

HUMANISTS AND THE VERNACULAR:



Creating the Terminology for a Bilingual Universe

By Johann Ramminger

Initially humanists who wanted to discuss the contemporary language of the Italian peninsula had to use the terminology inherited from Dante and medieval Latin, designating it as lingua vulgaris or materna. However, the term lingua vulgaris (commonly used/plebeian speech) implied a stylistic judgment which was not always welcome — the language of Dante or the poets of the dolce stil nuovo could hardly be called ‘plebeian’. The situation changed with the discovery of Cicero’s Brutus in 1421, whose comments on the sapor vernaculus (native refinement) of the inhabitants of Rome offered humanists a broader theoretical framework. The first to pick up Cicero’s observations were Biondo and Bruni, in a discussion in 1435 about whether the populace of ancient Rome had spoken Latin or an idiom similar to modern day volgare. The word vernaculus soon became the standard term amongst Italian humanists for the latter and, at the end of the Quattrocento, for other languages such as French and German. At that time we also find the first examples in the Latin of humanists outside of Italy. Finally, vernaculus develops into an Italian word and enters the lexicon of other languages, arriving in English around 1600.

In the Italian humanists’ language universe several registers of Latin competed with each other and with the dialects of the Italian peninsula (which in the following collectively will be called *volgare* or Italian). From early on humanists asked after the origin of the *volgare* and tried to map a path between present-day Italian and whatever they perceived as the linguistic realities of ancient Rome. The obvious similarities between Latin and the *volgare* suggested that Latin was either the ancestor or a close cousin of Italian; still, the assumption that – just as now everybody learned Italian at home – in antiquity all layers of society had spoken Latin, was contradicted by the fact that acquiring an elegant Latin nowadays demanded a lengthy educational process which neither now nor in antiquity would have been attainable by a large segment of society. On the contrary, the parallel existence of Latin and Italian spheres in contemporary literature and society suggested the feasibility of similar bilingual arrangements in antiquity, and some hu-

manists tried to deduce arguments for such a bilingualism from the ancient authors. The inquiry into the linguistic situation of ancient Rome was part of a general discussion about the hierarchy of contemporary Latin and the various forms of the *volgare*, respectively – a discussion which is commonly called the *questione della lingua*.¹

While the *questione* itself has generated a large amount of scholarship, the terminology applied by the humanists has provoked less interest, probably because it seems to be fairly uniform. The following paper will focus on one terminological innovation introduced by humanists, the word *vernaculus*, which, while absent in late medieval and early humanists discussions of language, came to occupy a prominent position within the Latin terminology in the course of the fifteenth century, and at the turn of the century entered the lexicon first of Italian, then of other European ‘vernaculars’ (notably English), where it survives until today. While the discussions surrounding the relative position of Latin and the *volgare* will inevitably be present in the following, no attempt will be made to present a coherent picture of the *questione* itself.

Dante

At the intersection of medieval and humanist considerations about the origin of the *volgare* stands Dante, who composed two works concerning the historic development and present state of the *volgare*, the *Convivio* in the vernacular (1304–1307) and the *De vulgari eloquentia* (1304–1305, henceforth *Dve*)² in Latin. Both were interrupted by his work on the *Commedia* and remained unfinished.

The *Dve* traces the origins of the *volgare* back to the dispersion of man at Babel, whence Dante through a series of triadic subdivisions arrives at the *lingua del sì*, the language which uses *si* for ‘yes’, and thus at the Italian vernaculars. With sometimes selfdeprecating irony Dante discusses the local variants of the *lingua del sì*, amongst which the Roman dialect is regarded as the ugliest, a *turpiloquium*. At the top Dante posits a *vulgare aulicum*, a mode of speech which only a friend and he himself have mastered, although the Florentine *volgare* comes close. Latin in this context is a stable secondary system: where the *lingua vulgaris* follows usage and therefore changes continuously, Latin is an artificial system of rules, a *gramatica*, existing in parallel with the vernaculars.³

¹ Fundamental is now Coseriu & Meisterfeld 2003, 117–148 (on Dante), 149–237 (on Italian humanists, incl. copious bibliography). A shorter survey can be found in Marazzini 1993, 231–329, on Dante pp.233–237, on the humanist debate before Bembo pp.237–241.

² All quotations from the *Dve* are taken from Dante 1997.

³ cf. Giustiniani 1979.

The *Dve* remained unacknowledged and probably unknown by humanists until the sixteenth century, when it was discovered by Giorgio Trissino in Padova and printed in an Italian translation in 1529; it has been discussed lately whether Leonardo Bruni knew the work⁴: if so, the knowledge has not left any unequivocal traces.

At the core of the terminology used by Dante is (*lingua*) *vulgaris* as the technical term denoting the Italian dialects.⁵ The Latin *vulgaris* could only with difficulty avoid negative connotations ('worthless', 'uncultured'); the narrower technical sense had its pendant in the Italian word *volgare*, which unlike its Latin counterpart had no negative implications.⁶ The result was an ambiguity in the use of *vulgaris* as a linguistic term, which is best expressed by Gianozzo Manetti (1396–1459) in the *Vita Dantis* (1440): "vulgares, ut aiunt, non vulgares poetae" (poets in the so called *volgare*, but not worthless poets; 39).⁷ Thus, if Dante avoids the pejorative connotations of *vulgaris* in the *Dve*, this is clearly a deliberate restriction; elsewhere he uses the word in its traditional sense including the connotation of inferiority:

Et per hoc patet, quod Comedia dicitur presens opus. Nam si [...] ad modum loquendi [*sc. respiciamus*], remissus est modus et humilis, quia locutio vulgaris in qua et muliercule communicant

(From this it is clear that the present work can be called comedy. For if we consider [...] the mode of expression, it is lowly and humble, since it is the speech of the masses in which even womenfolk converse).⁸

Alternatively, Dante uses *maternus* both in Latin⁹ and Italian¹⁰, which came without the negative connotations.

