

The Renaissance Emergence of National Languages in Western Europe

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Le lingue volgari si affermano come lingue di cultura, nel corso del XVI secolo, in modi diversi nei vari paesi dell'Europa occidentale, come conseguenza delle strutturali differenze politiche fra di essi e delle diverse tradizioni letterarie. L'Italia non ha né unità né indipendenza politica, quindi la "questione della lingua", che si pone in Italia con alcuni decenni di anticipo rispetto agli altri grandi paesi europei, viene risolta in modo letterario e meta-politico da Pietro Bembo (1525), adducendo a modello la tradizione letteraria illustre rappresentata dagli scrittori "classici" fiorentini del Trecento, Dante, Petrarca e Boccaccio: una soluzione classicista, arcaizzante ed elitaria, che crea una frattura fra la lingua scritta dei dotti e i diversi dialetti come lingua di comunicazione pratica. In Francia, Spagna e Inghilterra, invece, il successo della lingua nazionale può appoggiarsi sull'esistenza di una monarchia nazionale, di una corte, di un'amministrazione statale che agisce come forza centripeta capace di imporre la lingua della capitale su tutto il territorio e con una maggiore penetrazione sociale. La Germania, infine, priva sia di tradizione letteraria illustre che di unità politica, trova nella Riforma protestante il fattore di unificazione e diffusione del tedesco come lingua di alfabetizzazione di massa e di identità nazionale.

Se in Italia la "questione della lingua" significa competizione con il latino e scelta del tipo di italiano da adottare, in Francia e in Spagna significa, in aggiunta, competizione con l'italiano, la lingua sorella politicamente più debole ma letterariamente più prestigiosa. Mentre in Italia si dà una ipertrofia della produzione grammaticale, corrispondente alla mancanza di un modello linguistico attuale sostenuto dalla forza politica dello stato, nelle altre lingue di cultura, corrispondenti a stati nazionali, dove quindi non c'è altrettanta incertezza sul modello linguistico, la produzione di grammatiche è più povera, e spesso strumentale per l'insegnamento della lingua a stranieri. Soprattutto lo spagnolo, lingua imperiale, si dimostra di viva utilità pratica al di fuori della Spagna. Questi diversi fattori storici condizionano la forma interna delle grammatiche delle varie lingue.



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THE EMANCIPATION OF THE VERNACULAR LANGUAGES IN WESTERN EUROPE: NATIONAL CHARACTERS AND VARIETIES

The 16th century in Western Europe saw the unfolding, together with the development of national literatures, of movements for the

defence of the vernacular languages, whose dignity, communicative and expressive capabilities were affirmed, in competition with the classical languages, particularly Latin. These movements operated in national situations which were very different from the point of view of political, social, cultural and literary conditions.

The 'language question' which developed in Italy some decades earlier than in other European countries was characterized by a fourteenth-century literary tradition which can be summed up by the names of Dante, Petrarca and Boccaccio, authors that Italian men of letters already recognized as 'classical', and men of letters outside Italy recognized as incomparably superior to their own literary traditions. On the other hand, Italy had neither unity nor political independence.

Bembo's solution, expressed in his *Prose della volgar lingua* published in 1525, was therefore a classicist and metapolitical solution, which appealed to what Italy believed to be unquestionably valid in its past – i.e. its illustrious literary tradition – and simply took note of the fact that in the present situation there were no real forces, outside literary society, which might act in favour of linguistic unification.

In France, Spain and England, on the other hand, the success of the national language as the language of culture emerged in the presence of a strong centripetal force represented by the capital and the court, in the presence of various promotional attitudes on the part of the monarchy, and in the absence of literary traditions of comparable authority to the Italian one.

Politically divided Germany found an effective factor for regularizing and unifying language in the supra-municipal practice of regional chanceries and in the interchange between these and the Imperial chancery. The adoption of this chancery's language by Luther, who mentions it explicitly as the common language of the whole of Germany, had enormous importance for its capillary diffusion throughout the country. Through preaching and religious instruction, elementary education and the custom of the family reading of the Bible in the mother language, this "Protestant language" unified German society within the linguistic boundary that divided it to the north-west from the Netherlandish varieties and the religious boundary that divided it to the south from Calvinist Switzerland and Catholic Austria and Bavaria.

