The Routledge History of the Renaissance

William Caferro

“By imitating our nurses”

Publication details
Eugenio Refini
Published online on: 30 Mar 2017

How to cite: Eugenio Refini. 30 Mar 2017, “By imitating our nurses” from: The Routledge History of the Renaissance Routledge
Accessed on: 27 Dec 2018

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
As is well known, French philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) was educated as a Latin native speaker. Or, at least, this was his father’s intention. According to Montaigne’s own version of the story in the essay De l’institution des enfants (Of the institution and education of children), until the age of six Michel was solely exposed to Latin language.¹ In fact, a German teacher who did not speak any French was hired specially to “naturally” train the child in Latin. Montaigne’s father wished to spare his son the strenuous and long experience of acquiring Latin as a foreign language, in which people usually spent most of their time and energy, thus being prevented from equalling the knowledge of the ancients.² Put in the fortunate condition to be “naturally” conversant with Latin, Michel would be ready to fully commit himself to the acquisition of knowledge as of his very youth. By learning Latin “without art, without bookes, rules, or grammar, without whipping or whining,” — which were the usual components in the study of classical languages — Montaigne’s experience proved rather extraordinary.³ Not only was he able to enjoy Ovid in the original while other children of his age would read vernacular chivalric novels, but the entire household took advantage from the situation:

It were strange to tell how every one in the house profited therein. My Father and my Mother learned so much Latine, that for a need they could understand it, when they heard it spoken, even so did all the household servants, namely such as were neerest and most about me. To be short, we were all so Latinized, that the townes round about us had their share of it.⁴

Yet the inevitable anachronism of this experiment came to light quickly: as soon as Michel moved to boarding school, his allegedly ‘natural’ skills in Latin were replaced by a new proficiency in the vernacular, as if the order of nature was restored.

In its paradoxical outcome, the episode illustrates the complexity of the relationship between Latin and the vernacular in the Renaissance, particularly the dynamics between ‘nature’ and ‘artifice’ that is at the core of contemporary debates on language. Within a society that, from the Middle Ages to the modern period, has been constantly experiencing forms of multilingualism, the interaction of Latin and the European vernaculars — often
described in terms of conflict – proves a very slippery field of enquiry. For centuries Latin as the language of both religious and intellectual authorities faced the concurrent development of vernacular languages as the natural expression of the many entities that made up the multifaceted cultural geography of Europe. Within such a complex process, it is undeniable that the Renaissance marked a turning point in the ways in which the relation between Latin and the vernaculars was conceived and described. Yet, far from producing univocal patterns, discourses on language witness to a variety of trends, informed by both overlaps and irreconcilable views. Particularly, debates on language do convey conflicts of culture: not only Latin against the vernaculars, but also humanism (i.e. the rebirth of classical Latin) against scholasticism (i.e. the Latin medieval tradition), as well as vernaculars against each other. This chapter will not be able to answer the many questions solicited by such a manifold phenomenon. However, by exploring the ways in which the discourse on language was shaped in Italy between the age of Dante and the sixteenth century, the chapter focuses on the opposition nature–artifice as a key to understanding the cultural legitimation of the vernaculars on a larger, European scale.

Paving the way for the vernacular turn: Dante’s reflection on language

In 1309 something exceptional happened in Siena, where the officers of the commune translated the Latin constitution of the city into the Italian vernacular. A copy of the so-called Costituto volgare would always be publicly on display: written in large-format letters, easily legible and well shaped, copied on parchment of good quality in order to ensure the durability of the codex, the constitution was meant to be available to the poor and to those people who did not have any Latin in order to let them act according to the laws. The term used in the Costituto to refer to Latin is “grammatica.” As a language built on grammatical rules, Latin stands opposite the vernaculars, commonly perceived as languages devoid of the linguistic structures that made Latin teachable and allegedly stable through time. The contrast between grammatica and the vulgar tongue was the theoretical premise that informed the coeval practice of translating Latin texts into the vernacular, as is suggested by several translators’ prefaces to thirteenth- and fourteenth-century volgarizzamenti. In his introduction to the Fiore di rettorica (Flower of rhetoric) – a loose translation of Rhetorica ad Herennium with excerpts from Cicero’s De inventione – Bono Giamboni (1240–1292) explained that laymen were excluded from the study of rhetoric because they were unable to read Latin. In order to overcome this obstacle, he decided to embark on the “painful” project of providing them with bits of the discipline in the vernacular. The painfulness of the endeavor was due to the difficulty of unpacking the subtleness of the topic in the vernacular, which – because of its roughness – was considered unable to express the same linguistic qualities that Latin was capable of.

Yet to translate from Latin into the vernacular meant to reach out to a wider audience, thus fostering the development of new communities of readers outside the Latinate circles of scholars in the universities and the religious schools. The ideological and political implications of a somewhat revolutionary linguistic choice – implicit in statements such as Bono Giamboni’s – were crucial to the strategy deployed by the Sienese Costituto of 1309, which, at least in theory, would allow a wider participation in the city’s jurisdictional life. Interestingly enough, those were the same years of Dante Alighieri’s far-reaching reflection on the relationship between Latin and the vernacular, which – moving from similar premises – would
pave the way for a veritable turn in the ways in which the status of vernacular languages vis-à-vis Latin was conceived and theorized.