⁴ Mazzocco 1993, *passim*, esp. pp. 24–38; but cp. the sceptical review of Parker 1995, 620.

⁵ Note the beginning of the *Dve* (1.1): "Cum neminem ante nos de vulgaris eloquentie doctrina quicquam inveniamus tractasse" (Since I find that no one, before myself, has dealt in any way with the theory of eloquence in the vernacular; tr. Botterill in Dante 1997, 3).

⁶ Battaglia, 1961–2002, XII 986–988 (*volgare*): 987 § 5, the only example with possibly negative connotations quoted by Battaglia is from Vespasiano da Bisticci's *Vite* "nello ornato et elegante latino, e non nello idioma volgare" (in ornate and elegant Latin and not in the idiom of the people).

⁷ Quoted from Manetti 2003, 42.

⁸ Dante 1979, 620–621, no. 13 § 31 (letter to Cangrande). The translation closely follows Gilbert 1962, 204, and the Italian translation in Dante 1979.

⁹ *Dve* 6.2 "proprium volgare [...], idest maternam locutionem" (his own *volgare*, i.e. the mother tongue).

¹⁰ In *Purgatorio* 26, Guido Guinizzelli, the Bolognese poet of the *stile nuovo* (fl. 1230–1270), points to Arnaut Daniel (fl. 1180–1200), the Provençal troubadour (26.115–17): "'O frate', disse, 'questi ch'io ti cerno | col dito', e additò un spirto innanzi, | 'fu miglior fabbro del parlar materno'" ('O brother', he said, 'he whom I point out to you', and he pointed at a

Salutati

The terminology used by Dante is fairly representative of early humanism as well. Salutati uses *vulgaris* as a firmly established technical term for the language of the Italian peninsula (*De fato*, 1396–1399):

Nam cum sicut difficillimum sit latinitatis elegantiam in vulgare quopiam transferendo servare, sic etiam et e contra vulgare quamvis mediocriter cultum nunquam vertatur in latinum servando parem ornatum

(As it is very difficult to retain the elegance of Latin in a translation into whatever form of volgare, so even a moderately elegant form of volgare will not retain equal beauty when translated into Latin).¹¹

but also generally for any vernacular language:

nimis etate nostra eloquentie studia negliguntur et iam reges et principes non latine, sed gallice vel suis vulgaribus scribunt

(In our age the study of eloquence is neglected too much, and kings and princes do not write in Latin any more, but in French or their own vernacular languages).¹²

In a rare example he applies it to modern Greek to distinguish it from classical Greek: “Ceterum scio quod de greco in grecum vulgare et de hoc in aragonicum Plutarchum [...] interpretari feceris” (I know that you have had made translations of Plutarch from Greek into vernacular Greek and thence into Aragonian).¹³

Besides *vulgaris*, Salutati also uses *maternus*, when he compares Dante to Vergil and Homer:

sentio tamen alium recte, nisi fallor, tam latiali quam greco preferendum Homero, si latine potuisset, sicut materni sermonis elegantia, cecinisse

(I believe, however, that with good reason somebody else would be preferred to the Latin as well as the Greek Homer, if he could have sung as elegantly in Latin as in his mother tongue).¹⁴

With the choice of *maternus* Salutati subtly hinted at the fact the both Homer and Vergil had sung in their mother tongues – and calling either

soul in front of us, ‘was a better smith of the mother tongue’). Beside Dante, the earliest examples for ital. *materno* meaning ‘in volgare’ are *eleganza materna* (Boccaccio) and *materno sermone* (F. Villani); see Battaglia, 1961-2002, IX 932-33 (materno): 933 §5.

¹¹ Salutati 1985, 192.

¹² Salutati 1891–1911, I 77 (*epist.* 2.9, from 1369).

¹³ Salutati 1891–1911, II 301 (*epist.* 7.11, from 1392 ?).

¹⁴ Salutati 1891–1911, III 491 (*epist.* 12.7, from 1401). The allusion is to Dante, cf. Novati in Salutati 1891–1911, III 491 n. 2.

poet's language a socially inferior *lingua vulgaris* would have been awkward (*graecum vulgare* in any case designated modern Greek). Still, the *lingua materna*, especially of his Italian contemporaries, for Salutati was not necessarily a very cultured idiom; all too often it was used because it made small demands on the speaker:

nec contendo quod illud genus loquendi non possit etiam eleganter artificio quodam regi; sed indignor potius quod minor labor esse videatur maternam sequi dicendo rudem inscitiam quam scolasticam disciplinam

(I do not want to claim that that way of speech [i.e. the *volgare*] could not be governed by elegance and artifice; but I find it upsetting that it is considered less effort to have one's speech follow the clumsy ignorance of the mother tongue than scholarly learning).¹⁵

The recovery of Varro and Cicero

In the context of humanist Latin, *vulgaris* (besides the ingrained ambiguity) came with a further blemish: its technical sense in the examples cited above was not classical.