These radically different manners of linguistic and cultural unification marked these countries' social history for centuries. The publication, at approximately the same time, of Luther's translation of the New Testament (1522) and of Bembo's *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525) gives an indication of the different destinies about to be fulfilled, the German language being destined to become an instrument of popular literacy and a sign of national identity for all the people, the Italian language being destined to be for centuries the cultivated language of a narrow elite.

The 'language question' in France and Spain was more concerned with legitimizing the vernacular language *vis-a-vis* Latin and Greek on the one hand and *vis-a-vis* Italian on the other. In fact, in the course of the century Italian consolidated its position of international prestige as the language of literature, particularly Petrarchist poetry, and as the language of elegant conversation. The treatises by Pietro Bembo, Sperone Speroni and Baldassar Castiglione entered into the French and Spanish debates with authority, even if with some distortions.

The reference to a different modern literary language, whose exemplariness is discussed and normally challenged, is therefore a complication of the 'language question' as it arose in France and Spain. The relation between the modern language and Latin is noticeably different in the three

countries. In Italy the controversy over the use of Latin and of the vernacular essentially took place in the fifteen years between Bembo's *Prose* and the *Lettera in difesa della lingua volgare* (1540) by Alessandro Citolini. The excellence of the 14th-century tradition guaranteed full acceptance, which was never again to be questioned, for the vernacular. This does not mean that the vernacular triumphed *over* Latin – which was to continue to be the vehicle for most cultural communication for at least two more centuries – but only that the vernacular had conquered its own literary ground. The writings of Erasmus (who accused the Italian humanists of not being able to speak Latin), of Thomas More, of the great Reformers and of Kepler illustrate the vitality of the intellectual debate in Latin, in which Italy plays only a marginal role. This should lead one not to give a one-sided, overenthusiastic evaluation of the early success of the vernacular in Italy as being an entirely positive phenomenon.

A similar process of literary emancipation of the vernacular took place in France about ten years later with the Pléiade movement, which aimed at the Humanist ennobling of the vernacular (and almost at its refounding). In the absence of accepted French models, the proposed models are Latin and Greek. This Hellenizing element marks another difference compared with the debate in Italy, where the confrontation had been and still was between Latin and the vernacular, with other interferences being reduced to a minimum; i.e. it was a confrontation between the ancient language and the modern language, mother language and daughter language.

The situation was quite different in Spain, where for centuries the Arab occupation and the strong presence of Jewish settlements had formed a plurilingual society which had not developed the exclusive deference towards Latin which was reserved for it in other countries, both Romance and Germanic, of Western Europe. While in these countries a fundamental diglossia had crystallized in the Middle Ages, and had been culturally re-established by the Humanist movement, in Spain, ever since the time of Alfonso the Wise, a cultural plurilinguism had developed within which *Romance* had benefited from an advantage relating to its function: having been accepted as the common language by Arabs and Jews (who were reluctant to use Latin for religious reasons), and promoted by initiative of the court, Castilian had been reinforced at an early date above all as the language of prose – in the areas of the law, of science, of culture. On the other hand, because Latin had not taken deep root in the universities, and because a Humanist movement arose quite late, it came about that while in the rest of Western Europe the offensive in favour of the vernacular languages was in full swing, in the first four or five decades of the 16th century in Spain a battle was still raging to determine the acceptance of Humanist Latin.

The movement for the literary ennoblement of Castilian was a phenomenon that continued into the second half of the century. It shared some very general traits with the corresponding French movement, which it followed with noticeable delay. In both cases they were movements inside the literary milieu, paralleling a process of linguistic and cultural unification which, anyway, had already started on other and more concrete bases; and in both cases they were attempts to 'ennoble' the language, in the sense of making it conform to rules deduced from classical Latin (and from Greek, in the case of French); therefore implying some greater or lesser degree of rejection of the existing Romance traditions, and putting forward proposals which did not necessarily harmonize with the trends followed by the two languages as their use in administration, in the law courts and in public life in general became established.

