers to himself as *'aral sefatayim* (6:12, 30). A glance at some of the ancient and recent attempts to translate this expression will demonstrate its complexity. Onkelos translates it, figuratively, as "hard of speech," and Yonatan renders it, similarly, as "difficult of speech." The Old Jewish Publication Society translation (OJPS), on the other hand, has, literally, "uncircumcised speech," the New JPS version has "impeded speech," and Aryeh Kaplan, the least literal of all, has "no self-confidence."

Nehama appreciated nuanced translation; indeed, she often commends to us the German translation of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig as singularly sensitive to, and reflective of, the original Hebrew text. A technique she approved of is to ascertain the correspondence between the translators and commentators. For instance, the JPS translation: "impeded speech," appears to correspond to Rashi's interpretation (6:12): *atum* (sealed, closed off). On the analogy of referring to deafness as "*arlah* of the ears" (Yirmiyahu 6:10), incomprehension as "*arlah* of the heart" (op. cit., 9:25), and prohibited fruits as "*arlah* of the tree" (Va-Yikra 19:23), Moshe, here, claims to have "*arlah* of the lips," i.e., he is inarticulate.

Underlying the disagreement over the translation is the question whether this condition was congenital or acquired. "Impeded speech" (NJPS) suggests a congenital defect, "no self-confidence" (Kaplan) is an acquired characteristic, and "uncircumcised lips" (OJPS) leaves it ambiguous. This is congruent with Moshe's previous remarks (4:10): "I am heavy of mouth (*kevad peh*) and heavy of tongue (*kevad lashon*)," which expression is just as ambiguous as "uncircumcised lips." It, too, can refer to either a congenital speech defect or an acquired one. If the former, God would have had to provide him a cure; if the latter – he had to offer reassurance.

In our standard search for textual confirmation of one alternative or the other, we are stymied, since God actually provides both. God's retort: "Who gives man a mouth? Who makes him dumb or deaf, sighted or blind?" (v. 11) implies the correction of a physical impediment, while "I will instruct you what to say" (v. 12) suggests encouragement rather than a cure.

Ibn Ezra, commenting on *kevad peh*, takes the "congenital" approach, saying: "He was born that way, with heavy speech, unable to pronounce labial and liquid consonants [i.e., the letters formed by the lips and the tongue]." A well-known Aggadah, on the other hand, takes the "acquired" approach, suggesting that Moshe was afflicted after placing a hot coal in his mouth. On the other hand, Aryeh Kaplan's translation of "no self-confidence" finds support in Moshe's retort (v. 13): "Make someone else your agent." If neither of God's solutions – separately or together – swayed him, it would appear to favor the interpretation that he lacked self-confidence.

The Midrash *Lekah Tov* combines some of these interpretations:

> Moshe made these remarks three times. One: "I am slow of speech" (4:10); two: "I am a man of impeded speech" (6:12); and three: "I am a man of impeded speech" (6:30). Why so often? In order to transform his speech (*millulo*) into oratory (*tzebut*). He said: Master of the Universe, if I go to Pharaoh with impeded speech, he will say: Was there no better servant to send than you?
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> God replied (7:1): "I will place you in the role of a god to Pharaoh." Even though you are a man of impeded speech, you are in the role of god to Pharaoh, for this is the way our God performs miracles: (1) The axe head floats alongside its handle (2 Melakhim 6:6); (2) The bitter water is sweetened by a piece of wood (Shemot 15:25); and (3) During the time of Elisha, brackish water is cured with salt (2 Melakhim 2:21) – all in order to fashion one miracle within another.