Classical Latin had no terminology for the coexistence of two distinct languages similar to Latin and *volgare*, even though some mentions of dialectal variation could provide fodder for the humanists. I only mention Asinio Pollio's famous jeer at Livy's – elusive – *patavinitas* (Paduan dialect) reported by Quintilian (*Inst.* 1.5.56); Pollio's malicious comment presupposes the existence of such local variations in the general population; but if they existed at all in the Latin of the elite, they never became obvious enough to be diagnosed, and indeed Pollio's comment is no more than the snobbish application of a Greek literary cliché.¹⁶ In another case of dialectal Latin (transmitted in the *Historia Augusta*), the later emperor Hadrian provoked derision in the senate with his uncultured accent in a speech during his quaestorship.¹⁷

Without an inherent judgement of quality Romans distinguished between foreign and local origin within various areas, using *vernaculus* for the latter,¹⁸ as in the following quotation from Pliny (*Nat.* 14.25): “hactenus potissima nobilitas datur [*uvis*] peculiaribus atque vernaculis Italiae; ceterae advenere” (So far we assign the chief distinction to the vines peculiar and in-

¹⁵ Salutati 1891–1911, I 77 (*epist.* 2.9, from 1369).

¹⁶ Latte 1940, see also Syme 1959, 50–51, Syme 1939, 485, and Walsh 1961, 267–70.

¹⁷ *Hist. Aug. Hadr.* 3.1; see Travis 1953, 175, and McCartney 1927.

¹⁸ On the complex semantic development of *verna* and *vernaculus* in classical Latin see, beside the classical lexica, also Starr 1942.

digenous to Italy. The remaining kinds have come from abroad).¹⁹ Pliny continues the discussion with grapes from Greece and France. *Vernaculus* here means ‘of local or domestic origin’ as opposed to ‘imported from elsewhere’.

In this meaning it could also be applied to language, as was attested in two texts which came to the humanists’ knowledge in the early fifteenth century. One is a passage in Varro’s *De lingua Latina* (5.1.3) where he discusses *vernacula verba* in Latin: “neque omnis origo est nostrae linguae e uernaculis uerbis” (our language is not exclusively based on indigenous words), and he explains this further in 5.12.77: “Aquatilium uocabula animalium partim sunt uernacula, partim peregrina. foris mur(a)ena, quod μύραινα graece, [...]. uernacula ad similitudinem, ut surenae, pectunculi, ungues” (Of the names of water animals some are indigenous, some foreign. From abroad come *muraena*, ‘moray’, which is μύραινα in Greek, [...]; indigenous words point out a likeness, as *surenae* [not identified], *pectunculi* [scallops], *ungues* [razor-clams]).²⁰

The difference here is in origin, not in accessibility or intelligibility. Both kinds of words, *vernacula* as well as *peregrina*, are equally comprehensible in Latin, and they are also equally good Latin. Varro’s *De lingua Latina* was transmitted in a manuscript from Cassino; the text – although not unknown to earlier humanists – became more widely disseminated after the ms. entered the Biblioteca S. Marco in Florence in the early Quattrocento.²¹

A passage in Cicero’s *Brutus* had an even bigger impact on the humanistic discussion about the role of the vernacular in classical antiquity and in the Italian humanists’ linguistic universe. Cicero, too, used *vernaculus* to denote local origin, but differently from Varro, Cicero in the *Brutus* implied a stylistic judgement:

Tum Brutus: Quid tu igitur, inquit, tribuis istis externis quasi oratoribus? Quid censes, inquam, nisi idem quod urbanis? Praeter unum, quod non est eorum urbanitate quadam quasi colorata oratio. Et Brutus: Qui est, inquit, iste tandem urbanitatis color? Nescio, inquam; tantum esse quendam scio. Id tu, Brute, iam intelleges, cum in Galliam veneris; audies tu quidem etiam uerba quaedam non trita Romae, sed haec mutari dediscique possunt; illud est maius, quod in uocibus nostrorum oratorum retinnit quiddam et resonat urbanius. Nec hoc in oratoribus modo apparet sed etiam in ceteris. Ego memini T. Tincam Placentinum hominem facetissimum cum familiari nostro Q. Granio

¹⁹ Rackham 1968, 210.

²⁰ Kent 1938, 75, with modifications.

²¹ Brown 1980, 456.

praecone dicacitate certare. [...] Tinca non minus multa ridicule dicentem Granius obruebat nescio quo sapore vernaculo (170–172).

Then Brutus: “What status do these non-Roman orators have?” “What do you think”, I say, “not the same as the ones from the city? Except that their speech lacks a certain tinge of urbanity.” And Brutus: “What is this color of urbanity?” “I don’t know. But it does exist. You will understand this when you come to Gaul; you will hear words not used in Rome – but these you will be able to forget again. The other is more important: In the voices of our orators there is simply a more urban ring or sound, and this is recognizable not in orators only but in others, too. I recall hearing Titus Tinca of Piacenza, a very amusing man, engaged in a competition of wit with my friend, the herald Quintus Granius. [...] Tinca, although being quite hilarious, was overwhelmed by Granius with a sort of native refinement.”²²

The point Cicero makes is that there exists an especially elegant way of expression proper to urban Rome which, even though it defies exact definition, sets Roman speech apart from its lesser, provincial cousins.

Incidentally, it should be noted that an analogous case was described in Holy Scripture. A passage from Matthew, of course well known to humanists (26:73), attested to dialectal variation in spoken Hebrew.²³ At this point I know of no humanist reaction to this.

Cicero’s *Brutus* was not known in the Middle Ages. It was only discovered in 1421 in Lodi near Milan; the famous codex Laudensis is now lost, but several copies were made, and we know that Flavio Biondo was in the possession of the text at an early date.²⁴

Biondo – Bruni 1435: introduction of *vernaculus*

It may be that the discovery of the *Brutus* provided a stimulus to humanist discussion about the *volgare* and its origin, which crystallized some years later, in March 1435, in a debate amongst members of the papal chancery in Florence; the participants were Biondo Flavio, Antonio Loschi, Poggio

²² The translation follows Hendrickson 1971, with modifications.