THE GRAMMAR OF THE VERNACULAR LANGUAGES

The *Grammatica della lingua toscana* by Leon Battista Alberti, probably written between 1437 and 1441, and the *Grammatica de la lengua castellana* by Antonio de Nebrija, published in Salamanca in 1492, are the only two examples of grammars of vernacular languages written in Europe in the 14th century. While the conditions in which they were produced make them very different, they share the fact that they had little or no influence. The fact that Alberti's grammar remained buried in a single manuscript copy is the proof of its isolation because of too much far-sightedness; in consequence, the Italian grammatical tradition was to begin eighty years later, completely ignoring this first episode. In contrast, Nebrija's *Grammatica*, which came half a century later, is organic to the in Spanish culture of the time for the reasons already mentioned above, therefore it was promptly published.

It has been pointed out that Nebrija's was the first grammar of a national language. On the other hand, Alberti's grammar was consciously aimed at the language of a civic community, but not of a national community. On the contrary, the state dimension as such is important for Nebrija, who co-ordinates his educational strategy with the reforms required by the Crown. The formula of the "lengua compañera del Imperio" [companion language of the Empire], which sums up this aspect, has been repeated and misinterpreted too often. It does not make sense to think that Nebrija was predicting the discovery of America, and the essential point of what Nebrija considered to be his mission remained the spread of Latin. But, despite all this, he is the first to conceive a vernacular grammar in political terms not wholly dissimilar from those that were to recur in the cultural history of Spain itself, of Portugal and of France during the 16th century.

The Italian grammatical tradition arose at the beginning of the 16th century through the efforts of non-Tuscan men of letters who prepared the instruments, for themselves first of all, to be able to master the language of the great Tuscan writers of the 14th century.

As Giovan Giorgio Trissino says, "from Lombardy, or rather from the Marches of Treviso ... came in our age the first observations and the first rules of his [Petrarch's] language". That is, the first Italian grammar was born under the sign of a particular literary problem: the problem of giving a definite norm to a class of writers from different regions who had in effect already taken the initiative from the Tuscans in the matter of producing literature, but for whom the language of that literature was not their native tongue. The search for such a norm continued for about thirty years, with the hypothesis of an eclectic regularization based on selected usage in the courts (often temporary ports of call for often itinerant men of letters) and the opposite hypothesis of taking the living Tuscan language as a model, competing against each other; with paradigmatic value being variously attributed now to Latin writings and now to "classical" vernacular works.

Giovan Francesco Fortunio, author of the *Regole grammaticali della volgar lingua* (Ancona 1516) belongs to this phase. His interest for the vernacular language was determined by the interest for vernacular literature, which was to be read (in the best version) and to be imitated (in the most exact form). In order to fulfil these requirements what was needed was a manual to clear up controversial points, based on a linguistic indexing of authors: one did not need a systematic grammatical treatment. Fortunio openly passes over those rules which coincide with Latin rules or are known through practice, producing a kind of outline of the most notable characteristics of 14th century usage.

Bembo's grammar is even less methodical, at least in the expositive form. The architecture of the *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525), which assigns the third book to the grammatical tradition (after a first book which was dedicated to legitimizing the use of the vernacular and tracing its literary history, and a second book dedicated to constructing a rhetoric for it); the dialogic form, in which the grammatical "treasures" are "almost drowned"; finally Bembo's prose itself, which is presented as a stylistic model, are all aspects which reveal the direction of the operation, the level of the public it was aimed at, the nature of a taste which shunned schematization.

In the 1540s-50s the Tuscans took back the initiative, trying to react after twenty or thirty years of hegemony by non-Tuscan theoreticians. This resumption was also marked by a failure, the failure of the attempt promoted by Cosimo de' Medici to make the Florentine Academy produce an official Tuscan grammar. The reasons for this failure are very interesting, because they involve the problem of whether it was possible to fix a living language in a normative way – a problem which Bembo's followers and the non-Tuscans in general did not need to consider.