Despite their initially modest impact on Dante’s contemporaries, both the Convivio (The banquet) (1304–1307) and the De vulgari eloquentia (On vernacular eloquence) (1304–1305) played a key role in the elaboration of linguistic discourses in the Renaissance. Dante’s take on the cultural and ideological conflict that informed the relationship between Latin and the vernacular differed from the most typical approaches of his time. Instead of just focusing on the assumption of an insuperable qualitative divide between Latin and the vernacular, Dante addressed the reflection on language through a double lens: on the one hand, he discussed the ethical and political role of linguistic choices within the historical context in which he was living; on the other hand, he situated his analysis within a wider reflection on the philosophy of language. What is common to both perspectives, respectively embodied by the Convivio and the De vulgari eloquentia, is the conscious claim that the vernacular – as opposed to Latin – the natural option for men and women. The vernacular, that is the language we acquire “by imitating our nurses,” deserves both our fullest appreciation and the commitment to enhance its beauty.

As we shall see, Dante’s ideas resounded widely in the Renaissance debate on the relation between Latin and the vernacular, particularly in the sixteenth century, when the debate itself influenced concurrent discussions internal to the vernacular context such as the so-called questione della lingua (controversy on language). In fact, one conflict fed the other, and the rise of humanism in the fifteenth century did complicate things. The opposition between Latin and the vernacular that lay behind the Sienese Costituto and Dante’s defense of the vulgar tongue turned into something even more controversial at the time of the rebirth of classical Latin. Walking in the footsteps of the ancients, most humanists would harshly criticize both medieval Latin (considered as a corruption of Cicero’s language) and the vernacular (labeled as the language of the illiterates). Yet Latinate humanism paradoxically contributed to the progressive acknowledgement of the virtues of the vernacular. It was in fact by challenging common assumptions about its inferiority that advocates of the vernacular managed to legitimate its status and use. Most of their arguments were built on the same ideas that Dante championed in the early fourteenth century, particularly the notion of naturalness and the expressive potential of the vernacular.

If it would be misleading to read Dante’s reflection on language through the lens of later developments in the field, it is however undeniable that Dante distanced himself from contemporary approaches to the topic, particularly when the relationship between Latin and vernacular is concerned. He would have probably shared the political and ideological end that informed the Commune of Siena’s decision to translate the Costituto (namely the idea of involving a wider public in the civic life of the city), but he would have almost certainly disapproved the means. As convincingly argued by Alison Cornish, Dante’s take on the very notion of translation is problematic and challenges the ideology behind the contemporary blossoming of vulgarizzamenti (literally, vernacular translations).

Dante’s harsh criticism of Taddeo Alderotti’s vernacular translation of the Summa Alexandrinorum in the Convivio is emblematic of this point of view. According to Dante, Taddeo’s translation of the famous compendium of Aristotle’s Ethics from the Latin version of Hermannus Alemannus (probably completed around 1260) is a bad example of how to use the vulgar tongue. Given the larger context of the passage, which focuses on the reasons why Dante has decided to write the Convivio in Italian rather than in Latin, the reference to Taddeo Alderotti (1210–1295) is of particular interest: in fact, despite Dante’s
opinion, the vernacular version of the compendium was widely read across Europe. As is well known, the text reappeared in French as part of Brunetto Latini’s Tresor (The treasure), one of the most successful encyclopedias of the later Middle Ages, written during the author’s French exile between 1260 and 1266. Furthermore, the Tresor – soon translated from the original French into Italian – intermingled with the textual transmission of Taddeo’s compendium and contributed to the vernacular spread of Aristotelian ethics that informed civic discourses in the Italian cities. 

Within such a frame, Cornish’s suggestion that targets of Dante’s criticism include Brunetto Latini’s choice to write the Tresor in French rather than in Italian, is a compelling one and contributes to a better understanding of the author’s take in the Convivio. Not only does Dante challenge the widespread phenomenon of the volgarizzamenti, which, in a way, mimic Latin without a real commitment to enhance the vernacular, but he also criticizes those authors who prefer other vernaculars to their own.

Dante’s argument in the Convivio is a subtle one. While acknowledging the superiority of Latin in terms of nobility, virtue, and beauty, Dante provides a philosophical legitimation for his use of the vulgar tongue. Since the Convivio is a commentary on Dante’s own vernacular songs, to comment on them in Latin would introduce a disproportion in the relationship between the text and the commentary (which is supposed to be subordinate to the text itself). If this argument is a logical one, Dante’s following remarks lead to a more profound reassessment of the cultural values of the vernacular. First, it speaks to a much larger audience than Latin does, which means that the transmission of knowledge through the vulgar tongue will have a wider impact on society, thus leading more people towards science and virtue. Second – and we get here to an idea that will be key to the Renaissance defense of the vernacular – the use of the vulgar tongue is justified by the natural affection we feel for it. Speaking for himself, Dante outlines a very personal experience, but his arguments lead the readers to perceive this individual account as a model which does apply to everybody: it is through their conversation in the vernacular that Dante’s parents met, interacted and eventually generated him; also, it is by means of the vernacular that Dante moved his first steps down the path of science and knowledge – in fact, it is through the vernacular that he made his acquaintance with Latin, thus preparing himself for higher forms of knowledge.