²³ *Matthew* 26:73 “et post pusillum accesserunt qui stabant et dixerunt Petro vere et tu ex illis es nam et loquella tua manifestum te facit” (Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away; *Vulgata* 1994, 1570, tr. *Bible* 1980, 972). Note the commentary of Jerome: “Non quod alterius sermonis esset Petrus aut gentis externae – omnes quippe Hebraei erant et qui arguebant et qui arguebatur – , sed quo unaquaeque prouincia et regio habebat proprietates suas et uernaculum loquendi sonum uitare non possit” (not because Peter spoke a different language or was a foreigner – since all were Hebrews, accusers as well as accused – but because every province and region had its properties and cannot avoid a local sound); Hieronymus 1969, 262, ch. 4 ll. 1452–1456.

²⁴ The story of the discovery of the Laudensis has often been told, see e.g. Yon 1964, CXCVII. Westman 1980, XVII. Reeve 1996, 39 and 243 n. 25, and McLaughlin 1996, 230.

Bracciolini, Andrea Fiocchi, Leonardo Bruni and Cencio Rustici.²⁵ They discussed the language of ancient Rome. Biondo gives his version of the discussion in his letter *De verbis Romanae locutionis*, addressed to Bruni, in April of the same year:

Magna est apud doctos aetatis nostrae homines altercatio et cui saepe numero interfuerim contentio, materno ne et passim apud rudem indoctamque multitudinem aetate nostra vulgato idiomate, an grammaticae artis usu, quod latinum appellamus, instituto loquendi more, Romani orare fuerint soliti

(There is an huge discussion in learned circles nowadays, and one which I have often taken part in, as to whether Romans delivered their speeches in our mother-tongue, i.e. the idiom common in our days in the ignorant masses without learning, or employed a regularized manner built on the use of grammar which we call Latin).²⁶

Biondo maintained that the Romans had had a monolingual culture, albeit allowing for variations depending on social status and other factors, so that public speeches – which had to be understood by all – could have been delivered in Latin.

Bruni responds with the tract *An vulgus et literati eodem modo per Terentii Tulliique tempora Romae locuti sint* (Whether the common people and the men of letters spoke the same language in the times of Terence and Cicero, *epist.* 6.10).²⁷ He shifts the debate from public speeches to language use in general: “Ego autem, ut nunc est, sic etiam tunc distinctam fuisse vulgarem linguam a litterata existimo” (I believe that just as now, also then there was a *vulgare* different from the language of literature), that is, some kind of *vulgare*, not necessarily the same as in Bruni’s time.

Both Biondo and Bruni built their theories on the traditional terminology, using both *maternus* and *vulgaris* to designate the mode of speech of the uneducated. The newly discovered conceptual framework of the *Brutus*, however, provided the possibility to describe the *je ne sais quoi* of urban Roman eloquence both classical and contemporary more precisely. Cicero’s *vernaculus* was introduced into the debate by Biondo, when he argued

[...] Latinitatem litteratam, de qua totiens dixi, unicum fuisse idioma romanae multitudini, quae et syllabarum brevitatem longitudinemque in versu sentiret ac urbanitatis sonum saporemque vernaculum et oppidanum genus dicendi internoscere posset

²⁵ See the introduction by Delle Donne 2008. I also found the overview given by O’Rourke 2006, 52–94, very useful.

²⁶ Biondo 2008, 5, §8.

²⁷ Bruni 1741, II 62-68.

(that the often-mentioned written Latin was the only idiom of the Roman population, who could feel long and short syllables in verse and were able to distinguish urban sound and native-tasting words from the small-town way of speaking).²⁸

Biondo uses the Ciceronian phrase *vernaculus sapor* once more when he tries to disprove the argument that Latin grammar was too complicated for the ordinary people. Vestiges of the old ways of speech could still be heard in Roman women:

Eas [*i. mulieres Romanas*] saepenumero adverti, mutua salute obvianti data redditaque, bonam valetudinem ceterasque domus condiciones verbis magna ex parte litteratis vicissim interrogantes, maiorem, ut existimo, quam quae a nostrorum paucis servari possit, urbanitatis et gentis romanae vernaculi saporis proprietatem elegantiamque adhibere

(I have often seen Roman women greeting each other mutually, asking after each other's health and the state of the household in rather refined words and showing in my opinion a greater elegance, urbanity and typical Roman way of speech than even a few of our own townswomen could master).²⁹

The vernacular elegance of Roman speech (*vernaculi saporis* [...] *elegantia* [...]) and the *litterata verba* for Biondo show the descendance of present day *volgare* from the Latin of antiquity. The observable linguistic competence of contemporary Roman women is important for Biondo, since he had specifically centered the discussion on the *sermo maternus*, the language learned from the mothers. Consequently, it appeared plausible to Biondo that Roman children of antiquity had at home learned the inflected Latin literary language instead of the allegedly primitive utterances of the present day *volgare*.

In his response Bruni, too, finds the eloquence of Roman women remarkable: “Denique etiam hodie mulieres romanae iudicio meo elegantissime loquuntur” (Finally, in my opinion nowadays, too, Roman women speak most elegantly).³⁰ Bruni had witnessed a quarrel between two women, which he sums up thus:

Haec illa [*sc. matrona Romana*] puro nativoque romano proferebat sermone, ita ut admodum sim equidem delectatus, cum et verba nitorem gravitatemque sententiae et pronuntiatio ipsa vernaculam quandam haberet suavitatem

²⁸ Biondo, *locut.* 20.5.