This marks a point of contact with what was happening in France, for example, where Charles de Bovelles had defended a similar renunciation in his *Liber de differentia vulgarium linguarum et gallici sermonis varietate* in 1533. The fact that among the Florentine academicians this renunciation was cloaked in pride, because their language was in the process of growing and still had to reach its peak, did not eliminate their inability to guide the process of the language's appropriation by Italian men of letters, which was already taking shape.

Ludovico Castelvetro, from Modena, the greatest historical grammarian in Italy in the 16th century, deserves a special place in this survey. It is emblematic that his penetrating reconstructions should be expressed in the form of polemical *Giunte* to Bembo's *Prose* (published in 1572): on the one hand we find the winning rhetorical approach of Bembo, which answers the literary needs of the time and tends to subordinate the enquiry on historical reality to them; on the other hand, channelled into a subordinate typology and editorial form, we find research concentrating on the facts, on gathering and understanding the data offered by Italian dialects and other languages, inspired by an abiding interest in gaining knowledge of reality.

A particular trend is represented by grammars for foreigners, which give evidence of the literary prestige and of the spread of Italian abroad. In France, Jean Pierre de Mesmes published a *Grammaire italienne composée en françois* in 1548, which makes use of the treatises by Bembo and Fortunio and Accarisio, and was used in turn in the French adaptation of Accarisio's grammar published in Louvain by B. de Grave in 1555. In Geneva the *Italicæ grammatices praecepta ac ratio, in eorum gratiam qui eius linguae elegantiam addiscere cupiunt* by the Neapolitan Scipione Lentulo were printed again and again; it were later to be translated by H. Grantham (*An Italian Grammar*, London 1575). These are only a few examples, while the letters written in Italian by Alessandro Citolini to Queen Elizabeth give a glimpse of the popularity of Italian at the court of England.

The birth of vernacular grammar in France occurred little later than the (re)birth of vernacular grammar in Italy. It served the purpose of raising the vernacular to the status of a regulated and stable language, a purpose which was shared by all the nascent grammars of modern languages. It began with the *In linguam gallicam Isagoge, una cum eiusdem grammatica latino-gallica, ex Hebraeis, Graecis, et Latinis auctoribus* by Jacques Dubois [Jacobus Sylvius Ambianus] (Paris 1531). Dubois was a doctor expert on classical languages who never used anything but Latin in his scientific writings and in his teaching. The self-definition of "Latino-Gallic grammar" is a good

indication of the way it is organized: an etymological grammar, based on the assumption that French is deformed Latin, and that therefore one needs to resort to Latin to explain the phonetics and morphology of the vernacular as well as to choose normatively between alternative forms coexistent in usage. Dubois' assumption is strictly contemporary with the discussion of the same subject in Italy, and similar main themes run through all the 16th century works in Spain and Portugal.

After the concise profile of French (as well as Latin, Greek and Hebrew) found in the *Grammaticae quadrilinguis partitiones in gratiam puerorum* (Paris 1544) by Jean Drosai, the *Tretté de la grammere françoize* (Paris 1550) by Louis Meigret is of considerable importance. The *Tretté*, which followed an opposite trend to Dubois' *Isagoge*, embodies an approach which is rigorously based on usage and opposed to the reasons of etymology. The usage which Meigret urges his readers to follow is that of the court. The *Gramère* by Pierre de la Ramée, published in Paris in 1562, attempts to give a purely formal description of language, excluding, at least in principle, any semantic reference. The educational reform of Ramus' followers was soon supplanted in France by the Jesuit influence, and does not seem to have left significant traces even in the French grammatical tradition.

There was a clear disparity in the distribution of grammars in Spain compared with Italy and France. While the wave of defences of the vernacular in the first three decades of the 16th century was about parallel in the three countries, production of grammars in Spain was very late and very infrequent throughout the century. These grammars were generally aimed at a foreign public and were published outside Spain.

