

Ideas on Language in Early Latin Christianity: From Tertullian to Isidore of Seville. By Tim Denecker. (Vigiliae Christianae, Supplements, 142). Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2017, xv + 497 pp. ISBN 978-90-04-34987-2, € 149.00 (HB)

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This splendidly edited book, which originated as a doctoral thesis (KU Leuven, 2015), fills a significant gap in the study of the history of western linguistics. It is beyond any doubt that ancient grammar, especially in its systematization in the form of handbooks and commentaries, has received much greater attention than any other ancient linguistic reflection: a pagan and traditional product, grammar belongs “to a normative and prescriptive tradition in its own right” (p. 4). This explains and justifies a seemingly (at first) shocking decision of Tim Denecker, namely not to include in his corpus the language manuals “composed by early Christian Latin authors” (with the exception of Isidore’s Book I of *Etymologiae*, as indicated on p. 262, n. 4). Even if some peculiarities have been highlighted in ancient grammar books written by Christians, little more than some examples diverge from the books by their pagan counterparts, and the use of “Christian” examples is anyway quite limited in authors earlier than Priscian (one can note, e.g., *horum Samuel(i)um* in Pallad. *gramm.* IV 120.12, and the earlier *Adam* and *Abraham* in Char. *gramm.* p. 151.15-17 [*ex Romano*]).

To the benefit of the historiography of linguistics, instead of a conventional research on the grammatical reflection by Christian writers, the author embarks on a more ambitious and original inquiry on what could more properly be called “Christian ideas on Language”, with a well-deserved capital letter of the word Language. In effect, grammar is only dealt with in the last third of the book (Part 3, “Language description”, pp. 221-387), the rest being devoted to Language as a whole. Part 1, “Language History” (pp. 23-118), deals with the nature and origin of language, its “protohistory” (from Creation to the Babel episode), and the origin of language diversity, bridging to Part 2 (pp. 119-219) which focuses on language diversity and multilingualism.

Before those three main sections, an introduction very clearly sets out the scope of the book, by first presenting the *status quaestionis* (pp. 2-4), where the author exhibits his excellent command of the bibliography (the impressive “Secondary literature” [pp. 411-451] includes nearly 800 titles): a succinct review of specific studies on the linguistic ideas of early Christian Latin authors patently shows that Augustine (354–430) and his theory of the sign have attracted most of the scholarly attention, so that the need of a study with a broader scope is accordingly justified. Also, the reader is informed that general works on the history of linguistics pay unequal attention to Christian writers, most often with “a strong bias towards Augustine”, even if some relevant contributions exist on specific topics or authors. This short survey finishes with the reference to contributions relating to early Christian authors as a source “for the reconstruction of contemporary linguistic reality”.

The corpus is set up in a somewhat vague way, since we are told (p. 4) that it has been established “through an exploration of the *Index linguisticae* of the *Patrologia Latina*”, and then expanded through references in the secondary literature and through additional searches in Brepol’s *Cross Database Search Tool*. Even if Denecker then provides a chronological list of authors (pp. 19-20), and opportunely comments on the different text types in the corpus (pp. 21-22), the interested reader misses a justification of the chronological time span. Only in the Preface one intuitively feels that “Early Latin Christianity” is an *ad hoc* label which the author himself creates to name the period “from Tertullian (b. c.160) to Isidore of Seville (d. 636)”. In so doing, he may be stretching too far the adjective *early*, which the book’s subtitle renders unnecessary anyway. A recent book (Shuve 2016 [the list of references below includes only the titles that are not in Denecker’s own bibliography]) using the same label “Early Latin Christianity” does not consider authors later than the early fifth century, which was also the limit set by Christine Mohrmann (1951) for the “early Christian Latin”. At any rate, nobody should blame Denecker for avoiding unfruitful discussion on periodization (see Shanzer 2009), especially when in its place he has offered a much more relevant account on the “intellectual networks” (pp. 15-18), those emerging, for example, from epistolary exchange (Novatian and Cyprian), friendship (Jerome and Rufinus), controversy (Jerome and Ambrose), or Church administration (the bishops Ennodius, Sidonius Apollinaris, Ruricius, Avitus).