²⁹ Biondo, *locut.* 22.4.

³⁰ Bruni, *ep.* 6.10, ed. Tavoni 1984, 216–221: 221.

(This the woman said in pure and native Roman dialect, in a way which was sheer pleasure, because the words were splendid and had a dignity of expression, and the pronunciation itself had a certain local sweetness).³¹

The *volgare* Bruni hears in the streets of Rome is by no means a primitive mode of communication, but rather an attractive (*suavis*) and regionally established (*vernaculus*) way of speaking. Unlike Biondo, Bruni does not regard this as evidence that the *sermo maternus* once had been the inflected system of the Latin of literature. What the present-day eloquence of the Roman women showed for Bruni, was that the speech of mothers and nurses could lay in the children the foundation of an elegance of expression, which could be useful in a refined *volgare* as well as in Latin. The ensuing debate saw most of the humanists agreeing with Biondo; among the few who followed Bruni was notably Lorenzo Valla.

Even though humanists could not agree on the precise nature of the *sermo vernaculus* mentioned by Cicero, they were in accord as to the word itself. The exchange of letters between Biondo and Bruni had established *vernaculus* as a category of a characteristic local way of speaking, and the word remained in the Latin terminology used by subsequent authors.

Developing the Ciceronian Model

Biondo and Bruni had spoken of the *vernaculus sapor* or *vernacula suavitatis*, the distinctive local tinge of the *volgare*, thus following the Ciceronian model closely. The strictly classical usage found few later adherents, such as Andrea Bussi, who spoke of the *vernaculus nitor*, the splendor proper to a language and inimitable by a translator; even as late as the turn of the century Battista Guarini affirms that the figures of speech ‘proper to Greek’ made translation difficult.³²

In the wake of the Ciceronian example, humanists seem to have felt that *vernaculus* had none of the semantic limitations which had restricted the

³¹ *ibid.*

³² Giovanni Andrea Bussi, in the preface of 1469 to the *Noctes Atticae*, explains that the Greek words in Gellius had not been translated in his edition, “quia arduum in primis est, aut verius impossibile, omnem alterius lingue cultum vernaculumque nitorem ac gratiam exprimere” (mainly because it is difficult or in reality impossible to translate the elegance and proper splendour and charm of another language); Bussi 1978, 24, no. 3 (1469). In the same vein, Battista Guarino in a letter from 1494 talks about the typical figures of Greek style, which even Cicero had failed to render adequately in Latin: “cum et facilitatem componendi et dicendi brevitatem et verborum proprietatem et vernaculas sermonis graeci figuras [...] difficile sit interpretari” (because it is difficult to translate the ease of composition, conciseness of speech, precision of expression and the typical figures of Greek); Guarino 2002, 240.

usefulness of *vulgaris*, and it soon took over many of the functions of the latter. It not only came to designate a local propriety of a language of wider diffusion, but was transferred to the language *itself*.

Valla used *vernaculus* for the (non-Latin) idiom of individual speech communities in an inaugural oration from 1455 where he lamented the fragmentation of Italian law, asking rhetorically: “nonne singule pene civitates suum ius civile vernacula lingua condiderunt?” (Does not nearly every single city already have its own civil law in its local language?).³³ And Bartolommeo Platina observes in *De honesta voluptate* from 1467, concerning the *carpanus grossus*, the carp: “Hos Mantuani bulbaros lingua uernacula uocant”³⁴ (These the inhabitants of Mantua call *bulbaro* in the local dialect).³⁵

In these examples *vernaculus* designates the local idiom of a given town or region, a usage still complying with what can be found in classical authors. But in a rapid semantic expansion, after the Biondo-Bruni controversy *vernaculus* became the comprehensive designation for the ‘vernacular’, the general phenomenon of a language other than and often competing with Latin. It does not seem to have unduly disturbed humanists that this newly popular usage was no more classical than the same had been with *vulgaris*.

Valla

Already Valla, when he was drafting the *Elegantiae* in the 1440s, felt the need to give a definition of the newly coined expression *lingua vernacula*:

Vernaculus, vernacula, vernaculum, quod est domi nostrae vel in nostra patria natum – lingua vernacula, quod vulgo dicunt ‘lingua materna’ –; dictum est a ‘verna’, quod est ‘servus domi nostrae natus’, id est, ex nostra ancilla

(Vernaculus, -a, -um, born in our house or country, – e. g., *lingua vernacula*, commonly [or in the *volgare*?] called *lingua materna* –; derived from *verna*, a slave born in our house, i.e. from a female servant).³⁶

I will leave open the question of the exact meaning of *vulgo* (‘commonly’ or ‘in the *volgare*’). What is important in the context of *vernaculus*, is that Valla explicitly equals *lingua vernacula* and *lingua materna*, thus again taking up the points made by Biondo and Brunni about the role of language

³³ Valla 1994, 198.

³⁴ See Battaglia, 1961-2002, II 437: “Bulbaro ‘Carpa’, Deriv. dalla voce dialettale mantovana *bulbar*, di origine incerta.”

³⁵ Platina 1998, 456 (10.53).

³⁶ *Elegantiae linguae Latinae*, 1.5, ed. Valla 1999, I 72.

acquisition at home in early childhood. The derivation of *vernaculus* from *verna*, slave, in the *Elegantiae*, allowed Valla to make an important socio-linguistic point: it defined the *lingua vernacula* not only as a local or regional variant phenomenon, but also as the speech of the uneducated.