After Nebrija's early, isolated and immediately forgotten grammar, one has to wait until 1555 to have a Spanish grammar: and it is an anonymous grammar, which was not only published in Louvain, but commissioned by the printer (the official printer of the Trilingual College, Bartolomeus Grave), in the context of his current production of numerous grammars and vocabularies of various languages; i.e. it was conceived and written for decidedly practical purposes, and in a trilingual version, in order to appeal to three readers' markets. The *Util y breve institution para aprender los principios y fundamentos de la lengua hespañola* (subtitles: *Institution tres brieve et tres utile...* and *Institutio brevissima et utilissima...*) is undoubtedly a commercial product, and there is reason to believe that it had been designed to be used not only by the French and other foreigners to learn Spanish, but also by the Spaniards and other foreigners to learn French: a multifunctional product similar to multilingual dictionaries, like the one by Noel de Barlaimont, of which Grave edited various reprints between 1551 and 1560.

The commercial characteristics of grammars like this are more interesting than their internal characteristics. It appears that in Spain, unlike in Italy and France, there was no real demand for grammatical codification for internal and literary use, or almost none; the only demand was the practical one made by foreigners. This can certainly be connected to the worldwide projection of Spanish as the language of the Empire, but these grammars seem to be less the result of the ideology of the "lengua compañera del Imperio" and more the proof that knowing how to speak Spanish abroad must have been actually useful.

The only 16th-century Spanish grammar which is not exclusively a grammar for foreigners is the *Gramática castellana. Arte breve e compendiosa para saber hablar y escrevir en lengua castellana congrua y decentemente* by the licenciado Villalón, which was also published in the Netherlands, in Antwerp in 1558. But in this case too the author, alongside the aim of "reducing the Castilian

language to art, imitating the Latin and Greek languages”, aims at foreigners and subject peoples, the two categories affected by the imperial linguistic programme: “and it is certain that not only the enemies of our faith ... now need to know the Castilian language, but the people from Biscay, from Navarre, the French, the Italians and all the others who have any dealing and conversation in Spain”. It is also significant that the only grammar which was inspired by a certain linguistic and literary ambition was presented as semi-anonymous, in contrast with the illustrious Italian and French men of letters who in the first half of the century had taken on grammar.

Only two grammars were produced in Portugal in the 16th century: the *Grammatica da lingua portuguesa* (Lisbon 1536) by Fernão de Oliveira and the grammatical works (1539-40) by João de Barros.

Fernão de Oliveira, an ex-Dominican, adventurer, traveller and man of letters, produced a grammar that was about as disorganized as his biography: it was incomplete, with a lot of phonetics and not much morphology, without a rhetoric, full of theoretical insights, and lacking in didactic theory. It was perhaps conceived for foreigners. João de Barros’ grammar is in fact the first systematic treatment, upheld by a will to teach which embodies the apologetic tension expressed in the *Diálogo*. It seems logical, therefore, to interpret it as an instrument of grammatical teaching of the mother language: and while the “conformity” with Latin acts as apologetic argument, grammatical description represents rather the structural specificity, the “unconformity” of modern language.

In Germany and Britain the production of grammars in a strict sense was limited and came late, in contrast with the more abundant and early production of orthographic texts. The discrepancy seems to indicate that, while the problem of the regularization of writing (which was made urgent everywhere by the requirements of printing) was arising at similar times and with similar intensity in all European languages, the problem of the regularization of grammar was more developed and was felt more intensely where the literary tradition was more consolidated and prestigious. In the sixteenth century, only France produced as many grammars as Italy. While the two Iberian countries produced little, characterized in the way we have seen, and concentrated between 1536 and 1540 in the case of Portuguese, and in the 1550s in the case of Spanish, the grammars of the two main Germanic languages were concentrated in the last three decades of the century.