For all these reasons, Dante feels a natural inclination to foster the growth of his mother tongue, which can be achieved by seeking the stability that is typical of “grammatical” languages such as Latin.

As shown by, among others, Gianfranco Fioravanti, Dante’s manifesto goes beyond a generic discussion of language. The commitment to realize the expressive potentials of the volgare is in fact part of an agenda that considers the transmission of knowledge as crucial to the ‘architectural’ function that the ruling class is supposed to embody in society. That is why the definition of the audience that Dante addresses in the Convivio is so important to the understanding of the work. After criticizing the numerous scholars who “do not acquire learning for its own use but only insofar as through it they may gain money or honor,” Dante identifies his targeted audience as those who because of the world’s wicked neglect of good have left literature to those who have changed it from a lady into a whore; and these noble persons comprise princes, barons, knights, and many other noble people, not only men but women, of which there are many in this language who know only the vernacular and are not learned.
By focusing on the aristocracy, accused of being responsible for the cultural and political decline of Italy, Dante places his reflection on language in the reality of his own time, thus stressing the performative function that the choice of the vernacular entails.

From a slightly different perspective, the celebration of the vernacular in the De vulgari eloquentia adds yet another layer to Dante’s discussion. If the Convivio, despite its innovative outcomes, shares the traditional idea of a qualitative divide between Latin and the vernacular, De vulgari eloquentia reassesses the relationship between the two by affirming the natural and chronological priority of the vernacular. We know all too well that Dante’s reconstruction of the origin of languages is faulty, particularly his idea that Latin was an artificial language created in order to cope with the progressive and unavoidable evolution of the natural ones. As we shall see, the assumption of a “diglossia” that, as early as in Roman times, would oppose grammatical Latin to a non-grammatical language, namely the vernacular, would later be used by some humanists to prove the higher value of Latin. Dante’s take on this issue is different, for he uses the very notion of “grammatical languages” to justify the need for the definition of a similarly stable form of vernacular. It is in fact through art (that is by means of rules) that a natural language can be granted the same status that the so-called locutiones regulatae have. Even if it is true that, by committing himself to the identification of the ‘ideal’ Italian vernacular, Dante moves quickly back from the natural to the artificial, his premise is revolutionary. First, he consciously applies the notion of eloquence to the vernacular, acknowledging that eloquence in the vernacular is “necessary to everyone – for not only men, but also women and children strive to acquire it, as far as nature allows.” As such, vernacular eloquence deserves to be enhanced, so that people can benefit from their communication skills. Second, and more importantly, Dante provides a definition of vulgaris locutio that, in its priority over Latin, entails the opposition between nature and art:

I call ‘vernacular language’ that which infants acquire from those around them when they first begin to distinguish sounds; or, to put it more succinctly, I declare that vernacular language is that which we learn without any formal instruction, by imitating our nurses. There also exists another kind of language, at one remove from us, which the Romans called gramatica [grammar] … Few, however, achieve complete fluency in it, since knowledge of its rules and theory can only be developed through dedication to a lengthy course of study. Of these two kinds of language, the more noble is the vernacular: first, because it was the language originally used by the human race; second, because the whole world employs it, though with different pronunciations and using different words; and third because it is natural to us, while the other is, in contrast, artificial.

Whereas the gramatica is the result of “formal instruction,” hence limited to those who have a chance to study it, the vernacular is the language to which we are all naturally exposed. This makes the vernacular nobler than the gramatica, which partially contradicts what Dante argued in the Convivio. The contradiction, however, is only apparent, for the perspective of the author’s discussion has changed. The nobility of the vernacular is in fact grounded in an ontological argument, which does not affect the idea of regulated languages such as Latin as a model to look at in the process of carving the literary use of the vulgar tongue. Yet Dante’s argument was indeed an innovative one and – backed up by the author’s own poetical experience in the Divine Comedy – did open a new chapter in the history of the relationship between Latin and the vernacular.
Latin humanism and the vernacular: conflict and interaction

The usual narrative about the establishment of the vernacular as a language suitable for literary purposes identifies Petrarch (1304–1374) and Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) as those who, along with Dante, laid the foundations for the legitimation of the vulgar tongue. However, fully conversant with both Latin and Italian, Boccaccio and Petrarch approached their bilingualism in different ways. If Boccaccio’s writings, the *Decameron* in particular, embody at its best the ‘new’ vernacular society of medieval Europe, Petrarch’s scholarly and literary production paves the way for the humanist turn. Emblematic of Petrarch’s attitude towards languages is his willingness to obtain the laurel wreath as a Latin poet, to say nothing of the Latin title – *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (Fragments of vulgar/vernacular things) – given to the poetical achievement that, contrary to his stated plans, would make him one of the most influential poets ever. Petrarch’s Latin is surely not Dante’s. What distinguishes Petrarch’s consciously humanist approach from Dante’s relation to the classics is, among other things, the poet’s commitment to restore the style of the ancients, thus introducing the opposition between medieval Latin and classical Latin that would prove crucial to the intellectual experience of humanism. Petrarch’s attitude towards the Latinate cultural elite represented by university professors who, despite their alleged acquaintance with the classics, are far from fully understanding the importance of eloquence, is in fact a veritable manifesto of new ideas about the epistemological potential of languages. According to Petrarch, it is impossible to appropriate the teachings of the ancients without appreciating, appropriating, and, to some extent, re-enacting their use of language – an approach that differentiates him from scholasticism.