Valla presented his views on the Latin language question in greater detail in his polemic against Poggio in the *Apologi*. Poggio, one of the participants of the discussion of 1435 on the side of Biondo, wrote his own account fifteen years after the event.³⁷ He felt that there was absolutely no reason why small children should not have been able to learn Latin, “cum ab ipsa infantia barbarorum filii cum materno lacte vernaculam linguam discant” (since the children of barbarians learn their native language with their mothers’ milk) – these being languages, Poggio adds, which even a grown-up humanist might find difficult to pronounce.

Valla ridicules Poggio’s argument in the *Apologus secundus*. If all the children had grown up speaking like Cicero, excellence in eloquence would not have been praiseworthy, because

si omnes latinum sermonem a matribus nutricibusve discebant, ergo omnes norant, quemadmodum nunc in omnibus civitatibus fieri videmus de sermone vernaculo

(if all had learned Latin from their mothers and nurses, all would have known it, just as is now the case in all towns with their local dialect).³⁸

Vernaculus = generally Italian

In the second half of the fifteenth century *vernaculus* became the comprehensive term for *volgare*, when it was not necessary or possible to distinguish between the individual dialects:

Thus Angelo Decembrio in the *De politia litteraria* (c. 1462) rejects the assumption that *sequester* means *sequax* ‘following’, because in Italian (*vernaculo sermone*) the verb *sequestrare* means ‘to confiscate, to impound’:

Sequester [...] non pro sequaci, quamvis a sequendo deductum. Quo magis miror a litteratis errari, cum ab Italis etiam vernaculo sermone id sequestrari praedicent, quod apothecae more seu pignoris vel depositi causa distinetur, quoad iure civili dirimatur

(*sequester* does not mean ‘*sequax*’ [following], even though it is derived from *sequi* [to follow]. All the more I am surprised by this error of the educated, because Italians in their native language, too, use *se-*

³⁷ Poggio 1984, 239, §5.

³⁸ Valla 1972, 525.

questrari to design something which is put aside as security or deposit, until a case is decided in court).³⁹

Perotti

The first one trying to integrate the newly expanded usage of *vernaculus* with classical usage, was Valla's pupil Niccolò Perotti in his *Cornu copiae*, published posthumously in 1489. The passage is from the commentary to the third epigram of Martial's *Liber epigrammaton* (written in the late 1470s):

Item uerna, seruus domi natus [...] . Ab hoc uernaculus fit; dicitur autem uernaculum quicquid domi nostrae nascitur. Vnde uernaculam linguam dicimus uulgarem, hoc est domi natam, et uernaculum morem domesticum. Vernaculum etiam pro proprio et peculiari capimus. Plinius: "Potissima nobilitas datur [*sc. uvis*] peculiaribus atque uernaculis Italiae". [...]

(Also *verna*, a slave born at home Thence is derived *vernaculus*; we call *vernaculus* everything originating from our home. Therefore we call *lingua vernacula* the common language, that is the one born at home, and the *mos vernaculus* a domestic custom. *Vernaculus* is used also for 'proper' and 'special', as in Pliny: "In highest esteem we hold our own grapes which are proper to Italy").⁴⁰

Perotti – apparently without being aware of the passage from either Cicero's *Brutus* or Varro's *De lingua* – attempted to put the specialized meaning into a larger context. Charlet, the editor of the passage, noted in the *apparatus fontium* that Perotti's definition of *verna* and its derivatives was quite similar to Valla's. There is, however, one important difference: when Perotti thirty years after Valla had formulated his definition took over a large part of it, he substituted *lingua vulgaris* for Valla's *lingua materna*. Perotti ruined what in Valla was a coherent definition; the changes he introduced reflected the fact that in the thirty years since Valla had written the *Elegantiae*, the usage of *vernaculus* as a *terminus technicus* had significantly encroached upon the semantic territory of the older term *lingua vulgaris*. Thus the central part of Perotti's definition: "uernaculam linguam dicimus uulgarem, hoc est domi natam" avoids absurdity only if we understand *vulgaris* as the equivalent of Italian *volgare*, even though Perotti otherwise abstains from using *vulgaris* in this sense (although he does use the adverb *vulgo*).⁴¹

³⁹ Decembrio 2002, 262 (3.27.78).

⁴⁰ *Cornu copiae*, 3.224, ed. Perotti 1989–2001, III 84.

⁴¹ *Cornu copiae*, 2.393: "Est enim proprie uulgus [...] ignobilior multitudo. [...] Vnde uulgarem dicimus uilem ac communem" (*Vulgus* is the primitive masses. *Vulgaris* we use for 'vile' and 'common'); Perotti 1989–2001, II 149.

From the time the *Cornu copiae* was written onwards, *vernaculus* could be used completely synonymously with *vulgaris*. When Filippo Beroaldo in the *Annotationes Centum* from 1488 talks about the *camelopardalis*, he explains:⁴² “Hoc est illud animal quod Italici lingua uernacula gyrapham appellant” (this is the animal which the Italians in the vernacular call *giraffa*; *Annotationes Centum*, 14.1).⁴³ Clearly, *vernaculus* here has become a collective term for the dialects of the Italian peninsula. The word *giraffa* is attested in Italian texts since the thirteenth century; *lingua vernacula* is unspecific, since the animal can hardly have been commonly known and is probably attested only in few variants of the *volgare*.