The most obvious characteristic of the four German grammars published in Germany between 1573 and 1596 (excluding the *Teutsche grammatica* of 1534, by V. Ickelsamer, which is really an orthography with a few notes on grammar in its proper sense) is that they were all written in Latin. This is clearly connected with the extreme weakness of German as a literary language. What did not occur was the codification of grammar as the result of a literary tradition at the moment of its maturity. What did occur was that German became established as the result of a religious and political event: the grammatical codification which followed this process was understandably in Latin because German did not have enough prestige to justify itself. The German vernacular had to be justified and codified in Latin, in a similar way (from this point of view only) to what Dante in his *De vulgari eloquentia* had thought should happen to the Italian vernacular 270 years earlier. The authors of these German grammars were Humanists who contributed their work in favour of the unification and codification of the vernacular, with an implicit or an explicit reference to the language of Luther; and it is probably not by chance that three of them came from the areas of Lutheran action (Saxony and Turingia) – even if the first of them, Laurentius Albertus (Albrecht), published his *Teutsch Grammatick oder Sprachkunst* (Augsburg 1573) shortly after his conversion

to Catholicism. The Humanist character of these grammars is prepared by the copious central European tradition of translations of Donatus' *Ars minor* into the vernacular, and is confirmed by the fact that they are all influenced by the model of Melanchthon's Latin grammar.

Albertus' grammar states a whole range of motivations – from usefulness to foreigners, to the improvement of oratory, to the patriotic decision not to be inferior to what other nations have done for their language, to the need for clarity in translations, especially in the Bible, to the value which vernacular grammar can have as an introduction to the classical languages. Instead, Ölinger's grammar (A. Ölinger, *Underricht der Hoch Teutschen Spraach: Grammatica seu institutio verae germanicae linguae*, Strasbourg 1573 or 1574) which comes from the largest town on the Rhine border, is written to teach German to the French. Correspondingly, Ölinger's grammar is more practical than Albertus', and one notices the influence of the French grammarians in it. In Albertus' grammar, the comparison between the lexical richness of German and that of Greek, and the (Hellenizing) idea of a common language as the synthesis of what is best in regional varieties, confirm the Humanist character of the text. The *Grammatica germanicae linguae, ex Bibliis Lutheri germanicis et aliis eius libris collecta*, [n.l.], 1578, by Johannes Clajus (Clay), states in its subtitle the basis (not only in a factual but also in an ideological sense) of its codification. The work of this Humanist from Saxony, who knew Greek and Hebrew, had studied theology in Wittenberg and had been a pastor from 1573, was in fact the schematization and simplification of Luther's language, and therefore played an effective role in consolidating and defining the common language. Finally, the *Synopsis grammaticae tam germanicae quam latinae et graecae* (Mülhausen 1596) by Johann Becherer represents the fullest realization of the Humanist approach which was typical of all these grammars; it accepts the theory of the dependence of Latin language and grammar on Greek language and grammar, to which it adds German language and grammar as a third term, and puts into practice the idea that the grammar of the mother tongue is a preparation for studying the classical languages.

Britain produced only two grammars in the 16th century, the first one in English, the second in Latin: W. Bullokar, *Bref Grammar for English* (London 1586); and P. Greaves, *Grammatica anglicana, praecipue quatenus a latina differt, ad unicam P. Rami methodum concinnata*, Cambridge 1594. Bullokar's grammar follows Lily's Latin grammar closely: this was his main, if not his only source, with some necessary forcing in order, for example, to make the article fit among the eight parts of speech (emphatically recognized as exhaustive for the analysis of English), and more generally with a strong Humanist emphasis on the correspondence between the two languages. Greaves' grammar, on the other hand, states right from the subtitle that its organization is influenced by Ramus. The claim that it was based exclusively on Ramus' method, and that of presenting a description of English focusing on what differentiates it from Latin, are mutually exclusive: Ramus' formal and anti-semantic method is actually particularly badly suited to account for an analytic language which has few morphological markers and is heavily dependent on syntax in order to express grammatical relations. Hence the great difficulty in dealing, for example, with verbs (which have no markers of number) and with adjectives (which have no markers for gender and number).



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