This humanist shift, which, at least in Petrarch’s own terms, was not meant to denigrate the role and the legitimacy of the vernacular, had a strong impact on cultural developments of the following century. By engaging in a tenacious fight for the rebirth of classical knowledge through the rebirth of classical languages (Latin in the first place, followed by a renewed interest in Greek), humanism tended to set aside the momentum that had informed Dante’s claim to the enhancement of the vernacular. Within this context, the experience of Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444) and his fellow humanists in early-fifteenth-century Florence is pivotal. Bruni’s ideas on classical languages are emblematically witnessed by his commitment as a translator. In particular, his translations of Aristotle – along with his treatise on the theory and practice of translation – reveal a new approach to language as a tool for knowledge. Through a harsh criticism of the medieval Latin translations of Aristotle, responsible for the barbarous linguistic shape that makes the philosopher’s works unreadable and almost impossible to understand, Bruni commits himself to an entire program of new Latin translations. Imitating the style of Cicero, but also revising the interpretation of some Aristotelian passages, Bruni’s versions of Aristotle generated one of the most famous controversies of the time, namely the debate with the Spanish priest Alfonso de Cartagena (1384–1456), a strong supporter of the previous Latin translations of Aristotle, which constituted the core of university curricula across Europe.

If, on the one hand, Leonardo Bruni’s campaign against the barbarous Latin embodied by scholasticism aimed at recovering the intellectual value of ancient eloquence, it entailed, on the other hand, a rather negative judgement of the vernacular, perceived as incapable of reaching the qualitative heights of Latin. Similar thoughts informed the 1435 debate on the origins of the vulgar tongue. Whereas the humanist Biondo Flavio in his *De verbis Romanae
locutionis (On the words of the Latin language) assumed that the vernacular was the result of
the progressive and historically justifiable decline of Latin, Bruni as well as other humanists
shared the idea of an original “diglossia” that, in Rome, would oppose grammatical Latin to
a non-grammatical vulgar tongue. As mentioned above, Dante used a similar argument in
the De vulgari eloquentia to legitimate the notion itself of vernacular eloquence. On the con-
trary, Bruni employed the “diglossia” argument to focus on the restoration of classical Latin
as the main condition for literary engagement.34

However, as shown by recent scholarship in the field, it would be misleading to think of
Bruni, and of humanism more generally, as impervious to the concurrent development of
the vulgar tongue as a language suitable for knowledge.35 Bruni’s own ideas on language
are more articulate than has often been thought. In the Dialogi ad Petrum Paulum Histrum
(Dialogues to Petrus Paulus Histrus) (1401), for instance, Dante is both criticized and praised.
The decision to write the Divine Comedy in Italian (which had been already the polemical
target of the proto-humanist schoolmaster Giovanni del Virgilio in Dante’s own day) was,
according to Niccolò Niccoli, one of the interlocutors of Bruni’s dialogue, motivated by
Dante’s lack of Latin skills.36 Yet in the second book of the Dialogi, Bruni praises Dante’s ver-
nacular poetry as an oral language. The distinction between lingua and sermo, Bruni explains,
is double-sided.37

The ambiguous position of a humanist such as Bruni in the debate on languages is also
suggested by the vernacular lives of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio that he wrote late in
his life and which, along with other works (including poetry), witness to the humanist’s
preoccupation with writing in the vernacular.38 The multifaceted dynamics that inform
the use of Latin and the vernacular in fifteenth-century Florence (but the same might
be said of other places) is nonetheless confirmed by the impact that Bruni’s own work
in the field of Latin translation had on contemporary vernacular culture. His ‘human-
ist’ version of Aristotle’s Ethics (1417), for instance, was soon translated into Italian by
a renowned schoolteacher called Bernardo Nuti, whose professional career was indeed
at the crossroads of Latinate and vernacular cultures.39 Interestingly enough, Nuti’s
Italian version of the Ethics, which enjoyed a significant circulation among lay readers in
fifteenth-century Florence, was commissioned by a Spanish humanist, Nuño de Guzman.
The detail is worth mentioning because the original manuscript sent to the Spaniard –
now at the Beinecke Library – played a crucial role in the vernacular dissemination of
Aristotle’s Ethics in late-fifteenth-century Spain. It was in fact the main source of a suc-
cessful compendium that stands out among the works that contributed to the spread of
philosophy in the vernacular.40 The case of the Spanish afterlife of Nuti’s translation
shows how intricate and not mutually exclusive the paths of Latin humanism and ver-
nacular culture were.