Equally, when Poliziano in the *Miscellanea* (1489) talks about the poetry in *volgare* of Lorenzo de Medici, he avoids the ‘vulgar’, i.e. negative, connotations of the word *vulgaris*: “Sed et uniuersam [*sc. fabellam de Adonide et Venere*] pulcherrime numeris uernaculis complexus [...] Laurentius Medices” (The whole fable of Venus and Adonis was beautifully treated by Lorenzo de Medici in his vernacular verses; *Miscellanea*, 11.4).⁴⁴

Bembo regards the *volgare* already as a unified system, when in a letter from 1513 to Gianfrancesco Pico he talks about the use to be drawn from “(auctoribus) cum Latinis, tum Graecis, tum certe etiam uernaculis, ut sunt nonnulli excellentes in ea lingua viri” (Latin as well as Greek and of course also vernacular authors, as there are some excellent writers in that language; Bembo, *Epistula*, 1.31).⁴⁵

To designate the common elements of the language of the Italian peninsula theorists since the 1480s also use *Italicus*; the first one seems to have been Bartolomeo Benvoglianti in his work *De analogia* (1481).⁴⁶

⁴² Beroaldo 1995, 70.

⁴³ When Poliziano a year later, in 1489, claims the priority for this identification, he avoids the innovative *vernaculus*, but uses *vulgo* instead (*Miscellanea* 3.2): “Nos olim iam publica praelectione dictauimus uideri eum de chamelopardali, quae uulgo girafa dicitur, sentire” (A long time ago I said in a public lecture that I believe that Horace here means the *chamelopardalus*, called *girafa* in the *volgare*); Poliziano 1553, 228.

⁴⁴ Poliziano 1553, 236 (paragraph numbers from Poliziano 1982); the reference is to Lorenzo de Medici’s *Canzoniere*, 136.

⁴⁵ Bembo 2007, 84–85, tr. Duvick, modified.

⁴⁶ See Coseriu & Meisterfeld 2003, 191: “dictiones [...] tum italice tum latine” (Italian and Latin words), on Benvoglianti *ibid.* 182–191. A notable example of *Italicus* can be found in Sabellicus, preface to the eleventh Ennead (1504) of his *Enneades sive Rapsodiae historiarum*, quoted from Coseriu & Meisterfeld 2003, 180: “Italicus sermo neque ille est qui olim fuit, nec ab eo omnino diversus, sed barbaris uocibus plus minusue adulteratus, ut haec aut illa regio fuit externis gentibus magis obnoxia” (The Italian language is not the one it once was, nor is it altogether different; it has been adulterated more or less with barbarian words, depending in the degree of exposure to foreign influence of the different regions).

From the end of the Quattrocento, in the Latin of the Italian peninsula *vernaculus* was firmly established as a linguistic *terminus technicus*. For the Latin of the late sixteenth century we have a reliable source in the first edition of the *Dizionario della Crusca* from 1612. Its Italian is the result of an intricate compromise between the archaizing postulates going back to Bembo's *Prose della volgar lingua* and the exigencies of contemporary Florentine patriotism. The Latin explanations of the *Dizionario* reflect the vocabulary of an educated contemporary reader; they aim for clarity, but have no stylistic agenda. We find the word *vernaculus* in three entries of the *Dizionario*:

DIVOLGARIZZARE. volgarizzare. Lat. *vertere, vernacula lingua exprimere*.

VOLGARE. Sust. linguaggio, idioma vivo, e che si favella. Lat. *lingua vernacula, sermo*.

VOLGARMENTE, e VULGARMENTE. In volgare, comunamente. Lat. *vulgò, lingua vernacula*.⁴⁷

In these definitions it is easy to see where the attractiveness of the term *vernaculus* lay: The existence of two distinct Latin terms allowed a disambiguation: the ambiguity of the Latin *vulgaris* was avoided by reducing *vulgo* to mean only 'commonly, generally'; the ablative *lingua vernacula* replaced *vulgo* for the technical meaning 'in the *volgare*'.

***Vernaculus* = language other than Latin**

At the end of the fifteenth century the meaning of *vernaculus* rapidly expanded to signify any European language other than Latin. In an example from 1492 Ermolao Barbaro still tries to reconcile the new meaning 'vernacular' with the classical 'local, regional, typical': "Quod autem paulo post Carban Torathe scribitur, extat hodieque sed Carpentoracte nominatur, et barbari Galliarum sermone vernaculo Carpentras" (Somewhat later this town is called Carban Torathe, it exists still today under the name Carpentoracte, and the barbarians call it in the native language of Gaul Carpentras; *Castigationes Pliniana*, I 3.54.2).⁴⁸

Often it can only be inferred from the context which language (other than Latin) is actually meant, as in the following example from the introduction to the French version of the statutes of the Knights of St. John (1493):

verum quia variis vernaculis linguis commilitones nostri pro genitales [progenitales *ed.*] soli more utuntur nec latine familiares existunt [...],

⁴⁷ *Crusca* 1612.

⁴⁸ Barbaro 1493–99, I 96.

necessum fuit volumen stabilimentorum lingua latina editum in vernaculam linguam vertere

(but because our comrades speak different vernacular languages according to their birth place and are not familiar with Latin [...], it was necessary to translate the book of statutes published in Latin into the vernacular).⁴⁹

As becomes clear from the context, the ‘vernacular’ language in this case is French (*huiusmodi stabilimentorum volumen in gallicanam linguam versum, ibid.*). *Vernaculus* is also used as a synonym for ‘French’ in an example from 1495 taken from the French theorist and publisher Guillaume Guerson:

Cum hiis enim figuris alie hoc tempore adduntur scilicet hamate, que lingua vernacula dicuntur crochees, et dramate, que etiam lingua galica dicuntur fusees

(To these figures nowadays others are added, the so-called *hamate*, which in the vernacular are called *crochees*, and the *dramate*, which in French are called *fusees*).⁵⁰