Chapter 1 goes into “The Origin and Nature of Language”, a topic whose relevance for Christian thought is first shown in some biblical passages: so in *Gen. 1* (*dixit Deus faciat lux...*) the linguistic nature of the act of Creation is made evident, as it is the “Christian tradition of *logos* theology” in *Ioh. 1:1-3* (*in principio erat uerbum*), and 23 (a misprint for 14 *Verbum caro factum est?*), and the *impositio nominum* in *Gen. 2:19-20*, where Adam is mandated to give names to things. The narration of Adam as name-giver recalls one of the most important pagan traditions of the origin of language, the well-known account in Plato’s *Cratylus* (388a), which Denecker (p. 26) outlines mostly drawing from Gera (2003). In the author’s view, the other pagan “benchmark” on language origin comes from the Epicurean tradition, where there is also a heavy emphasis on the imposition of names.

After this brief and (as the author himself warns) selective outline, the author goes on to review the views on language origin expressed by some relevant Christian authors such as Lactantius (c. 250 – c. 325), whose ideas must be deduced from his criticism of pagan philosophy, particularly of Lucretius, and Augustine, who seems to draw from Varro (116 BC – 27 BC) and Cicero (106 BC – 43 BC). The two of them maintain that there is a connection between language origin and the beginning of social life and both emphasize the role of God, unlike the third of the figures considered in this chapter, Boethius (480 – 525), who in commenting Aristotle’s *Categoriae* refers to the gradual development of language by establishing a difference between *nomina rerum* and *nomina nominum*, but does not mention God’s intervention in the process. Finally, Isidore’s (c. 560–636) view and sources are explored by analyzing the two *loci classici* (*orig. 1.29.1-3* and *12.1.1-2*), which represent respectively the pagan (conflict between ‘natural’ and ‘conventional’ naming, drawing from Varro, Cicero, Quintilian [c. 35 – c. 100]) and the Christian stance (Adam as a name-giver, drawing from Tertulian [c. 155 – c. 240] and Augustine). “Origin” is closely linked with “nature”: accordingly, Christians depict

language as a “human” capacity depending on God’s will, this being the optimistic view on language contrasting with the pessimistic one on the “futility” of human speech “when compared to reality, thought, and — most importantly — God” (p. 56).

As for the author’s retrieval of pagan sources/antecedents about language origin, someone might miss a reference to a long discussed section (see Schenkeveld 1998) of Charisius’ (fl. 4th century) *Ars grammatica* (p. 62.2), the ultimate source of which is probably Pliny. There one can read the idea of language being originated at the same time as society (*Latinus vero sermo cum ipso homine civitatis suae natus* ‘Latin speech was born together with the men of its community’), as well as the important role of reason (*ratio*) from the very beginning of language origin. In connection with this, Lactantius’s reporting (pp. 29-30) of the last stage in the process of language origin, namely the gradual introduction of a system (*ratio*), has a likely parallel in Quintilian (*inst.* 1.6.16: *Non enim, cum primum fingerentur homines, analogia demissa caelo formam loquendi dedit, sed inventa est postquam loquebantur* ‘**Analogy was not sent down from heaven to frame the rules of language when men were first created, but was discovered only when they were already using language**’ [transl. Russell 2001: 169]): it is admitted that Lactantius may have known Quintilian’s *Institutio* (Claussen 1994: 78), so it is a possibility that the Christian apologist could have used that text to construct the pagan view against which he reacted.

This first chapter shows how deep into a matter the reader is led through Denecker’s method of tracing previous pagan views, analyzing their exploitation (either polemical or not) by selected Christian writers, contrasting the different Christian approaches, and exploring the offshoots of the central topic. This results in a richness and variety of themes which can hardly be accounted for in a book review. Therefore, the remaining chapters of the book (2 to 10) will be dealt with here only selectively.

A major issue extensively discussed in the book is multilingual competence. This “trendy topic” is examined through a dual perspective: a textual one, relating to the Bible, through which “Western intellectuals became (better) aware of the existence of the biblical languages Hebrew and Aramaic” (p. 150), and an oral one having to do with the new pressing need of acquiring “a notion of local languages or varieties of Latin” for the practical purpose of preaching and spreading the Christian creed. In respect to the latter, Denecker (pp. 183-189) decides to consider only those cases in which preachers are praised for using a language different from Latin, whereas he does not take into account the preacher’s accommodation of “the variety and register of his Latin to those understood by his audience” (p. 183), a topic for which he refers the reader to the influential book of Banniard (1992; this could be supplemented at least with Herman 1996). Admittedly, with this choice the author avoids the contentious issue of Vulgar Latin and the development of the Romance languages. The choice also explains why Caesarius Arelatensis (c. 470 – 542), known for his effort to adapt his *sermones* to the spoken language (Campetella 2001), is not included in the list of authors on pp. 19-20. Instead, Denecker collects interesting evidence on Christian writers’ appreciation of multilingual competence, which is seen, for instance, as a requirement for biblical exegesis (p. 175). This positive view contrasts with the “futility of Language Diversity” and even more with “Language diversity as an impediment” (for the propagation of faith) which some Christian authors insistently underline (pp. 122-136).