The ideal example to mention when discussing the humanist interaction of Latin and
the vernacular is undoubtedly the literary production of Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472).
Alberti, the embodiment of what later historiography would label the “Renaissance man,”
was an acclaimed artist, a renowned writer in both Latin and Italian, a poet as well as a
provocative thinker. He was also the figure who gathered the various threads that we have
outlined so far within a single cultural program based on a multilingual notion of human-
ism. At the time of Bruni’s assertive celebration of Latin in the Dialogi, Leon Battista Alberti
organized an event that marked another important step in the legitimation of the vernac-
ular: the Certame coronario of 1441.41 The poetical contest, which took place in Florence,
revolved around the topic of amicitia (friendship), a signature topic in the classical tradition,
and was open to poets eager to write in Italian. Not surprisingly, the award was not assigned. The judges, chosen among the secretaries of Pope Eugenius IV, did not find any of the participants worthy. If the outcome of the certame tells us a lot about the widespread bias against the vernacular within the humanist milieu, it did not undermine Alberti’s effort to harmonize Latinate and vernacular cultures.

The project had been a major concern of Alberti’s for many years, as suggested by the various occasions on which he reflected upon it. In the preface to the third book of his philosophical dialogues Della famiglia (Books of the family) (1436–1437), for example, Alberti challenges the idea that Latin was an artificial language and, sharing Biondo’s theory of the evolution and decline of languages, combines his passion for the classics and the legitimation of the vernacular. On the one hand, the loss of classical Latin after the fall of the Roman empire is said to be much worse than the end of the empire itself (Alberti obviously endorses the cultural value attributed by his fellow humanists to the language of the ancients); on the other hand, by introducing the notion of “language use,” Alberti explains historically the origins of the vernacular and prioritizes the communicative function of language that the vulgar tongue shares with all other languages, classical Latin included. Ancient writers aimed to be understood by their audiences; likewise, in order to benefit as many people as possible in modern times, the learned ones ought to commit themselves to the improvement of the vernacular.

Alberti himself offered his own contribution. Sometime around 1440, he authored the first ever Italian grammar. The so called Grammatichetta, which remained in manuscript and did not circulate widely, is a veritable milestone in the history of the Italian language. Consistent with the author’s ideas on language use, Alberti’s work is not prescriptive. The vernacular, like Greek and Latin, is indeed made of grammatical structures. Its status was not inferior to that of classical languages, as Alberti argues in the prologue:

I believe that those who argue that Latin was not common to all Latin people, but only peculiar to certain erudite scholars, as we find it in only a few people today, will acknowledge their fault by reading this booklet of ours. In it, I have gathered the use of our language in very short annotations. A similar project was pursued by ingenious scholars first among the Greeks and later among the Latins, and they called this kind of annotations – which would allow people to write and speak without making mistakes – ‘grammar.’ Please do read and understand what this art is in our language.

By insisting on the notion of the use of language as well as its ethical duty to enhance the vernacular in order to realize its communicative potentials, Alberti updates Dante’s linguistic project in the light of his humanist training. Also, by asking himself questions about which vernacular to use in his own time, Alberti touches on a topic that will be crucial to the following century’s debate on language.

**A fruitful compromise: Latin and the questione della lingua**

As noted in the previous paragraph, Alberti’s Grammatichetta did not circulate in the fifteenth century. Dante’s seminal writings on language were not widely read either, at least until the appearance of the editiones principes: the Convivio, the manuscript tradition of which was limited to erudite circles, was first printed in 1490; the De vulgari eloquentia, the original
Latin version of which would not be published until Jacopo Corbinelli’s Parisian edition of 1577, first appeared in an Italian translation by Gian Giorgio Trissino (1478–1550) in 1529. In fact, the translation was part of a wider project that Trissino was pursuing systematically. He not only tried to “canonize” the vernacular through the lens of the most illustrious classical genres that had newly entered the literary debate via the rediscovery of Aristotle’s *Poetics* (namely tragedy and epic), but he also proposed a grammatical and orthographical codification of the Italian vernacular in both his *Grammaticetta* and in the dialogue *Il Castellano* (1529). The publication of Trissino’s version of Dante’s *De vulgari eloquentia* could not be more timely. Only four years earlier, in 1525, Pietro Bembo had published a Ciceronian dialogue entitled *Prose della volgar lingua* (On the vernacular language), one of the most influential texts in the European Renaissance.

The publication of Trissino’s version of Dante’s *De vulgari eloquentia* could not be more timely. Only four years earlier, in 1525, Pietro Bembo had published a Ciceronian dialogue entitled *Prose della volgar lingua* (On the vernacular language), one of the most influential texts in the European Renaissance.

Between the two, in 1528, Baldassare Castiglione’s *Libro del Cortegiano* (Book of the courtier) – another Renaissance bestseller-to-be – was also printed in Venice. These works – along with which we should also recall Niccolò Machiavelli’s *Discorso o dialogo intorno alla nostra lingua* (Discourse or dialogue on our language) – are the key texts in the debate traditionally known as *questione della lingua*.