One of the earliest examples from the Germanic area comes from Jakob Wimpfeling’s *Adolescentia* (Strassburg 1500):

Itidem mihi facere videntur fratres Ioannis episcopi Vangionum, qui [...] non [...] otio vacant, sed optimis litteris vel in vernacula lingua strenue indulgent

(The same behaviour is shown by the brothers of bishop Dalburg, who are not idle, but show great zeal for the letters, albeit in the vernacular).⁵¹

The ‘vernacular’ here is presumably some form of German. Soon the new meaning of *vernaculus* was firmly established also in the Latin of humanists outside the Italian peninsula, as we see from a letter written by Erasmus in 1514 where he mentions the advice by a friend, the prior of the Augustinians of Gouda, to pursue a bishop’s service rather than life in the monastery, “because he knew my mind and the ways of his little brethren” (addens se nosse et animum meum et suorum fraterculorum mores); Erasmus adds “nam iis utebatur verbis lingua vernacula” (those were his words in the vernacular).⁵²

⁴⁹ *Stabilimenta* 2007, 65.

⁵⁰ Guerson c. 1495, d.iii^v, cited from *Thesaurus Musicarum Latinarum*, URL: http://www.chmtl.indiana.edu/tml/15th/GUEUT_TEXT.html (12.12.2009).

⁵¹ Wimpfeling 1965, 224; cp. also *ibid.* n. 50. I found the quotation originally in Drücke 2001, 25.

⁵² Erasmus 1906–1948, I 571 (*ep.* 296).

Transition into other languages

By the turn of the century, we find the first examples of *vernaculus* in the sense ‘in the vernacular’ entering languages other than Latin. The transition to the Italian *vernacolo* can be traced to the verse translation of Columbus’ *Letter about the newly found islands* composed in 1493 by Giuliano Dati (1445–1524), *La storia della inventione delle nuove insule di Channaria indiane*, where the Latin phrase appears inserted into a vernacular context:

Queste cose alte, degne, magne e mire,
che se tu leggi, tu le trouerrai
in uernacula lingua & in latino [...].

(Such things, lofty, worthy, august, and wondrous, you will be able to read here in the vernacular and in Latin)⁵³

In this text the *vernacula lingua* is synonymous with *volgare*, as we can see in the colophon of the same text (printed in Florence 1495): “Finita lastoria della inuentione delle nuoue isole dicannaria indiane [...] tradocta di latino inuersi uulgari” (End of the history of the discovery of the Indian Canary islands translated from Latin into vernacular verses).

Still, since *vernacolo* was a new word in Italian, not everybody was comfortable using it. Antonio de Ferraris in the preface to his *Esposizione del Pater Noster* (1504–8) calls Italian the *parlar vernaculo*, adding “as others call it”: “Intendo dunque secondo ’l mio parlar patrio o, secondo che altri dicono, vernaculo esponer a VS. la orazione domenicale.”⁵⁴

A hundred years later the word reached English. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the earliest example is from William Barlow’s (d. 1613) *A defence of the articles of the Protestants religion*. Barlow warns the reader against some representatives of the “Romish clergy”:

Yet these writ in Latine, & so the learned alone, if wauering, might be peruerted; [...] but of late, a vernacular pen-man, an Abyßian Locust [...], hauing translated them into English [...] hath scattered them abroad in our vulgar tongue, that so the meanest idiote [...] might hardly escape without daunger or infection.⁵⁵

Another, from 1661, is from Joseph Glanvill’s (1636–1680) *The vanity of dogmatizing*:

Only to give an hint more of this verbal emptiness [of the philosophic principles of peripateticism]; a short view of a *definition* or two will be current evidence: which, though in *Greek* or *Latin* they amuse us,

⁵³ vv. 36–38, Dati 1957, 36.

⁵⁴ quoted from Battaglia 1961–2002, XXI 788.

⁵⁵ Barlow 1601, 2.

yet a *vernacular translation* unmasks them; and if we make them speak *English*, the cheat is transparent.⁵⁶

In these examples there appears an opposition between Latin and English, i.e., between the arcane language of theology or philosophy and the commonly known language of everyday use. The difference between the two is not geographical – the “Romish clergy” against whom Glanvill warns, are “homeborne fugitives”⁵⁷ – but a disparity in accessibility, emphasizing the contrast between the commonly known vernacular and the esoteric Latin.

As we have seen, the evolution of the meaning of *vernaculus* in early modern Latin is closely connected with the complex shift of the status of Latin in Italian society and the increasing prominence (and coalescence) of the vernacular idioms of Italy and Europe in general: in Cicero the word had designated an especially attractive segment of Latin, the language of urban Rome; it was transferred by Biondo and Brunni to the Italian spoken by admittedly uncultured segments of society in Rome (in parallel with the language spoken by the same strata of society in antiquity). Then it was applied to the dialects of Italian towns around the peninsula, was transferred to mean ‘Italian’ as opposed to Latin, and finally ‘any modern language other than Latin’. At the end of this trajectory it entered other languages and came to signify regional idioms as opposed to Latin as the language of international communication and of the educated.

In our days Latin has for a long time ceased to be a significant means of international communication. Still, many of the humanists’ arguments referring to local prestige, to regional identities as articulated through a common language have not lost their relevance. We are the heirs not only of a conceptual framework, but also of a terminology which promoted a cultural continuity, reaching from the inter-regional and international Latin culture of the Quattro- and Cinquecento to the present day where the exigencies of efficient international communication (conducted in our days mostly in English) often appear to threaten regional and national identities which articulate themselves through local and regional vernaculars.

⁵⁶ Glanvill 1661, 156.

⁵⁷ Glanvill 1661, 1.

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