Multilingual competence has also a major effect in language description (Part 3 of the book): in all levels of description in which Denecker arranges the topic (language–sentence–word–letter) a contrastive approach emerges more or less systematically. Both language classification and the description of language affinity imply a consciousness of language diversity and ideally demand a competence in the languages involved. As for “sentence level”, Denecker reports, for instance, some comments by Jerome (347–420) relating to problematic literal Greek-to-Latin translations of biblical passages: among the various remarks in Hier. *epist.* 106, the one in §59 deserves some further attention because of the use of *uerborum consequentia*, a phrase which Denecker (p. 266) translates as “the proper sequence of words” and explains in the context as indicating “that a sentence ‘does not run properly’” (another passage, where the phrase is said to be used in relation to word-order, is then cross-referenced to Sect. 8.3). Without contradicting this interpretation, one can wonder whether *consequentia* is rather being used as a technical grammatical word: significantly, the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* (IV 402.72-403.19) illustrates the special sense “*uerborum, sententiarum conexio*” first with passages from the Latin grammarians Diomedes (4th century) and Priscian (late 5th – early 6th century), but then offers passages from Christian sources, Jerome providing the majority (sixteen) of them, which could complete the picture offered by Denecker. In the two passages he analyzes (*Ep.* 59 and *in Is.* 57.1-2, on pp. 266 and 277 respectively) *uerborum consequentia* must be understood as the syntactic “linkage of words”, and more specifically a major linkage is implied in the two passages: the subject-verb linkage. As for the second passage, dealing with *Is.* 57.2 (*Veniat pax, requiescat in cubili suo; ambulet in directione sua* ‘Let peace come, let him rest in his bed; let him walk in his uprightness’), it might be the case that, as Denecker suggests, it is the relative order of verb and subject what is being emphasized, but it seems more likely that, as suggested for other passages (p. 272), the disturbing fact here is also the elliptical subject (*iustus*) of *requiescat* and *ambulet*, for this missing subject might make the Latin reader think of the previous *pax* as the subject of the two remaining verbs in the verse. Also in this passage, one can note the technical use of *stare*, not simply ‘stand’, but specifically ‘provide full sense; be correct’ (the phrases *stat uersus*, *stat elocutio* are common in Latin grammarians to indicate that a verse and a sentence are correctly expressed).

A more systematic exploration of grammatical terminology could enlarge the (indeed very rich) collection of evidence in the book. For example, the frequent treatment of contrastive remarks in terms of *idiomata*, *proprietaes*, *locutiones*, *figurae* (illustrated with examples from Augustine and Jerome) could be supplemented with the parallel use of *elocutio* in Ambrose (c. 340–397), e.g. *Ambr. Noe* 63.2. The *Lexicon* of Schad (2007), which is — as far as I can see — one of the few important works missing in the bibliography, could have helped in this respect: also, the whole issue on *idioma*, for which the author confessedly (p. 268) draws on Süß (1932), could be supplemented and updated with Baratin (1989), who is included in the bibliography (but not used for this specific issue), and with Magallón (2011), who is not. In this respect, one can add to the abundant evidence in “The Word Level” chapter, Jerome’s semantic remark on the biblical special use (*idioma*) of *dormire* to mean *mortuum esse* (Hier. *epist.* 119, 5; cf. a similar remark in 85, 5, relating to *sancti* meaning *mundi* ‘clean’). Needless to say, the immense corpus considered makes omissions fully explicable, especially when a very careful and relevant selection has been made.

The notes above can only give a partial idea of the many insights in this book and of all reflection it can trigger in its readers: lexical borrowing, translation theory, origin and history of writing systems, superfluous letters, solecism, women's multilingual competence are topics as interesting as those dealt with in this review. The *Centre for the Historiography of Linguistics* at Leuven can be proud of this great contribution which one of its junior members has made to the discipline.

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