Given the existence of many Italian vernaculars, which – as Dante had pointed out in the *De vulgari eloquentia* – vary in both space and time, what kind of “Italian” should be identified as the *volgare* par excellence? This was the question that, combining literary issues with cultural politics and linguistic ideology, was at the core of the debate. Bembo’s project, which would soon become a sort of cultural dictatorship, found in Petrarch and Boccaccio the two models to imitate in order to attain excellent results in vernacular writings. The idea of imposing a literary and linguistic canon from two centuries earlier was criticized by those who preferred to privilege the use of contemporary Italian: this was the case of Machiavelli’s *Discorso* that, consistently with Alberti’s legacy, considered the current language spoken in Florence as the best option. Less inclined to favor a specific dialect, Castiglione’s “courtly” theory acknowledged the centrality of the Tuscan tradition, but suggested opening it to a broader spectrum of influences. Closer to Dante, however, was Trissino’s theory, based on the idea of constructing a somewhat artificial vernacular by drawing on the various Italian vernaculars.

While there is no way to address here all the many facets of the *questione della lingua*, it will be useful to compare the reflection on the vernacular with the concurrent status of Latin. From this point of view, Bembo’s *Prose* is particularly instructive. The first book of the dialogue is in fact primarily aimed at convincing one of the interlocutors, the renowned humanist Ercole Strozzi, of the legitimacy of the literary use of the *volgare*. The main argument employed by Bembo is the opposition between the vernacular as a natural language and Latin as an artificial one. The proximity of men and women to the vulgar tongue is proved by the fact that we all “drink the vernacular with the nurses’ milk.” Furthermore, the chronological distance that separates us from Latin makes it foreign to us. The natural learning of the vernacular is thus opposed to the study of foreign languages at school, which Bembo does not hesitate to label as “non-natural.” Of course, this does not undermine Bembo’s praise of the ancients. Trained as a humanist and well versed in both Latin and Greek, the Venetian scholar did not mean to disqualify the classical tradition. Rather, his commitment to the enhancement of the *volgare* must be read as the attempt to bring it to the same level of classical languages. By situating the relation of the Italians to their vernacular within a wider understanding of languages as historically grounded organisms, Bembo introduces a parallelism between the linguistic histories of Latin and Italian.
that Cicero had in the evolution of Latin is taken on, within the vernacular context, by the “new” classics, namely Dante and, even more so, Petrarch and Boccaccio, who perform the role played in Latin culture by, respectively, Virgil and Cicero himself. Bembo introduces a successful compromise between the assumptions of humanists, primarily based on the authoritative connection with the ancients, and on the necessity for the new vernacular literary tradition to be legitimized.

Despite its massive influence on the linguistic culture of the time, Bembo’s “humanist” compromise was not able to neutralize the conservative ideology that informed most Latinate scholars and intellectuals. In fact, if the questione della lingua did affect the evolution of the Italian vernacular (thus paving the way for similar developments in other European countries), the alleged superiority of Latin in many fields of knowledge (particularly those that were studied at the universities) would remain a common trope in linguistic discourses. The complex nature of the cultural conflict informed the central decades of the sixteenth century, when several authors engaged in articulate discussions of language that witness to a controversy that proved even more passionate than the one evoked by the portrayal of Ercole Strozzi in the first book of Bembo’s Prose.

**Legitimizing the vernacular as a language of knowledge**

Emblematic of the cultural rivalry that characterized discourses on language in mid-sixteenth-century Italy was a series of works that focused on the legitimacy of the use of the volgare for purposes other than literature and poetry. In fact, if it is undeniable that Bembo did contribute to the legitimation of the vernacular for literary use, it was the employment of the volgare in fields such as science or philosophy that remained problematic. Within a variety of concurrent trends, which the simplistic “dichotomy Latin versus vernacular” cannot properly summarize, it is crucial to distinguish those approaches that better characterized the various facets of the debate. To this end, it is useful to consider works such as those by Alessandro Citolini, Alessandro Piccolomini, and Sperone Speroni. These authors engaged in thorough discussions of the controversy between Latinate and vernacular cultures, finding in the notion of translation a possible way to harmonize the two terms of the conflict.

Alessandro Citolini’s *Lettera in difesa de la lingua volgare* (Letter in defense of the vulgar tongue), printed in 1540 without the author’s knowledge, is a milestone in the history of the emancipation of the vulgar tongue. When he wrote the letter, Citolini (1500–1582) was not new to the discussion of language. As a disciple of Giulio Camillo Delminio, whom Alessandro followed in France, the young Citolini engaged very soon in the study of literature and poetry, thus setting the stage for his later *Tipocosmia* (1561), an encyclopedic dialogue that had an important influence on similar works across Europe. The letter of 1540 is a sort of premise to the major work. In fact, the defense of the vulgar tongue is twofold: on the one hand, Citolini engages in a systematic criticism of those who defend Latin, arguing that it is nobler, richer, and more common than the vernacular; on the other hand, based on the idea of the volgare as a living language, Citolini focuses on the ethical commitment to make it a tool for the dissemination of knowledge. As for the first point, the author situates his reflection on language within a wider consideration of cultural progress. Also, by identifying a common origin for Latin and Italian, he maintains that it is impossible to criticize one without criticizing the other. In fact, the point of Citolini’s argument is not to diminish the
importance of Latin, but simply to legitimize the use of the vernacular by showing that Latin is dead while the vernacular is hale and hearty. As such, the vulgar tongue is the expression of its time:

[The vulgar tongue] is alive and grows, generates, creates, produces, gives birth, thus becoming more and more rich and abundant. This is why as soon as a new thing comes to light, among the many that every single day appear, it gets clothed by vernacular words, while lacking in Latin or Greek ones. And such things, which arise day after day, include both natural ones (that are infinite) and those related to the arts: these are so necessary and numerous as to encompass more than half our life … [E]ven if such words are not yet recorded on paper, they are not lost, as the Latin ones are … they are, instead, continuously in the mouth of the living tongue.58

Whereas Latin cannot be used to name all the new things that populate the modern world, the vulgar tongue is able to produce words capable of describing them. Similarly, since the various vernaculars have been diversifying one from the other, the “international” span of Latin (an argument often employed by its defenders) is also called into question: for instance, should an Italian speak to a German about military weapons for which they have created new words in their respective vernaculars, Latin would prove useless to the conversation.59 Furthermore – and Citolini enters here the favorite battlefield of humanists – not only is the vernacular capable of expressing many concepts that Latin cannot express, but it is also able to do so in an eloquent way. By applying to the volgare what Cicero says about the ennoblement of Latin in both Brutus and De oratore – two of the reference texts in the study of classical eloquence – Citolini identifies language use and diachronic evolution as the two criteria that inform the progressive shaping of the vernacular. Of course, the naturalness of the vernacular is not enough to make it eloquent, and this is where the productive relation to the ancients comes in. By imitating the classics, the vernacular will indeed be able to refine itself.

However, it is not the use of a specific language that makes the speakers wise or knowledgeable. This is crucial to Citolini’s argument. Rejecting a conservative approach to the humanist idea that proficiency in Latin ensures knowledge, Citolini stakes out the value of vernacular culture per se. Consistent with this argument, he also points out that the vulgar tongue is not only able to “speak about fables and love,” but also about more serious matters, such as philosophy and astronomy.60 The domains that should be dealt with in the vernacular, according to Citolini, include Holy Scripture, a statement that introduces another facet of the “vernacular turn.” The author, known later in his life as heterodox, approaches a controversial aspect of the linguistic conflicts that informed Renaissance culture. If classicizing humanists and university professors were in fact harsh towards the literary and scholarly use of the vernacular, the Catholic Church was not more inclined to let vernacular audiences access the Bible directly.61

Citolini’s combination of the various layers involved in the linguistic controversy finds a natural haven in the discussion of translation. It is in fact through the practice of translation that past and present interact. More specifically, by translating from classical languages into the vernacular, a double outcome can be achieved: first, vernacular readers will have a wider access to knowledge; second, by looking at the classics, the vernacular will improve its stylistic potentials. Furthermore, Citolini argues, since natural languages are better than dead ones
at moving the audience, the vernacular will prove more effective than Latin in reaching the souls of men and women.⁶²

Eventually, the use of the vernacular instead of Latin produces a non-negligible benefit in the general advancement of learning, for it makes people save time in their studies. Instead of years and years spent in the study of languages prior to devoting oneself to the real content of disciplines, the use of the vernacular as a language of knowledge would let people engage with learning earlier in their lives. A similar argument was at the core of Alessandro Piccolomini’s defense of the volgare, which was a veritable Leitmotiv throughout his career, primarily devoted to the vernacular dissemination of classical philosophy and science.⁶³ In his preface to the Filosofia naturale (Natural philosophy) of 1551, for instance, the Sienese scholar argued that the alleged superiority of the ancients could only be challenged if all fields of knowledge were accessible in the natural languages of the moderns.⁶⁴ Since youth is the most productive part of life in terms of intellectual achievements, it is unfruitful to spend much time in the study of dead languages while postponing the acquisition of knowledge itself. Yet, while legitimizing the intellectual status of the vulgar tongue, Piccolomini agrees with Citolini on the importance of being familiar with the classics in order to make the volgare competitive. Indeed, even if both Citolini and Piccolomini stress the centrality of subject matter as the primary concern of learning, they do not deny the importance of eloquence as a vehicle for the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge.

Less obliging towards the humanist trend embodied by Citolini’s and Piccolomini’s defenses of the volgare was Sperone Speroni’s provocative Dialogo delle lingue (Dialogue on languages) (1542), which inspired Joachim du Bellay’s famous Deffence et Illustration de la Langue Francoyse (Defence and illustration of the French language) of 1549.⁶⁵ Beyond the usual arguments employed to support the use of the vernacular, Speroni’s dialogue is of particular interest for the way in which it stages the cultural clash between the humanist perspective on languages and the potentially subversive implications of the vernacular turn. Within the fiction of the dialogue, an interlocutor simply called “the scholar” (possibly the voice of the author) retells a previous conversation between two iconic figures, the Italian philosopher Pietro Pomponazzi (1462–1525) and the Greek humanist Giano Lascaris (1445–1535). Whereas the humanist asserts that the study of texts in their original languages is the only path to the acquisition of knowledge, the university professor argues that the importance of ancient texts lies in what they say, and not in the way in which they say it. Two different conceptions of language are at stake here: Lascaris embodies the Platonic idea of a direct link between res (things) and verba (words), which entails that certain languages are better than others at communicating specific topics; Pomponazzi shares instead the Aristotelian notion of language as a set of arbitrary conventions, which makes all languages equally suitable for all topics. Pomponazzi’s criticism of his interlocutor’s elitist approach is radical: according to the philosopher, the priority assigned to the study of languages is just a way to save knowledge for the few people who are able to access it. Things, according to Pietro, are definitely more important than words, and that is why the practice of translation is more than welcome in order to let larger numbers of readers access the sources of knowledge. Furthermore – and Pomponazzi develops here the same argument as Citolini – the long time spent in studying languages keeps us from the actual acquisition of knowledge. Eventually, the philosopher goes beyond the debate on the alleged qualitative differences between classical and vernacular languages: he does not care for the refinement of the vulgar tongue, because what matters to him is the communicative function of language.
Conclusions

As noted at the outset of this chapter, the idea that the study of classical languages absorbs too many years in one’s education, thus preventing one from attaining the knowledge of the ancients, was also a major concern of Montaigne’s father. Sperone Speroni’s argument, as mentioned above, made its way through France thanks to Joachim Du Bellay’s widely successful *Deffence et Illustration de la Langue Francoyse* [Defence and illustration of the French language], which literally translated the terms of the Italian debate beyond the Alps, thus replicating the idea of a contest between the ancients and the moderns that led to the cultural affirmation of the latter. Far from representing the end of a story that would last for a few more centuries, these debates, as well as Montaigne’s peculiar experience, embody the unavoidable contradictions entailed by a society in which the gradual legitimation of the vernaculars coexisted with and was shaped by the weighty legacy of the classics.

From Dante to mid-sixteenth century authors such as Citolini, Piccolomini, and Speroni, through the humanist controversies, the examples that we have examined show that attempts to reduce the relationship between Latin and the vernaculars in the Renaissance to a strict dichotomy do not work. In fact, forms of linguistic conflict involve productive interactions. First, by consciously distancing itself from Latin, the vulgar tongue acquired a new status in both cultural and grammatical terms. Second, those figures that seem to be more invested in the debate were also those who, in different ways, embodied Renaissance multilingualism at its best (just think of Leon Battista Alberti and Pietro Bembo, who wrote widely in both Latin and Italian, thus actively contributing to the mutually informing relation that characterizes the two languages in the period). Lastly, despite the differences that characterize each case, the dialectic between Latin and the vernacular found in the broad notion of translation was one of the most effective catalysts for the early modern reception of antiquity. If during the Middle Ages vernacular translations tended to be perceived as second rate products, authors such as Alessandro Piccolomini and Sperone Speroni fostered the legitimacy of the genre as a powerful means for the development and enrichment of the vernacular.

Notes

2 Ibid., p. 306; cf. the passage in John Florio’s translation (1603): “My late father, having, by all the means and industrie that is possible for a man, sought amongst the wisest, and men of best understanding, to find a most exquisite and readie way of teaching, being advised of the inconveniences then in use; was given to understand that the lingring while, and best part of our youth, that we imploy in learning the tongues, which cost them nothing, is the onely cause we can never attaine to that absolute perfection of skill and knowledge of the Greekes and Romanes.”
3 Ibid., p. 307.
Latin and Vernacular in the Renaissance


13 Cornish, Vernacular Translation, pp. 126–57.


16 Gentili, L’uomo aristotelico, pp. 41–9.

17 Cornish, Vernacular Translation, pp. 135ff.

18 Dante, The Convivio, 1.5.6–7.

19 Ibid., 1.9.2–5.

20 Ibid., 1.10.

21 Ibid., 1.12.


23 Dante, The Convivio, 1.9.3–5.

24 Dante, De vulgari eloquentia, 1.1.1–3; 1.9.6–11.


26 Dante, De vulgari eloquentia, 1.1.1.

27 Ibid., 1.1.2–4.


See the references in note 31.


Refini, “‘Aristotile in parlare materno’,” p. 316.


G. G. Trissino, La Grammatichetta, Vicenza: Tolomeo Gianicolo, 1529; Dialogo del Trissino intitolato il Castellano, nel quale si trattà de la lingua italiana, Vicenza: Tolomeo Gianicolo, 1529.


Bembo, Prose, Book 1.


A. Citolini, Lettera in difesa de la lingua volgare, Venice: Francesco Marcolini, 1540.


Citolini, Lettera, fol. B2r.

EUGENIO REFINI

60

For a discussion of Piccolomini’s ideas on language and translation, see A. Siekiera, “Riscrivere Aristotele: la formazione della prosa scientifica in italiano,” in Lines and Refini (eds.), *Aristotele fatto volgare*, pp. 149–68.